

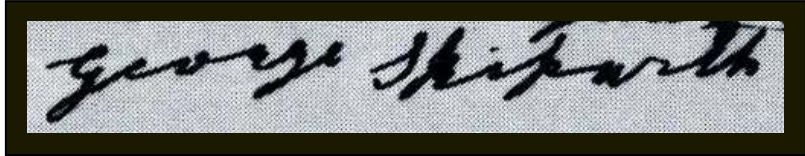


LETTERS OF

George Skipwith

OVERSEER/DRIVER

HOPEWELL PLANTATION
ALABAMA



1847-1849 _____ TO HIS MASTER, **John Hopewell Cocke**
BREMO PLANTATION, VIRGINIA



In the 1840s George Skipwith was the enslaved African American overseer of a 320-acre Alabama plantation owned by John Hartwell Cocke, a wealthy Virginian who had purchased the plantation to prepare selected slaves for self-purchase, emancipation, and re-settlement in Liberia on the west coast of Africa. Cocke remained in Virginia on his family plantations, maintaining a regular correspondence with Skipwith. (The white overseer/manager was Elam Tanner.) Skipwith had a stormy tenure and in 1848 was demoted from overseer to “driver.” In these seven letters from May 1847 to October 1849, we follow Skipwith’s reports on the cotton crop (dismal), building construction (steady), health and behavior of the slaves (worrisome), his battle with alcohol (unsuccessful), and his competition with the overseer who finally replaced him in 1848.

_____ may the 11 [1847] green County Ala

Sir

I imbrace this oppertunity to write you a few lines. I Reseved [received] your letter and should have anserd it before now but master John¹ was from home on busness and I could not write untel he returned wich was last Sunday. You told me in your letter that you was glad that I had the management of the farm my self, and you said that you noed [knowed] that I was able to do as you and master John wish providing that I would not make use of ardent spirits [liquor], but I am convinced that it has been my greatest enemy and I shall consider it so as long as I live. We have not been able to do any thing towards marling our land² our team could not be spared from farming except wet spells and it would be too wet for hauling, and master John thought we could do as good busines by toating leaves to put on the poorest partes of the land by the spare hands [enslaved workers] and we put down two thousand and five hndred baskets full weighing from thirty five to forty, and thirty cart load out of the farm pen, and ninety out of the horse lot. We have a very good stand of cotton, but it has been so cold that it does not grow but our corn cannot be beaten and about three days from now we will finish plowing our corn the second time and our peas. we will be then reddy to commence plowing our cotton the second time. it has been about a week since the hoes started over the second time. our oats crop hav been somewhat backward but we had a very fine rane and I am in hopes they will start to growing again. Lee and archa hav been working with us for sum time building a screw whiat looks very fine I have not herd any thing from brother peyton [emancipated and living in Liberia] sence you was out here I should be very glad to hear when you herd from him We are all well and hav had no call for a docter this year and I hope that you will reseve this letter in good helth my self and master John gets on very smooth together he have not given me a cross worde this year. give my love to every boddy boath white and black and beleave me to be your umble servant

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¹ **John Cocke** of Greene County, Alabama, was Cocke’s neighbor and a distant relative. He was a planter of considerable means who also served as Cocke’s steward for many years.

² **Marl**—calcareous matter from marine deposits—was used to eliminate acid in the soil and to hold the properties of organic manures in the soil. [Miller’s footnote continues.]

hopewell July the 8 1847

Sir

on the forth day of July I reseed your letter dated may the 25. I wrote to yo the 15 of June the second time giving you a true statement of the crops, horses, hogs, and chickeins but I am sorry that I shall have to write yo princerbly [principally] about other matters. I hav a good crop on hand for you, boath of cotten and corn. this you knoe could not be don without hard worke. I have worked the people but not out of reason, and I have whiped none without a caus the persons whome I have correct I will tell you thir name and thir faults.

Suky³ who I put to plant som corn and after she had been there long anuf to hav been done I went there and she had hardly began it I gave her som four or five licks over her clothes I gave isham⁴ too licks over his clothes for covering up cotton with the plow.

