

# “A pleasant good Family”: Domestic Enslavement in Samuel Johnson’s Household, 1723–1772

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Enslavement is not part of the scholarly image that most people have of the Reverend Dr. Samuel Johnson. The first president of King’s College—the institution that would later become Columbia University—is better remembered for his role as an academic, a philosopher, and an Anglican minister in colonial New England. In his own memoir, completed just a year before his death in 1771, Johnson mentioned the presence of a “servant” only once.[1] Even previous research into Johnson’s slave holdings has only skimmed the surface of his involvement. Eric Foner’s 2016 report on King’s College and Slavery references only two enslaved people, Jenny and Robin, by name, and mentions Johnson’s efforts to purchase another enslaved person during his presidency of the College.[2]

However, Johnson’s lifetime correspondence tells a different story about his relationship to the institution of slavery, and about the level of involvement that Johnson had with the

people he enslaved. His letters to his friends and family members, preserved at Columbia University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, demonstrate the extent to which Johnson's private life and public image depended upon the labor of free servants and enslaved people. At least twenty enslaved people are mentioned by name in Johnson's correspondence, many of them over the course of several decades. Their brief appearances in Johnson's writings, and the silences surrounding their existence in the official history of his legacy, reveal how utterly entrenched—and disturbingly commonplace—the violence of owning human property was in Johnson's life.

The enslaved people who lived in Johnson's household, and whose labor made his personal and academic life possible, were men, women, and children who each lived lives equally as complex and multifaceted as Johnson's. Their histories are part of Columbia University's institutional history; without their labor, Johnson's leadership of King's College would not have been possible. But they must also be remembered in their own right: as people who were dehumanized, transacted for, and subjugated by their enslavers, but who at the same time insisted upon their own personhood and negotiated lives for themselves beyond the bounds of Johnson's writings. More than Johnson's story, this essay attempts to uncover their stories, to mourn the violence that was exacted upon them, and to honor the full complexity of their lives.

Conducting this type of scholarly inquiry into slavery is never uncomplicated, particularly for a white American university student like myself. The brutality and dehumanizing nature of slavery means that the lives of enslaved people emerge only on the margins of the official historical archive—their own voices are absent from Johnson's letters, their memory made possible only through the words of the man who enslaved them. The fundamental violence that is constitutive of, and inherent within, the archive of slavery necessitates a different kind of reading: Saidiya Hartman writes in her introduction to *Scenes of Subjection* that reading the history of slavery requires “excavations at the margins of monumental history” that attend to “the cultivated

silences, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts.”[3] I attempt to follow Hartman’s example in my own work, to honor the lives of the people Johnson enslaved against and in spite of his negation of them, while at the same time respecting the limits of what I can imagine about them.

This essay presents the findings of my research into the presence of enslaved people in Samuel Johnson’s and the Johnson family’s archives. I trace the lives and experiences of the people that Johnson enslaved from his early years in Stratford, Connecticut, to his time in New York City as the president of King’s College, to his return to Stratford for the final decade of his life. Although the essay is arranged roughly chronologically and geographically, these categories do not fully encapsulate the mobility of eighteenth-century New Englanders and the people they enslaved, nor are they able to do complete justice to the existence of the enslaved people who appear in Johnson’s writings. Even if an enslaved person might have appeared only once in Johnson’s correspondence, or not at all, they still existed beyond the “register of [their] encounter with power.”[4] My work here, like all work that takes up the lives and historical memory of enslaved people, is always already incomplete.

## Stratford, Connecticut: 1723-1754

In 1723, a twenty-nine-year old Samuel Johnson moved to Stratford, Connecticut to take a position as minister of the parish there. The move marked a new chapter in an already accomplished early life. Johnson had been born north of Stratford in Guilford, Connecticut in 1694; educated at the recently established College at Saybrook, from which he graduated in 1714 and then worked as a tutor after its move to New Haven;[5] and voyaged to England in 1722 to become ordained as an Anglican minister.[6] Now

back in the American colonies, he would remain in Stratford for the next three decades, preaching sermons to the local community and neighboring towns, meeting and marrying his wife Charity Floyd Nicoll in 1725,[7] and starting a family of his own.

Along with a main building that served as his house, Johnson's estate in Stratford included ample land, outbuildings, and meadows grazed by his animals. A 1757 deed for his land, which by that point had been conveyed to his son William Samuel Johnson, described it as containing "2 Acres of Homelot land in Stratford Town plot near the Church with a Mansion House, Barn and Chaise House thereon standing." [8] Johnson was not a farmer, unlike many of his neighbors and parishioners—he occupied the majority of the time with his ministry and academic work—but, like most New England landowners at the time, he probably raised at least some crops and his own stock animals. In the 1730s and 1740s, he also purchased a succession of adjoining lots in Stratford and its neighboring town Woodbury, a more inland area formerly named "Pomperoege" by the indigenous Americans who had been displaced by settler colonial violence.[9] It is possible that he used these lands for farming, or leased them out to make additional money to supplement his own income.

Secondary sources paint a more vivid picture of Johnson's household in Stratford, although they do not mention the labor of enslaved people that made its operations possible. T.B. Chandler wrote in his 1805 biography of Johnson that the man and his home were famous for hospitality:

For the greater part of his life he kept what may be called a public table. This was at all times liberally furnished, but without superfluity or needless expense. To say nothing of his parishioners and neighbors, the poorest of whom were frequently fed at this table, the Church people belonging to all the adjacent towns thought it their duty, when they came to Stratford, if their business would admit of it, to wait upon him; and they were always hospitably received and entertained by him. For a number of years after he

entered upon his mission, while there was no other Clergyman in the colony, at Christmas and the other great festivals, his house was thronged for several days together, with the pious members of the Church from the neighboring towns, who came to Stratford to spend some part of these solemn seasons, under the advantages of his public and private ministrations. On such occasions every bed was crowded; and sometimes the number of these guests was so large, that several of them were obliged to take up with lodgings on the floor. As he lived on the great road from Boston to New York, and had a large acquaintance in both places, as well as throughout the country in general, many gentlemen that travelled contrived their journeys so as to make a stop at Stratford, in order to spend some time with this eminent Clergyman.[10]

While his “public table” and great gatherings made Johnson famous for his hospitality, they must have been a tremendous burden on the enslaved people who had to prepare the food for that same table, attend to Johnson’s many guests from morning until night, and clean the premises after they had departed. Perhaps the “travelling gentlemen” brought their own enslaved people along with them, who could have spent their brief nights sharing news and stories with the people enslaved by Johnson when not engaged in heavy labor. Even in rural Stratford, Johnson was more connected and cosmopolitan than the typical Connecticut farmer, and the people he enslaved experienced that sociality alongside him, albeit in immensely different ways.