I put frank,⁵ isham, violly,⁶ Dinah⁷ Jinny⁸ evealine⁹ and Charlott¹⁰ to Sweeping cotten going twice in a roe, and at a Reasonable days worke they aught to hav plowed seven accers a peice, and they had been at it a half of a day, and they had not done more than one accer and a half and I gave them ten licks a peace upon thir skins I gave Julyann¹¹ eight or ten licks for misplacing her hoe. that was all the whipping I hav done from the time that I pitched the crop untell we comenced cutting oats. I put Shadrack,¹² Robert,¹³ Armstead,¹⁴ and frank to cutting. they comemince on friday, but they did not more than urn [earn] the salt in thir bread, but the next morning i went out there and staid untill a late breackfast, and i saw that the lick that they had then, they were about to do a pretty good days worke. I then leave them and went to the hoe hands, marking the last roe they cut while I was there. when I come to them at twelve o clocke, they had cut me nineteen roes, and it would not take them more than ten minits to cut one roe as Shedrack was the ruler among them, I spoke these words to him. you do not intend to cut these oats untill I whip every one of you. Shedrack did not say any thing to me, but Robert spoke these words saying that he knoed when he worked. I told him to shut his lips and if he spoke a

³ **Ann Sucky Falcon** (b. 1803) often vexed overseer Elam Tanner by her accusations and antics, but earned Cocke's confidence so that he liberated her in 1851. On her Liberian experiences see *Letters from Liberia* [Miller, *Dear Master*, Pt. I] and her letters in the Cocke Papers.

⁴ **Isham Gault** (b. 1810) was a field worker at Hopewell who had worked as a cowherder at Bremono. After the war he returned to his original occupation. He was the father of Hannah and the brother of Julyann and Mima.

⁵ **Frank Randall**, the son of Primus the driver at Bremono [Cocke plantation in Virginia], worked as a brick mason, a ditcher, a field hand, and a marler. In 1842 he carried on a clandestine courtship off the plantation, in 1844 he cheated a white man in a sale and resisted Tanner, in 1846 he left Hopewell without a pass, and on other occasions he was among those described as unworthy of manumission [emancipation]. In 1853 Cocke ordered him sold or hired out in Mobile [Alabama] because of his repeated quarrels with his wife Jinny and his refractory character.

⁶ **Violly** was a field worker.

⁷ **Dinah** was a field worker.

⁸ **Jinny Randall**, Frank's wife, was a field worker. With her husband, she was sold or hired out in Mobile in 1853.

⁹ **Evelina Smith** (b. 1821?) was a field worker who professed religion in 1853. According to the 1870 census, she lived with the Archer Creacy family and worked as a farm laborer after the war.

¹⁰ **Charlotte (Morse) Lewis** (b. 1834) was the daughter of Charles and Kessiah Morse and the sister of Albert, Cain, Carter, Charles, Jr., Frederick, and Matthew. In 1844 she married Robert Lewis, and in 1857 they went to New Hope plantation to live [a second Alabama plantation established by Cocke]. After the war she scratched out a living as a farm laborer in the Greensboro [Alabama] area.

¹¹ **Julyann Gault**, the daughter of "Old" Hannah and sister of Isham and Mima, was a field worker.

¹² **Shadrach Cocke** (d. 1855) was a prayer leader and exhorter among the slaves and the driver after George's downfall. In 1842 he wrote Cocke asking permission to marry a woman on another farm, but Cocke refused. According to Tanner, Shadrach spoke "very bad" about the master's decision and, rather than give up the girl, he asked to be sold to her master. Tanner wrote that he ran "mad for 2 days" in disappointment. He involved himself in other scrapes in the next few years, but by 1850, probably as a result of his conversion, he mellowed and won Cocke's confidence. He died suddenly in 1855 of a "disease of the heart." [Miller's footnote continues.]