Despite his social position in Stratford, Samuel Johnson saw himself as a man of modest means. In a 1754 letter to the Reverend Mr. Beach—probably John Beach, a minister in nearby Newtown—he wrote that, “[W]ith these great salaries of mine and my son’s joined with my boarding and teaching gentlemen’s sons and all my grasping, I have but just been able to live, and believe I have not half the estate that you have, nor have I been able to do perhaps one quarter so much towards setting up my son in the

world as I suppose you have.” In fact, Johnson attributed the wealth he did have to his wife, Charity Floyd Nicoll, who came from a prosperous family in Long Island and had accumulated additional wealth through her previous marriage into the Nicoll family of New York landowners:[11] “What I have is chiefly owing to my wife’s fortune.”[12] But Johnson’s sense of himself as lacking personal wealth is incommensurate with the fact that he owned enslaved people throughout his lifetime—and generally more than one person at a time, as evidenced by his household accounts and correspondence.

During his early years in Stratford, Johnson owned at least two enslaved people, Robin and Hagar, whose names are mentioned directly in his correspondence. Although he spent the greatest span of his life, by far, in his Stratford home, there are few mentions of enslaved people in his letters before 1754. Their relative absence in the archive does not imply that they did not exist; rather, it reflects the fact that these were the early years when all of the members of Johnson’s immediate family were united under one roof. The later departure of his sons to start their own lives, and Johnson’s move to New York, would create the opportunity for more detailed accounts of their respective households in correspondence.

A 1746 account of Johnson’s household was one of the few documents not intended as correspondence that recorded the presence of enslaved people during this time. The account, written by Johnson, listed the names of sixteen enslaved people, including two unnamed “Infants,” as well as two Irish servants, Judith Flannagan and John Togg, and twenty-two people labeled as “boarders.”[13] Only two of the names, Hagar and Cloe, are repeated elsewhere in Johnson’s letters. The rest—Bennet, Cesar, Cato, Juba, Pompey, Palea, Amos, Flora, Peg. / Dame / Betty (grouped together on one line, their names separated by dashes), Bennet,[14] and two infants—appear only in this document. It is unlikely that all of these people would have lived in Johnson’s household at the same time, and equally unclear whether all of the people listed as “Servants” were personally enslaved by Johnson, or brought to his household by the boarders

named thereafter. Historian Larry Lee Bothell writes that “During the 1720’s, a small but steady number of Yale graduates resided with the Johnsons for varying periods before travel to England for Anglican orders,” and surmises that this household account encompasses all the members of Johnson’s household between the years of 1723 and c. 1741.[15] Along with these religious guests, Johnson’s boarders likely also included “several boys from Albany and New York” who Johnson “took into his house” to teach alongside his own sons, Benjamin and William Nicoll and Samuel and William Johnson.[16]

By 1750, Johnson had acquired at least one enslaved person in addition to his household list. In a drafted letter to the Reverend Mr. Beach, he wrote that “The wench I had does not suit either my wife or my man. So if you know of any body would have her I wish you would send Him.”[17] Johnson’s concern that the “wench,” a term he used for enslaved women, would suit not only his wife but his “man” indicated the close proximity in which the two enslaved people would have worked, as well as the significance that Johnson ascribed to having some level of social compatibility between the people he enslaved. As his later letters demonstrated, Johnson was deeply preoccupied not only with the effectiveness of the labor performed by the people he enslaved, but also with how their actions and dispositions impacted the social and emotional climate of his household. The “man” mentioned in Johnson’s letter to Mr. Beach may have been one of the sixteen enslaved people listed in his household account; or it might have been Robin, an enslaved man whose name was not included on that list, but who appeared in Johnson’s correspondence beginning in November 1754 when Johnson—already in the process of moving into his new lodgings in New York City—wrote that “I forgot to send the Key of my Desk by Robin.”[18] Robin may have even been the person who delivered that letter, though not the key, from Johnson in New York to his son in Stratford. His travel back and forth between New York and Stratford traced a path that Johnson, his family, and the enslaved members of his household would retrace time and time again in the decade to follow.

## New York City, New York: 1754-1763

### Moving to New York

In 1754, at the age of sixty, Samuel Johnson moved from Stratford, Connecticut to New York City to take the position of president at King's College. Johnson's role at the College was far more involved than the president of a modern university. In his first year there, he taught the first class of eight students in the vestry room of Trinity Church, which had provided the land and institutional support for the school. He also oversaw the building of the College itself,[19] putting him in direct contact not only with students, but also with the laborers who transformed King's College from a plan into a material reality.

For the first few months of Johnson's move, the status of his Stratford household was left uncertain: no one was certain whether King's College would be able to survive the financial demands and political infighting that accompanied its founding,[20] and so Johnson's wife Charity remained at their home in Stratford to await further instructions from her husband. At least one enslaved person remained there alongside her: in March 1755, in response to his son's letter expressing Charity's doubt that she should prepare to move at all, Johnson wrote that "[A]t present it is Benny's advice that we continue as we are till we hear further, & that she be disposing of all she can spare as she has opportunity, but keep the Oxen and 2 or 3 Cows for the last & provide a few necessarys in the garden, & such Husbandry Affairs for Robin's employ as you may have the Advantage of if she should come away." [21] Robin had apparently remained in Stratford for the time being, after his first mention in Johnson's 1754 letter. Johnson's recommendation to his wife provides insight into the labor that Robin performed while in Stratford. By "Husbandry Affairs," Johnson likely meant attending to the garden and any



crops that were cultivated on his land, chopping wood, driving the oxen, milking the cows (clearly an essential asset, as they were kept “for the last”), and tending to the other animals on the estate. Robin might also have been engaged in tasks like carpentry and preparing food to be cooked for the family’s meals; or, if additional labor was needed, he might have been hired out by Johnson to work in the fields of neighboring farms.[22]

By June 1755, Charity had moved to New York to join Johnson in his new house there, bringing Robin with her. Johnson wrote in a letter to his son that “Robin continues to act a tolerable good part, & expresses no discontent in words, tho’ I can’t say, he seems quite easy & cheerful.”[23] His surprise implies that this was not the reaction he had expected from Robin. Maybe Robin had reacted differently when he first learned that he would have to move; or maybe he had formed social ties in Stratford so strong that even Johnson was aware of them, and anticipated the difficulty of leaving them behind. Perhaps he was being sundered from family members who lived on neighboring farms, or even a wife and children. Or perhaps he had simply resisted the move’s unavoidable reminder of his own lack of agency to move freely, according to his own desires. Regardless of whether he wanted to go to the city or not, he had not been consulted, and in the eyes of his enslavers he had no choice in the matter.

Johnson himself felt apprehensive about the transition from rural to urban: Eben Edwards Beardsley wrote in his 1874 biography of the man that “the social refinement, the bustle and stir, and demands upon his time in a city did not contrast pleasantly in his mind with the studious retirement and quiet repose of a rural parsonage.”[24] But for the people Johnson enslaved, the denser urban setting of New York also brought more opportunities to interact with other people enslaved in neighboring households, as well as with the city’s free black population. In 1756, one year after Robin came to New York, the city had an estimated 10,768 white and 2,278 black residents.[25] Compared to the population of rural Stratford at the time—according to Yale College president

Timothy Dwight, 3,658 inhabitants in 1756, 150 of whom were black[26]—the city had both a larger and a far denser population of enslaved people, creating the conditions for increased contact with a greater number of different people. In the landscape of New York City, the people who Johnson enslaved would face new challenges and new opportunities from the ones they had in the rural Stratford countryside.

### “Hagar desires to know”: Hagar and the separation of enslaved families

Johnson did not mention all of the members of his household in all of his letters. It is difficult to do justice to the life of an enslaved person with only their brief mentions in letters by a person who viewed them as human property, and who took their presence for granted to the extent that it barely needed to be stated. To read their lives only through these fragments in the correspondence of their enslavers is necessarily to miss the full texture of their personhood—their daily interactions, their relationships with people living within and outside of the Johnson household, the overt or covert forms of resistance they engaged in. But there were moments in Johnson’s letters where enslaved persons were able to make themselves known in spite of the archival violences that sought to silence them. Hagar, an enslaved woman whose name was included in Johnson’s 1746 account of his household members, was one such person. In all of Johnson’s letters that have been preserved in Columbia’s collection, Hagar’s is the only voice included of an enslaved person who spoke directly to her enslavers. She was mentioned in two brief asides in correspondence between Johnson, then recently arrived in New York, and his son William Samuel Johnson in Stratford.

On June 14, 1754, William wrote to his father that “Hagar desires to know, if you can tell, whether her Mother be yet alive, or not.”[27] The sentence was brief, tucked in the midst of a mundane discussion of travel and family affairs, but striking. It must have

taken tremendous bravery for Hagar to ask such a favor of her enslaver, to insert her “desires” into his correspondence. The very fact that she was able to make this request of Johnson suggests that she knew she had some sort of a claim on him. The proximity between Hagar’s family in New York—where Johnson was traveling when William sent him the letter—and Charity Floyd Nicoll’s home with her previous husband in Long Island suggests that Hagar might have been more closely tied with Johnson’s wife than with the man himself. Benjamin Nicoll’s estate inventory, made after his death in 1724, includes solitary mention of “a negro Girl.”[28] Could that girl have been Hagar? If so, perhaps Charity had taken her from Long Island to Connecticut upon her marriage to Johnson, sundering Hagar from the social ties and family relationships she had formed in her previous household. Perhaps Johnson felt as though he owed at least this small favor to the enslaved girl; or perhaps Hagar’s status as a person enslaved not directly by himself but by Charity—a human element of his “wife’s fortune” to which he attributed his worldly wealth—meant that Johnson was in part following his wife’s wishes rather than solely Hagar’s own. Whatever claim she might have had on Johnson, Hagar’s asking the question in the first place also meant that she must have been substantially concerned about her mother’s health; although they were geographically separated, she had to have heard some news about her mother, at least enough to know that she was ailing. Had she been sick for some time? Was she elderly? How old was Hagar when she asked this question, and how long had she been separated from her mother? Johnson’s letter provides more questions than it does answers.

Johnson responded to Hagar’s inquiry three days later. He wrote to William that “Hagar’s mother is dead, but Benny found her sister at Jamaica & delivered the letter.”[29] The fact that his stepson Benjamin Nicoll was able to deliver this “letter” once again suggests Hagar’s connection to the Nicoll family. Even more compellingly, it also suggests that both she and her sister were literate. Although many enslavers expressly forbade the people they enslaved from learning to read or write, fearing that such an education would provoke resistance, Hagar and her sister may have learned alongside

the children in the Nicoll or Johnson households.[30] The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, of which Johnson was a member and a donor, was also an early proponent of teaching enslaved people to read for religious purposes. In fact, Trinity Church—where the early classes of King’s College, taught by Johnson, would later be held—was originally the site of a different educational endeavour, led by the Society’s Elias Neau, who from 1709 until 1722 instructed enslaved and free black New Yorkers in Anglican catechisms.[31]

Despite the apparent goodness of “Benny’s” favor, however, the callousness of Johnson’s response—dismissing Hagar’s desperate inquiry in the space of four words—underwrites the violence of her loss. For Hagar, the experience of losing a mother from afar must have been devastating. Confined to William Samuel Johnson’s household, Hagar would not have been able to mourn her mother’s loss with her sister in Jamaica, a settlement outside of Manhattan, almost seventy miles away from Stratford. Although the rural settlement of Jamaica may have followed its own customs, in New York City restrictions on gatherings of enslaved people meant that Hagar’s mother likely would not have been able to receive a proper funeral: by 1754, city laws forbade more than twelve enslaved people from assembling at a funeral, and barred the presence of a pall or pall bearers.[32] Hagar would be forced to mourn alone, while continuing to perform the daily domestic labor that was demanded of her by her enslavers.

Like Robin, who seemed ambivalent about the move from Stratford, Hagar’s separation from her family was one instance of the violence of being forced to move from place to place, regardless of the relative opportunities that life in the city or the countryside might have afforded. Hagar and her mother and sister, and Robin, were involuntary travelers; they had no choice as to where they would go, how they would live, or who they would live with. But Hagar’s vocal “desire to know” about the condition of her mother resisted this violence, pushing back against their geographical separation and insisting upon the continued bonds of kinship that bound their family together, from New York to Stratford.

## “The great horror of his life”: Johnson’s bereavement and remarriage

Upon his arrival in New York, Johnson stayed at first in a temporary residence, spending his first winter there outside the city proper at the estate of his stepson Benjamin Nicoll.[33] By 1756, he had moved again, this time to a house in “Spring Garden” that had been built especially for him several blocks north of Trinity Church, off Broadway.[34] The house, much to Johnson’s pleasure, was centrally located relative to the church and the new College building: he told his son that it would “be a 100 times more Convenient & agreeable besides a good garden, stable, &c.”[35] At least five enslaved people would live in Johnson’s two households during the nine years he spent in New York: Robin, Horace, Jupiter, Jenny, and Cloe. The spaces they occupied in Johnson’s house likely afforded them little comfort or privacy: according to Jill Lepore, “New York City slaves slept in the attics and cellars of their owners’ houses, or in ‘Negro kitchens.’”[36]

Johnson’s wife, Charity Floyd Nicoll, also lived with him in the Spring Garden house beginning in 1756. There, she would have managed the affairs of the household, directing the activities of enslaved people and free or indentured white servants. But in 1758, three years after her move to New York, Charity contracted the smallpox and died. It was an outcome that Johnson had long feared—in fact, one biographer of Johnson wrote that smallpox had been “the great horror of his life.”[37] The greater prevalence of the smallpox in New York City was one of the primary reservations, in addition to his advanced age, that Johnson had initially raised about taking the position about King’s College.[38] The disease ravaged the American colonies throughout the eighteenth century, particularly before the widespread use of inoculation, and Johnson’s relatively elevated socioeconomic class made him no less vulnerable—although it did allow him the resources to flee the city at will, as he did many times over the course of

his presidency. The natural violence of smallpox also exacerbated the racial violence of enslavement. Although Johnson's letters provide evidence that at least some of the people he enslaved were inoculated,[39] he would not have gone to great lengths to ensure the health of an enslaved person in the same way that he did his own; they were worth protecting only in their status as property. Indeed, in a letter to William Samuel Johnson sent just four years after Charity's death, he wrote of his granddaughter Sally that "Her things she wore in the Small pox she has given to Mrs Nicolls s black Girl, & has got a new supply of wht she wants." [40] Although Sally's clothes had doubtless been laundered—probably by another enslaved woman—the comment suggested an implicit divide between those girls that could be given tainted "Small pox" clothes and those that were worthy of a more hygienic "new supply."