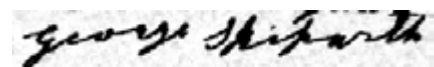
¹³ **Robert Lewis**, husband of Charlotte, "cut up a few skins" in physically resisting Tanner in 1844, the only evidence of stubborn resistance prior to the affair described in George's letter. In 1856 he was whipped for feigning illness, and in 1862 he stole swine from Capt. John Cocke's farm. Still, John Hartwell Cocke considered him a likely candidate for freedom. In 1857 he joined the New Hope [Alabama plantation] community.

¹⁴ **Armistead Hewitt** (b. 1814) was a field worker and carpenter at Hopewell and the driver at New Hope after 1857. In 1846 he received a thorough willowing for sneaking off the plantation, and, later, he had numerous falling-outs with overseers, particularly J. W. Carter. . . . He married Lucy Skipwith, George's daughter, in the late 1840s or early 1850s. There is no positive record of more than one child by the marriage. Lucy's eldest daughters, Maria and Betsy, were fathered by white men, and the father of her daughter Dinah is unknown. Lucy's liaisons with white men and her attachment to Cocke may have been the causes of her unhappy relations with Armistead. She left him after the war. [Miller's footnote continues.]

nother worde I would whip him right of[f] but he spoke again the second time saying that he was not afraid of being whiped by no man. I then gave him a cut with the whip. he then flong down his cradle, and made a oath and said that he had as live die as to live and he said that he did not intend to stay here. he then tried to take the whip out of my hand, but I caught him fast by the collar and holed him. I then told the other boys to stripe him and they don so I then whiped untell I thought that he was pretty could but I was desieved for as soon as I leave him and went to the hoe hands, he come of to the house to our preacher¹⁵ and his family becaus he knoed that they would protect him in his Rascality for he had herd that they had said that they were worked to death, and that they were lowed no more chance for liveing than if they were dogs or hogs. tho the preacher did not say any thing to me about whiping Robert neither to mas John but went down to the shop and holed about an hours chat with the negros I do not knoe what his chat was to them but [he] ask Dr Weeb¹⁶ what was good for a negro that was whipt albut to death, and he had much to say about it Dr Weeb saw that his chat was calculated to incurage the people to rebel against me, and he went and told mas John about what he had herd and mas John took him and come up here to see if he was punised in the way that he had herd, but as soon as the Dr put his hand upon him, he told mas John that there was nothing the matter with him. mas John then ordered him to his worke and told him that he did not have what his crime was deserving him, and at som lasure time he intend to give him a good willering and then he would knoe how to behave him self. he rode over the land and saw what they had done and instead of finding fault of me he said I ought to have given the other three the same

we did not plant any ceaders [cedars] last winter becaus we had a great deal of fencing to do that was oblige to be done for we have Joined fences with mr Smith¹⁷ for he would not keep a good fence and his stork [stock] was often in our crops. mas John said that he would not be plaged with him no longer, to make my fence the whole line out and he gave me a half a mile of fence and was to hawl them at every lasure chance and the nearist rails was a mile and a half and from that to a mile and three quarters

I have not room to write you as I would wish. I will inform you in my next letter what fenceing I have done. then you can Judge whither I had any time or not. I have a nuf yet to write you to fill up another Sheat. permit me to say a few words to you in James¹⁸ letter. we have our family worship every morning. Beleave me to be your servant



Hopewell August the 12 1847

Sir

I Reseved your letter a few days ago, and thir has been no sickness among us sence I wrote to you last. I told you in my last letter, that when I write to you again I would tell you what fenceing I done last winter so that you mought knoe what time I had to spare. I had to make a stob fence between me and mr Smith, a stob fence between the meltons and Sawyers track¹⁹ the hole line out, a stob fence from the corner of the garden up to meltons, a stob fence from the

¹⁵ **Rev. Isaac Taylor** (1802-1874?), a Methodist minister hired by Cocke to live at Hopewell and to preach to the slaves of the neighborhood. He held a low opinion of the Hopewell slaves' moral values and particularly disliked George's influence. [Miller's footnote continues.]