For Johnson, Charity's death was undoubtedly a tragedy, but it also presented a more practical obstacle: he had lost not only his lifetime companion, but also the manager of his household affairs. If Johnson took the labor of the people he enslaved for granted, then his letters following Charity's death make abundantly clear how essential he saw his wife's presence—and, more specifically, her household and social labor—as being to his own status and everyday life. In the wake of his wife's death, Johnson's widowed stepdaughter Gloriana Maverick came to live with him, presumably to take over the domestic labor and household management that Charity had previously performed. But in June 1759, she, too, fell ill and passed away.[41] Johnson would have to find a more long-term solution to the absence of a free white woman in his household.

Even before Gloriana's death, Johnson had reentered the marriage market. His apparent desperation to find a new wife indicates the degree to which he depended on the domestic labor of his female family members, in conjunction with the forced labor of enslaved people, to live and continue his work at King's College. In the January 1759 letter to Ann Watts where he proposed marriage to the widow, Johnson explained that

“in truth if my daughter should fail or be much enfeebled, it looks as if I must otherwise break up house keeping and become a lodger,” citing “ the little capacity I have for economical affairs,” rather than any desire for companionship or personal attraction to Mrs. Watts, as the reason he was pursuing a second marriage. His marriage proposal, couched in the religious language of eventual salvation, promised Mrs. Watts not romance but an eventual return on her investment in a husband with such a public status: “I hope you will have some satisfaction in thinking that you are all the while assisting me in doing public good to mankind in one of the most important and useful stations and business in which it is possible to us to be employed and as you will partake with me in the duty and service, so you will not fail, as I humbly trust, of partaking with me eternally in the reward.”[42] Apparently Ann Watts did not find Johnson’s promises very enticing; she declined his proposal.

But Johnson did not give up his search for a new wife. While taking on a housekeeper, Nancy, in the interim to manage his household affairs[43]—including, presumably, the labor of the enslaved people who lived there, who at that time likely would have included Horace, Jenny, and Cloe—he turned his eyes on a new prospect: Sarah Beach, the widowed mother-in-law of his son William Samuel Johnson. “It seems the general Opinion of my Friends here that I must get somebody, & there is it seems a general talk that it is to be Mrs. Beach, tho’ I know not how they came by it,” he wrote to Ann Beach, William Samuel Johnson’s wife and Sarah’s daughter, in October 1760. “I should be glad to know what she & you think on these difficulties, tho’ if it was so I would keep Nancy as long as I can, but my case is such that I am terribly afraid she will unavoidably be attended with a great deal more trouble & Care than in her present state, especially as there must be a good Deal of Parade of dressing & visiting &c.”[44] To his son he wrote even more candidly, admitting that “I was always with you, against 2nd Matches, especially in advanced years,” but that “in truth it seems so doleful in old age, to be destitute of a contemporary companion, that I am almost apt to think a man never wants one more.”[45] Johnson, of course, had more than one “companion” in his

household at all times in the people he enslaved; but his specific desire for a “contemporary companion” indicated that he viewed another free adult as existing on a different social plane, however subordinate she might be.

Johnson’s advances to Sarah Beach were more successful than his earlier proposal to Ann Watts. In June 1761, the two were married. When Johnson wrote to his acquaintance and British clergyman J. Berriman seven months later recounting the saga, he was unreserved in detailing how necessary the marriage had been not only for his private life, but also for his public work: “I intended however to have lingered along my life in widowhood, but found after three years trial I could not subsist in that condition unless I quitted my college and went to my son, and as this could not be done without the greatest detriment to that, such a necessity I thought might excuse me. I have therefore procured myself another consort, in whom I thank God I am very happy, and my college seems likely to flourish.”[46]

### “Bad Company”: Horace and black sociality in colonial New York

On August 18, 1760, Samuel Johnson wrote a brief letter to the wife of his son William Samuel Johnson, then away in Litchfield for business. “I am very sorry to tell you Horace has been so bad that I can’t keep him any longer & so am obliged to send him to Stratford,” he wrote, “& hope you can keep him at least till my Son can dispose of him.” The letter continued:

I cant but hope he has yet some good Dispositions, & would be tolerable if he be but out of the way of the bad Company that have bewitched him to Gaming which has tempted him to steal & thence to Lye, so that the best thing for him is to place him out of the way



of Temptation, in which Case I hope his good nature may yet issue in some good. What I shall do I know not. I have got an Irish man for a month, in which time our friend Nicky hopes he can procure me another.[47]

This description is the single longest passage that Johnson wrote about any individual enslaved person—indeed, virtually the entire letter was devoted to describing Horace’s behavior. Johnson’s attention to Horace’s transgressive sociality raises questions about how life in the city of New York would have differed for enslaved people compared to the more rural, isolated households of Stratford. For Horace, at least in Johnson’s eyes, the city provided access to a new population of “bad Company.”

What spaces in New York City would have been available for Horace to meet and socialize with this “bad Company?” A 1736 petition against gaming, brought to the city’s Common Council by concerned citizens, explicitly discussed the malevolent influence of “Gaming Houses,” which encouraged “Youth” — presumably free, white youth — to “use unlawfull Methods for maintaining their unreasonable & Extravagant Expences, sometimes attended with Quarreling and fighting, and after unfitt as well as unwilling to perform those Services, as are required of them.”[48] Perhaps Horace might have been able to steal away to meet newfound friends at such establishments after hours, or on Sundays, when enslaved people were typically given the day off.[49] Certainly, some establishments in the city were known to open their doors to enslaved and free black patrons, despite laws against it.[50] Horace might also have met his “company” in the public spaces of the city — on the streets, in alleyways, or in the marketplace while out on errands for his enslaver. A 1731 “Law Against Slaves Gaming” passed by the Common Council specifically targeted “Gaming or Playing in the Streets of this City, or any of them, or in any House, Out House or Yard,” indicating that these common spaces might have been particularly popular areas for enslaved people to gather.[51]

The empty market house near Burling's slip on the waterfront, a ten minute walk to the southeast of Trinity Church, was a favored hangout for some: perhaps Horace joined the "Idle people, Boys and Negroes spending their Masters Time by playing and Gaming" there, fashioning a space for recreation amidst the cattle that also used the building for shelter.[52]

Johnson's apprehension of Horace's misbehavior also had historical precedent. Horace's "Stealing and Lying" may have provoked fears in his enslaver—or, at the very least, a lingering memory—of the 1741 Conspiracy that had taken hold of the city just nineteen years earlier, in which 30 enslaved men were executed, and over seventy more enslaved men and women banished from the province, for a suspected interracial arson plot against the city's white landowners.[53] Taverns and meeting places in which enslaved people, free black laborers, and white indentured laborers met and socialized were the central locations in which the supposed plot had fomented, and Johnson may have been frightened by the suggestion of a similarly threatening social autonomy in Horace. But beyond the apprehension of resistance, Johnson's harsh response to Horace's behavior also shows the extent to which the mere sociality of enslaved people was feared and restricted by their masters. As historian T.J. Davis wrote in his analysis of the 1741 Conspiracy, "taking time to relax, to gather together and laugh and play and feel unfettered or act freely as a person for at least an hour or two was a crime because the law denied the basic humanity of slaves: It provided for slaves to be property, not people." [54]

This was not Horace's first mention in Johnson's correspondence: he had appeared in earlier letters, usually alongside Robin, in brief passages where Johnson attempted to gauge the temperaments of the two enslaved men. Horace had arrived at Johnson's household in July 1755—sent there by William Samuel Johnson, apparently, in exchange for Robin, who appears to have returned to Stratford.[55] Johnson gave no explanation for sending Robin away; perhaps his initial lack of "discontent" after moving

to the city had been only temporary, as Johnson had seemed to suspect from the start. “It is well if Robin’s goodness holds, for my part I can’t but doubt whether he will ever hold it very long. Horace is a good relief yet and does very well if it holds, and there is little doubt but he may do good service at least till we can find a better,”[56] Johnson wrote to William Samuel Johnson in his initial account of Horace’s arrival. Just a week later, he seemed still uncertain about Horace’s disposition, writing that “And it is very well Robin holds so good. Horace also does very well, at least much better than I expected.”[57] His updates denote an anxiety about the emotional reactions of both men to their circumstances; Johnson clearly did not expect his enslaved people to “do well,” whether emotionally or in terms of the labor they performed, and was relieved when they did so.

But by the fall, Johnson had changed his hopeful tone regarding Horace. In November 1755, he wrote to his son that “As for us we must do as well as we can, and I hope we may do tolerably. —Horace does as well as can be expected, but in Truth we are but weak handed,” adding that “There is some prospect of a very excellent negro to be sold at vendue this week.”[58] In April of the next year, he wrote that “As to Robin you need be in no concern about paying soon for him, for I see no way to get another. We rub along with Horace as well as we can.”[59] The comment suggests that Johnson not only sold enslaved people like Robin, but sold them to his own family members, or at the very least acted as a go-between for his son’s transactions. But this resigned aside was the last of Horace’s mentions in Johnson’s correspondence, besides an apparently unfulfilled offer to send him to William Samuel Johnson as a replacement for another enslaved woman,[60] until four years later, when Johnson wrote to Ann Beach insisting upon Horace’s removal.

Despite Johnson’s efforts, Horace resisted being sent away from the city in which he had made a place for himself. At the bottom of his August 18 letter to Ann Beach, Johnson was forced to insert an addendum: “Augst 18. I send Horace with his Baggage

to go on board of Gorham & behold he was gone, so I must e'en keep him a little longer, & perhaps, as he has been severely punished he may do better, as he gives great promises, however I am obliged to by my service to Mr. Winslow.”[61] Johnson never described physical violence outright in his letters; his comment, which seems almost an afterthought, that Horace “has been severely punished” was as close as he came to divulging his own brutality as an enslaver. Then again, the everyday violence of enslavement was evident in every mention of an enslaved person in his letters, as well as in every time that their presence and their labor was omitted from the page. But if Horace’s resistance through consorting with his “bad Company” was imagined by Johnson, then there is little doubt that his absencing himself on August 18 was a deliberate and intentional act of defiance: Horace refused to go to Stratford, and at least on that particular day, Johnson could not force him to. Horace’s name appeared next in a letter to Johnson’s son one and a half months later, appended again as a sort of afterthought below the letter proper: “Horace is pretty Good ever since.”[62] The sentence appeared as a fragment rather than a complete thought, the violence that followed the “ever since” too incriminating for Johnson to put onto paper—or perhaps, in his world, too mundane. Horace’s resistance had not gone unpunished; but its record remained in the archive of Johnson’s letters, testifying to his presence and pushing back against Johnson’s own sense of himself as a liberal, morally justified man who also happened to enslave human beings.

### “A pleasant quiet Family”: White women and families under enslavement

Jenny was another enslaved woman who worked alongside Horace in Johnson’s Spring Garden house. She was first mentioned as a member of William Samuel Johnson’s Stratford household in a 1755 letter where William announced his aims to travel with her down to New York, writing to Johnson that “We have begun to pack up

the Furniture and purpose to get away in a Fortnight, if I am not disappointed in a Vessel. How we shall do with Jenny I am something at a loss; for I am suspicious whether she will hold out long enough for us to get down to you.”[63] William’s concern about Jenny’s ability to “hold out” was ambiguous—was she sick? Had she resisted being forcibly moved by her enslavers?

Regardless of the cause of his concern, William turned out to be wrong about Jenny’s inability to “hold out.” When she appeared next in Johnson’s correspondence, it was a full six years later, and she was now working in Johnson’s household in New York. Like Horace,[64] her labor there was likely primarily domestic; Johnson’s letters showed her working in the kitchen[65] and making soap,[66] among other duties. Jenny’s reappearance in Johnson’s letters corresponds almost exactly with the date of his marriage to his second wife, Sarah Beach, in June 1761, suggesting that Jenny might have accompanied Mrs. Beach from Connecticut to the city.

Sarah Beach’s arrival in New York precipitated a conflict with another member of Johnson’s household: Nancy, the housekeeper who Johnson had hired after the death of his stepdaughter Gloriana Maverick. As a free woman, despite her servant status, Nancy enjoyed more mobility and control over the household than enslaved women like Jenny. Her sense of herself as the owner of her own labor was evident in her clash with Sarah Beach, which Johnson described to William Samuel Johnson secondhand. In August 1761, he informed his son that “Our Nancy who had so long been the first, did not chuse to be a second in the House, & said from the beginning she did not incline to stay longer than till your mother was pretty well acquainted, so she has this day left us, designing, she says, to set up her trade, & your mother is not sorry she is gone.”[67] Just four days later, he wrote again to elaborate upon Nancy’s departure, explaining this time that “Nancy could not endure a Superior in the house, whom she treated ill all along from the moment she saw her without the least provocation, nay in spite of the utmost patience & good usage; Indeed I never imagined she could have had such a

temper.” Johnson’s language indicated that the conflict was something of an embarrassment to his household; he preferred that the news of it be kept within the family. “She has never seen us since, however we have said nothing of all this but to two or 3 friends in confidence,” he wrote, “nor do I hear any thing of her talk.”