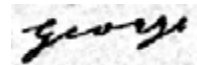
¹⁶ **Dr. William T. Webb** (1815-1883) of Greensboro provided medical care for the Cocke plantations in Alabama. He had a reputation as a skilled physician.

¹⁷ **Isaac Smith**, a neighbor.

¹⁸ **James Skipwith**, George's son, was then living at Hopewell.

¹⁹ **John Melton** and **Rev. J. E. Sawyer**, neighbors to Cocke.

house lot down to the widder [widow] Dufpheys²⁰ line, and the rails had to be hawled from the fence that divides mas John and mr may.²¹ I had to hawl a hundred cords of wood for burning brick and the timber to hawl from mas Johns to build the screw, had to hawl twelve loads of lime rock between twelve or thirten miles, and this kept my team busy every hour that they could be spared from the farm. I hav been working with my forder nine days to day, and I shall finish it to day I have put up thirty stacks and I think that there will be three or four more. the stacks are what I call duble stacks. I am now able to give you a true acount of my corn for it is the best crop I have made sence I have been to this country [Alabama], and if my cotten turns out as well as my corn I know that you will be pleased and I have every reason to beleave that it will. you shall be no longer disapointted about the marl for thir shall not a nother sun set before I commence about it. I do not knoe how long I shall be able to worke at it, for I am expecting to be cawled of every day to worke the rode, and we will have to worke there a week, and after we worke there a week there will be no more time for Jobs, for our cotten is opening in spots now, and when we commence on that we shall have no more time to spare wet nor dry, for in bad weather we are gining, packing and geting trash out of the cotten.²² I should like to knoe whither you reseved my second letter or not, which I wrote in Jun I wrote princeble about the stork [livestock] and if you have not reseved it I shall be compeled to write you again. I have no reason to complain about the behaviour of the people in this letter. thir has none violate from thir pledge to my knowing. I know that you manage your afars with a very little fighting, and I tries to patern after you, but you knoe that amoung twenty or thirty hands there will be som times that a man will to spur them up I Remane your Servant



George Skipwith wrote J. H. Cocke on Sept. 8 and Oct. 20, 1847 [letters not included here].

Hopewell Nov 18 1847

Sir

yours come to hand [your letter arrived] a few days ago, and I am sorry that you complain of not hearing from me once a month. the fault must be in the male for I have wrote to you every month sence I wrote my first letter it is true I always wait som too or three days to see if I can get a letter or not but I always low my self time anuf to write you the same month

I did not give you any understanding about the marl when I wrote to you last, but you need not take it for granted that I have givein the Job out. it is true from our short cotten crop that we could have spared som hands about the marl, but we thought it was to your intrress [interest] to put it off a while and imploy the hands another way. we knoe that fodder is always worth from six bits [seventy-five cents] to a dollar a hundred and we thought that it was best to imploy the spare hands poling hay, so that would enable you to sell the fodder, and we are able now to spare you half of our fodder or little more I have geatherd the balance of my corn which amounts to one hundred and twenty barrells I have hawled up all of my fodder and have restaked it puting too stakes in one and I have now seventeen very large staks I have paked twenty eight bags of cotten and they will avrige [average] over five hundred and I have hawled the last load to the

²⁰ **Jane Dufphey** (1803?-1862), originally from North Carolina, owned a modest plantation adjacent to Hopewell. On several occasions the Hopewell slaves visited slaves on her estate.

²¹ **John May**, a planter living nearby.

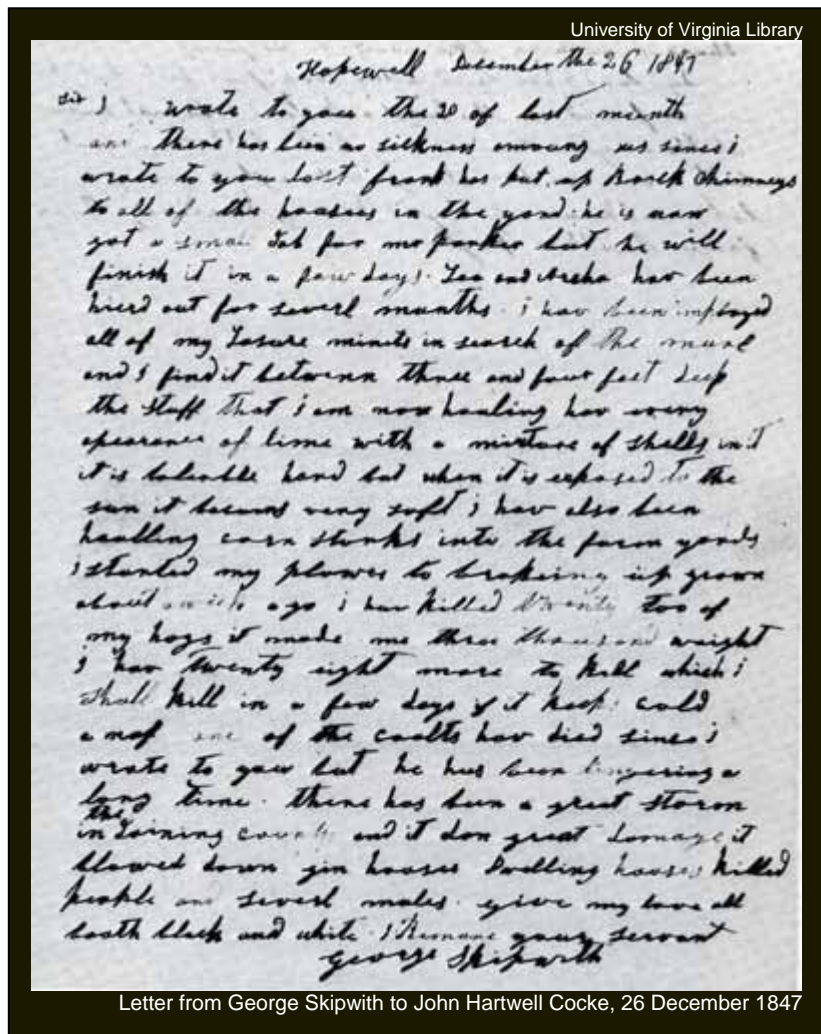
²² Picking cotton in the South began in late summer or early fall and lasted into January. Weather conditions and the stamina and dexterity of the individual worker determined the worker's pace and productivity. The Hopewell picking force averaged about five bales per hand, a good but not exceptional rate for Alabama. [Miller's footnote continues.]

river to day and I think that there will be nine or ten more in the field I have commenced digeing my potatoes but was stoped to day by the rain I have diged four hundred bushells of eating roots besids the cut roots and seed, and I think there will upwards of a hundred bushells more of eating roots excuseing the seed

I think that I have got too hundred bushells of seed peas, and master John was up here monday and we hav made our araingement and there will [be] no Job come next before the hawling of the corn storks in to the farm yards and the marling. I knoe sir that you thought straing of my not writeing to you about the minister who we had with us but as I could not say any thing that would pleas you about him I thought that is was best to say nothing. I knoe that you always did think hily of ministers and christians I cant say that mr Taylor was not a christian but he aked [acted] very comical the time he was with us master John gave orders for a mare to be turned into the yard and after he knoed that it was master orders for it to be don he said that she should not stay in here and he turned her in the woods master John toled me that after we had geatherd our corn that there was nothing to be turned in the field but the fattening hogs and the three mars mr Taylor said that his mare should stay in there and he keep her in there master John toled him also that he did not want him to interfear with the horces at the time of worke but if him or his family wanted a horse to go to church that he could get them at any time when they was not at