Johnson closed the letter by assuring his son of the continued functioning of his household—a functioning that was enabled by the enslaved “servants” who, unlike Nancy, could not decide to leave when the household’s conditions no longer suited them. “As for us we are much better without her, we can easily procure by Nicky & Molly what we want, & much cheaper have Ironing & sewing &c done by hiring when we want,” he wrote. “The Servants are glad, & do very well, without a harsh word & all is perfectly quiet & cheerful.”[68]

In October 1761, Johnson wrote to his son extolling his satisfaction with his current situation. “Indeed, my Son, I never was happier in my life than now, so long as it shall please God to continue it,” he wrote. “—Your mother, without scarce a harsh word has made even Horace a good boy, & Jenny has got a good Husband who does many good offices, so that we have a pleasant quiet Family.”[69] Johnson’s language here is remarkable: it imagined a “pleasant quiet Family” that was composed not of his blood relations, but of his new wife (“your mother”) and Horace and Jenny—the very people they enslaved. By refiguring his household as a “Family,” Johnson erased the violent hierarchies of power, subjugation, and human commodification that allowed it to exist in the first place. But the violence of enslavement bled through in his reference to Horace. Although Sarah Beach had apparently disciplined Horace “without scare a harsh word,” the specter of his brutal punishment one year earlier was unforgettable.

Johnson’s language also implicitly effaced the existence of a different “Family”: Jenny and her “good Husband.” By folding the enslaved couple into his image of his own family, Johnson denied their ability to exist in their own right: they were “his” family, not

their own. But despite Johnson's best efforts, the relationship between Jenny and her husband did exist beyond the bounds of Johnson's limited imagination. Maybe Jenny's husband was a free black man who had been hired to do work for them, or who worked elsewhere in the city; or an enslaved man who lived nearby. If their marriage was official, it was not listed in the Trinity Church records. But their partnership attests to his and Jenny's resilience under the kinship-effacing conditions of enslavement. Even in a city like New York, with a far greater population density than rural Stratford, enslaved people faced heavy constraints in their ability to form and maintain personal and romantic relationships. Their unfree status meant that, even if they lived in the same house, one member of an enslaved couple could be sold away from their partner—or taken in a move, like Samuel Johnson's from Stratford to New York—at a moment's notice. The physicality of space itself provided an obstacle: especially in a city like New York, enslaved people rarely had their own entirely separate quarters, relegated instead to "sleeping space in attics and cellars" or rooms in the kitchen of their enslaver's house.[70] But Jenny and her husband found spaces for companionship in spite of, and in resistance to, the violence of the conditions to which they were subjected.

Jenny and her "good Husband" were just one facet of the different social relationships that existed between the people that Johnson enslaved. Even when Johnson did not explicitly describe the enslaved people in his household interacting with each other, there is little doubt that they did, laboring side-by-side and fulfilling the needs for conversation, comfort, diversion, and support that could not be provided by forcibly separated family members. Vivienne L. Kruger suggested in her 1985 dissertation that "the holding" of enslaved people within a particular household might be considered "as the meaningful social unit on a day to day basis." [71] The social arrangement of the "holding," made possible only through the violence of enslavement, could in no way replace the relationships between mother and child, husband and wife, or brother and sister; necessarily, all of these relationships existed at the same time, even if enslaved family members could not contact one another. But perhaps Horace and Jenny were

able to form their own approximation of a “pleasant quiet Family” during the time they were enslaved by Johnson. Maybe Jenny had helped Horace tend to his wounds after Johnson had him punished. Maybe they shared advice on places to go in the city, or favorite recipes, or stories of home. Or maybe the two enslaved people kept primarily to themselves, focusing their social energy on the world outside the confines of Johnson’s household rather than the people within it.

Johnson’s own happiness was short-lived. In 1763, he met with another personal tragedy: after just two years of marriage, his second wife Sarah Beach fell ill with the smallpox and passed away. “This Event, my Son, is indeed a most shocking disappointment to me,” Johnson wrote to William Samuel Johnson on February 14, five days after her death, “as we reckoned, (perhaps too much) within 3 or 4 months of retiring together & spending the remainder of our Days among our Children & theirs with much tranquility, but now if I live I must come alone, & welter thro’ my remaining Days, in a solitary Condition!”[72] The “pleasant quiet Family” that he had hoped for had been dissolved; and, in planning to “retir[e]” to Stratford, Johnson implicitly also plotted the dismemberment of Jenny’s family with her husband, who would not be able to travel with her back to Connecticut. Johnson’s lament at the loss of his family now imagined himself to be “alone” and “in a solitary Condition”; but the people that he enslaved would be forced to remain with him for the rest of his life, or until he decided to be rid of them.

Although Johnson paid little attention to them in his account of his wife’s illness, the enslaved members of his household were not immune to the ravages of smallpox. Johnson mentioned Jenny and another enslaved woman, Cloe,[73] by name in a parenthetical at the end of the letter where he told his son of his wife’s ailment: “(Jenny and Cloe on this Occasion are both inoculated, & Sally is going to her Aunt’s, & Cretia yet stands nurse & does very well, but we hope to get a good old experienced one).”[74] But one week later, on February 11, Johnson corrected himself: “Jenny proves to have had the small pox,\* & Cloe like to do well. \*She has got it since, but it is favourable.”[75]



After this episode, Cloe disappeared altogether from Johnson's correspondence. But her presence in these two letters suggests that Cloe was probably a part of the household for longer than Johnson's writings made apparent. Perhaps she, too, labored alongside Horace and Jenny, shared stories with them about her experiences before being purchased by Johnson, gossiped with Jenny about her husband when the two women were alone together. Once again, Johnson's correspondence reveals, in its brief mentions of enslaved people, just how much of the texture of their lives and social relationships have been effaced by the archive.

“I have this day wrote to Nicky”: Buying and selling enslaved people

Robin, Hagar, Horace, Jenny, Cloe, Robin, Prince, Sarah, and Till were only some of the enslaved people who passed through the Johnson household. Others, like the names listed in the 1746 household account, may have been enslaved by Johnson but did not appear in his correspondence. Still others appear in brief mentions in his letters, but are never given names. By purchasing, owning, and selling these enslaved people, Johnson implicated himself in the much larger, insidious network of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in New England and New York.

Johnson seems to have purchased enslaved people through a variety of means. At least once, he attempted to buy an enslaved man through a “vendue,” a Dutch word referring to a public auction: he wrote to William Samuel Johnson in November 1755 that “There is some prospect of a very excellent negro to be sold at vendue this week, belonging to Hansen's Estate, who I concluded you have heard has lately gone off the stage in good season many thousands worse than nothing.”[76] In that instance he was unsuccessful, scribbling on the back of a letter to his son eight days later that “I missed of the Negro I hoped for he being resolv'd to live with Hansen's Br ”[77]—language that

suggests that the enslaved man himself had negotiated his own claim to live with the brother of his former enslaver, perhaps so that he could retain his own local social ties. But the incident suggests that this was likely not the only vendue Johnson attended during his time in New York. The fact that Johnson had heard of the “very excellent negro” to begin with demonstrates how imbricated he was in the network of unofficial transactions and word-of-mouth exchanges that made the violence of enslavement in New York City as much a social order as it was an economic one.

Johnson also frequently reached out to Nicholas William Stuyvesant, a close friend who was listed as one of the “Boarders” in his 1746 household account, for help with procuring enslaved people.[78] Stuyvesant, often familiarly referred to as “Nicky” in Johnson’s correspondence, was responsible for obtaining at least two enslaved people on Johnson’s behalf. In October 1756, Johnson wrote his son to promise that Stuyvesant was engaged in procuring an enslaved woman for his household: “As to a wench Nicky said he would do his best for you.”[79] One month later, he had followed through on that promise: Johnson wrote that “I am glad the wench pleases you but I have not seen Mr. Stuyvesant several Days only at Chh & do not know the terms of payment. The Trouble was not much that we had, only he would have our Opinion.”[80] Eleven years later, in April 1767, Johnson wrote to Stuyvesant to ask for a second enslaved woman: he wrote to his son William Samuel Johnson, then in London, that “I have this day wrote to Nicky to get us another.”[81] This time, Stuyvesant was apparently unsuccessful in brokering a purchase; instead, Johnson had to turn to a more local source. “By Nicky’s advice, who could not suit himself at N.Y. we have a Wench of Mr. Lintot’s upon tryal,” he wrote in May, “who does pretty well, & if we can agree on ye price we shall probably buy her.”[82] Allegra di Bonaventura writes in her study of Connecticut slavery that these informal networks of purchasing and selling enslaved people were common in New England, increasing the already difficult task of tracing enslaved people through the historical archive: “Sales might be advertised in

regional newspapers or posted near the meetinghouse, but many simply took place through word of mouth.”[83]

In several of Johnson’s letters, the free or enslaved status of the servants he wrote about is unclear. Between December 1762 and February 1763, he and his son William Samuel Johnson corresponded about an unnamed woman who they called “Willet’s woman.” Although she was referenced in similar terms to an enslaved woman, “Willet’s woman” appeared to be working on a contract basis, indicating that she may have been an indentured servant. The two men’s tendency to refer to her as a “woman” rather than a “wench,” the word they frequently used to describe the women they enslaved, was another indication of her more free status—as well as a striking demonstration of the ways in which gender, and the ideals of femininity that so thoroughly structured the lives of white women like Ann and Sarah Beach, were raced and classed to deny the humanity and the womanhood of black enslaved women. In December, William Samuel Johnson wrote to his father:

If you have opportunity you will return my love and compliments to Mr. Stuyvesant. We imagined the woman I wrote about was engaged at least till towards spring with Mrs. Willet, and only meant to bespeak against her when she was discharged there. There is no occasion for her to hasten up. If she is ready to come by the vessel that ‘Cretia goes down in (which perhaps will not be till near the spring) it will be soon enough. But give yourselves no farther trouble in the affair than to speak to her and let us know her conclusion.[84]

Once again, Nicholas William Stuyvesant was implicated in the exchange—apparently his role as a broker went beyond locating enslaved people for Johnson to purchase.

Johnson's next letter to his son in January again linked Stuyvesant and the unnamed woman, although it was not decisive about a course of action: "We shall observe your directions about Willets woman. I have not heard of Mr. Stuyvesant since Sally drinkt Tea with him one last last week." [85] Just one week later, Johnson seemed to have received more information about the woman; perhaps he had managed to locate Mr. Stuyvesant. "Mr. Willets woman will come to you any time when you send for her," [86] he told his son. His next and final letter about the woman indicates that Johnson had done what his son had asked him to in his initial letter: "to speak to her and let us know her conclusion." He wrote to William Samuel Johnson that "As the woman cant go till Spring she is content to go back & wait with you till then." [87] His language suggests that he, or Mr. Stuyvesant, had consulted directly with the woman to understand whether and when she was willing to work for his son. The level of control she exerted over her own labor—within the confines of her inability to leave until the spring—is striking in comparison to the men and women Johnson enslaved, who were never given a choice. At the same time, Johnson's letters show how enslaved people like the man who was "resolv'd to live with Hansen's Br " also maneuvered their claims to make choices in spite of the bounds of their enslavement, exerting their own wills and desires against those who sought to control them.

## Return to Stratford: 1763–1772

### Johnson returns to Stratford

In 1763, at age sixty-nine and after the death of his second wife, Johnson left New York City and King's College for good and returned to his son's estate in Stratford. William Samuel Johnson lived in the same town where Samuel Johnson had spent his early years as a minister, although in a different house. Located on Broad Street, his home

had been built in 1739 by Paul Maverick, the husband of Johnson's stepdaughter Gloriana, and was inhabited by Paul and Gloriana before the untimely death of the former.[88] "No man could be happier than he was in a most tender and dutiful son and daughter-in-law," Johnson wrote of his relationship with William Samuel Johnson and Ann Beach in his autobiography, "whose affectionate tenderness together with the endearments and caresses of his young grandchildren in some measure atoned for the loss of his affectionate consort with whom he hoped to have been very happy at Stratford; but God was pleased to order otherwise, so he thought no more of keeping house but resided with his son who built him an elegant apartment" adjoining the estate.[89]

But Johnson's time with his "most tender and dutiful son" would be limited. In 1767, William Samuel Johnson was called to London to represent Connecticut in a trial over the colony's right to the land of the native Mohegan people. The Western education and oratory skills he had learned at the hands of his father were now deployed in the direct legal service of settler colonialism. William Samuel Johnson would be away from his family in Stratford for four long years, returning just a year before Samuel Johnson's death in 1772.

### "By the Care of my Daughter": Ann Beach and white women's violence

William Samuel Johnson's prolonged absence had material effects on the family members and enslaved laborers he left behind. Perhaps even more than the average white woman, his wife Ann Beach became virtually the sole manager of his household's affairs—including the purchase and sale of enslaved people. Although the Johnson family papers are dominated by the male household members—just one fragment of a letter from Ann Beach is preserved in Columbia's Samuel Johnson papers,[90] and the

letters of Samuel Johnson's wives Charity Floyd Nicoll and Sarah Beach not at all—the active presence of the Johnson women made itself clear through household updates, brief asides, and letters addressed to them whose responses have been lost.[91] In the case of Ann Beach, as with her mother Sarah, these fragments paint the portrait of a woman who, although limited in her own options by the gender norms of the time, was nonetheless very capable of exerting power and violence against the people she enslaved.

Jenny, the enslaved woman who had found a “good husband” and later contracted the smallpox in his New York household, returned to Stratford with Samuel Johnson when he departed from New York City. But in 1767, four years after her last mention in his correspondence, Johnson's language regarding Jenny had turned sour. He wrote to William Samuel Johnson that “Jenny is discontented & will be sold, & we will sell her, I believe, to Bill Thompson, for 50 pd.”[92] Characteristically, Johnson did not speculate on the cause of Jenny's discontent. Perhaps she found it difficult to adjust to life in Stratford after so many years of service in New York. Likely she resented being ripped away from her “good husband” and the other social ties she had been able to forge in the city—friends from neighboring houses who might have accompanied her to market on their enslavers' errands, or whiled away whatever brief snatches of time they were able to find together.