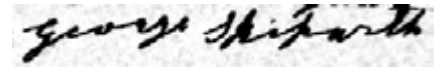
worke but he was not to carry them of[f] of the land without his knowing of it but he took one of the mares three diferent times and rode up to his plantation which was about eighteen or twenty miles and the last time he leave her up there a week at a time I knoe sir that mr Taylor has don more harm among our people than he has don good for he says that we are treated worse than any peopel in the world and if there is any in the world treated any worse he has never herde talk of them and this he says he will tell to every boddy that ask him any thing about us. he has spoken very free about the matter and master John saw that he was doing more harm than he was doing good and he turned him off I have writen you now the truth sir and you can Judge for your self

we are all well and there has been none married sence you



Letter from George Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, 26 December 1847

was out here. I have done the best I could and I knoe master John is a man of truth and I shall be satisfied with what ever correction he gives me I would be very glad sir if it sute you as well to bring william²³ with you I want to see him very bad there has none profest religion sence you was out here I remane your servant

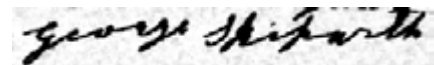


George Skipwith wrote Cocke on Dec. 26, 1847, and on April 15, May 6, June 8, and July 4, 1848 [letters not included here].

hopewell auggust the 8 1848

Sir

yours come to hand to day and I am glad to hear that you are well but I am sorry that you complain of not hearing from me once a month I have written to you every month since you went away. it is true that some of my letters was som too or three days after my ushall time but it was not through niglect but I knoe that I would be able to give you more satisfacshion about my matters. this letter is a few days behind now but if it was a week later I could give you more satisfaction concerning my crops than I can now. my last letter to you was on the forth of July and I gave ya an acount of my crops at that time. I have finished poling my fodder and my corn is a pretty fare crop, and I have more oats than I have ever made yet. my crope of cotton is as good a one at preasant as any man can shoe on sandy land thoe I cannot say with saftity what the turn out will be yet, for the worms have been aponn our cotton some six or eight days ago, and they are working faithful, but I am no ways Disincourageed yet. there is but one thing now that I am afraid of and that is a spell of wet damp weather but if we can be Bleesed with dry hot sons we will make a crop in fiance of the worms but if thir be a wet spel now the worms will commence cuting and Boing holes in the old Bowls [cotton bolls] and they will rot but if we have dry weather they can do the Bowls no harm, and I have Bowls a nuf at preasant to make a better crop than we have made for several years. it is raining at preasant but it does not apear as if thir will be a long spell but you may considder that we will commence picking cotton the first fare day that comes if it is to morro. we have started our marl carts and mas John thinks that thir is so much trash that we had better put it at a dubble rate we have paid our best attension to the sedars and the stork hav ingured [livestock have injured] but a very few of them we are all well and we hav had no sickness of much acount since you leave Lucy is attentive to the intfant school the married people are geting on very smooth togeathear they have been disposed to act contrary with one another but mas John has got them all to rights again. thir is but too roes of the orange that did come up we have planted our hold parster [pasture] in peas and they are all up and we have plowed them three times and worked them twice with the hoes and they looks now like they will make us a very fine crop I will now come to a close I Remane your servant



George Skipwith wrote John Hartwell Cocke on Sept. 1, Oct. 2, and Nov. 1, 1848 [letters not included here].

Due to Skipwith's drinking and lax management, Cocke demoted him from overseer to driver in late 1848 and assigned Abram Perkins, a white man, to supervise Skipwith's behavior.

²³ William Skipwith, George's son, was working as a stonemason at Cocke's Bremo Plantation in Virginia.

Hopewell December the 1st 1848

Sir

I wrote to you november the 2 and I have herd nothing from you nor mr perkins since I wrote last. I have geatherd my corn and I made seventy wagins loads and thirty Bushells to a load, and I have got twelve dubble stacks of fodder. it will take me about one more day to finish picking out my cotton I have got seventy seven bags packed out I have hawled fifty of them to the landing and the seventy seven Bags wayed forty five thousand five hundred and forty five pound and I yet think that we will make our hundred Bags. my marl carts have been constant runing except in bad weather we are about finishing the field behind my house. the next field that we commence apon will be the pea fielde. I think that we will get a plenty of marl we have got the pit about fifty foot wide, and thir is a Boddy of marl six foot deep before me now but below the six foot it is inclined to be sandy but is good on boath sides of the pit we have not commenced scattering the marl yet. mas John thought that it was better to let it stand for fear of hard rain washing it away but we will commence plowing and scatering it in next week

Frank is putting up chimneys to the new houses he has put up three and I think that he will finish them all by christmas with fair weather. I think archa and Lee will finish the new corn house in about too more days I have forty hogs for this years killing but som of them are right small. I was in hopes that you would hear a good acount of us all the hold year out but I cannot write any thing

concerning our matters that will be pleasing to you, for the state of things at preassant are such as I have never knone here before I remember the last discorse [conversation] that you had with me at the gate and I have kept it daily before me and I have done as I promased you to do, and I have found it Just as you told me that it would be you told me that no fals reports could condem a man if he went right. they have raised reports apon me once, but missed thir ame but here is the second one but master John says he will leave it for you to deside me and master John have talked on all of the difernt cases and he says that he intend to write to you forthwith and tell you of all of the cases. we are all well. I remane your servant



George Spierth

hopewell oct the 12th 1849

Sir

I reseved your letter several day ago and was glad to hear from you

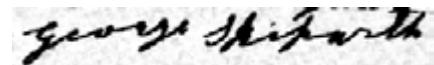
I knoe that you would wish to here from us in mr perkins absents, but as I was not aurtherised I did not knoe what to do. Mr perkins told me in his absents to repote to mas John every Sunday

and I done so, and I had no doubt but what he was writing in Mr perkins place. our cotton crop is a very short one I think if I can get fifty Bags waying five hundred it will be the end of my crope. I have packed out eighteen Bags, and they will go five hundred and a few pounds over. our pea field that we marled has failed, but I donot charge that to the marl altogearthier, but I am convinced that we bed[d]ed up our land too high altogearthier, and bedding upon so menny pey vines that it cost the squares, the best peace of cotton we had in that field was that we beded up with one horse. the field behind my house done very well where we got the first stand [growth of trees or plants], but where we replanted there is none. this makes me knoe that your Mode of early planting is a wise one, altho we may get caught by the frost som few year

when I reseved your letter mr perkins was in the act of writing, and I thought that I would wate and write between his times

sir I think mr perkins is the very man that you take him to be. he is kind to the people and whipes none bethout a suffishent cause. hen thinks that the horse will make some six or seven hundred dollars, and they are comeing in to us now like it was the first of the spring. Mr perkins have sold nothing of the land but what could be spared and he have bought such as was neadful, and they are oweing us now about ninety or a hundred dollars. Mr perkins is Busy now burning of his brick and I think that he will be able to bloe out about sattursday night or sunday morning. then my hands will all be togearthier and my next Job will be to gearther my corn, and I wish that you could be here to see with your one [own] eyes the difernce of the corn on the marled lands for there is better corn on the marled lands than any other parts of its. there is som sickness among us but non dangerus. we have losed none of our stock since you was here

we hav been trying to reduce our cattle [before winter] but I beleave that one comes for every one that we kill. we have had seven young calves since you was out here I have turned out Eight youngs stearers [steers] and if you think them Eight is too many let us knoe in mr perkins letter. I have a hundred and ten hogs and I calculate upon killing fifty or sixty of them give my love to every boddy white and Black. I remane your servant



George Skipwith wrote J. H. Cocke on Aug. 11, Oct. 14, and Nov. 10, 1850 [letters not included here].

In spring 1850 Skipwith was badly injured when drunk and in a fight at the house of a white man whom he had been forbidden to see. In exasperation, Cocke removed him from any supervisory role on the plantation and, in 1851, removed him from the plantation completely to protect the Hopewell slaves from his "radical depravity." George Skipwith was sent with his wife, Mary, and his young son to a Mississippi plantation where he lived until after the Civil War.