Whatever the cause of her discontent may have been, Johnson's underscored repetition of “will” indicated Jenny's express desire to leave his household, presenting her sale not as his own decision but rather as something akin to a contest of wills. Like the enslaved man sold alongside Hansen's estate in New York, who Johnson was unable to purchase because he chose instead to live with “Hansen's Br,” Jenny's willfulness demonstrated the limited ability that enslaved people did have to assert when and to whom they would be sold. In this case, Jenny's “will” won out over Johnson's. Just a month after his initial account of Jenny's discontent, Johnson wrote again to inform his

son that Jenny had been sold. His letter, although brief, directly implicated Ann Beach as an active participant in her sale. ““As to our domestic Affairs we get along pretty comfortably, thro’ my dau’ter’s great Care, with good Mr. C[h]apman’s,”[93] he told William Samuel Johnson. “Jenny sold to Bill Thompson.”[94]

In subsequent letters, Johnson expanded upon his daughter-in-law’s active role in buying and selling enslaved people, and updated his son on the effects of Jenny’s absence. By June, Ann Beach had already taken on one unnamed enslaved woman “on tryal” and then purchased a different enslaved man, Robin:

“I told you in my last that we had sold Jenny, (at which I believe you are glad,) & had Lintot’s wench on tryal, but we did not like her; upon which my Daughter (I believe) wisely got Robin, who has been a 14night on tryal, & we may have him for 60 pd. I hope 55. Nothing can be happier than he is, & if he continues to do as he has done, nobody needs wish to be happier in a Servant than we shall be, & I believe he is in earnest resolved to do his best, & he does with the best good will twice ye kitchin work Jenny did, & every thing as well, only washing; so that it looks as if we have made a happy exchange.”[95]

Johnson seemed eager to prove to his son that the decision to sell Jenny had been the right one, despite the fact that Robin could fulfill kitchen duties but not the “washing”—apparently a gendered form of labor that the men Johnson enslaved were incapable of performing. Perhaps he and William Samuel Johnson had argued about what to do with Jenny; or maybe Johnson himself felt some lingering regret about selling away the woman who had spent so many years of labor in his household, although it was not enough to keep him from engaging in the transaction in the first place. His last letter to

his son that mentioned Jenny was written five months after she had left the household, indicating the extent to which the enslaved woman must have still weighed on his mind. He again protested that “I find no want of Jenny; Prince & Robin answer all my purposes as well, if not better, & the families too, except washing, which my Dau’ter must hire, who is a very laborious, discrete & faithful Steward in yr absence.”[96]

Although he shared the same name as the Robin who was enslaved by Johnson earlier, the man who accompanied him to New York and then was sent back to Stratford to William Samuel Johnson’s household, the Robin mentioned in Johnson’s letters beginning in June 1767 was almost undoubtedly a different enslaved man. In his postscript to the June 1767 letter where he related the details of the purchase, Johnson commended his son’s wife for her skill in bargaining down the price of human property, as though Robin were like any other commodity with a market value that could be fixed or negotiated: “Necessity and the Disposition of people to impose upon her has made my Dau’ter grow pretty sharp. She has out-done Mr. Chapman, who could not get Summers lower than 60, but she has got him down to 55 for Robin, who does extremely well.”[97]

This second Robin in Johnson’s correspondence was almost always mentioned alongside another enslaved man, Prince, who had apparently already been in William Samuel Johnson’s household before his arrival. “Prince also continues to do pretty well & the better for Robin, so that all is easy, & quiet,” Johnson wrote in his initial account of Robin’s purchase.[98] One month later, he wrote again to update his son on the status of the two enslaved men: “& After 2 months Robin continues to do admirably well, & seems resolved to act up to the perfect Idea of a good & faithful servant, & Prince much the better for him.”[99] In September 1767, he gave an almost identical update: “Robin continues to behave & manage very well & Prince a good deal the better for him.”[100] A letter sent two months later provided slightly more detail about the relationship between the two men: “Robin continues to do excellently well, & Prince pretty well: they



live very peacefully together, & seem to serve us from a principle of Love & good will.”[101] As with the other people that he enslaved, Johnson’s letters revealed precious little about the actual relationship between Robin and Prince: Was Robin an older man who Prince would have looked up to? Were they the same age? Were they friends?

Throughout his correspondence, Johnson would return again and again to the image of Robin as “the perfect Idea of a good & faithful servant.” In August 1767, he told his son that “As to our Domestic affairs we go on very happily, as Robin continues to maintain his integrity to the full”;<sup>[102]</sup> and in December he updated him again that “Robin continues exceeding good.”<sup>[103]</sup> In January 1768, Johnson explicitly repeated his language of the “perfect Idea,” writing that “Robin still continues to act up to his Idea, to our great Satisfaction.”<sup>[104]</sup> In a 1770 letter, his last that would mention Robin, Johnson wrote once again to confirm his satisfaction with the enslaved man’s labor: “[T]hings go on with us very comfortably, & Robin does his Duty very well.”<sup>[105]</sup>

In his sermons, which Johnson preached to his congregation, his students at King’s College, and the members of his household<sup>[106]</sup>— including enslaved people— throughout his lifetime, Johnson made explicit the “perfect Idea” of a servant that he saw embodied in Robin. In one sermon on the divinely ordained roles that each member of a household was intended to play, titled by Johnson “On the Eternal Rule of Justice,” he wrote that “if I am a servant, as I can’t but know if I was in the condition of my master I should reasonably expect all dutiful behavior and free and cheerful obedience and all honesty and faithfulness; these therefore must be my duty to him.”<sup>[107]</sup> Johnson’s contorted attempt at identification with the servant’s perspective here is notable: rather than truly empathizing with the condition of an enslaved person or indentured laborer, his language instead imagined that subordinated person as empathizing with him. Beyond the hypocrisy of his writing, however, Johnson’s expressed ideal of not only “dutiful behavior” but a “free and cheerful demeanor” reflects the emotional performance

that he expected of all of the enslaved people in his household. Like the “pleasant good Family” he had seen himself as the head of in New York City, Johnson’s sense of the “perfect Idea” of a servant reflected the intimate relationships and emotional labor that he expected of the people he enslaved, even beyond the physical and domestic labor they provided him. In Johnson’s eyes, Robin’s “exceeding good” service must have reflected not only on Robin’s capacity as an enslaved servant, but on Johnson’s own success as a “master.”

### “Till not yet a bed”: Motherhood under enslavement

When Johnson wrote to his son in the third week of April 1767 about selling Jenny, he also mentioned another enslaved woman for the first time in his correspondence. “I have this day wrote to Nicky to get us another,” he wrote, “but we cant sell Till, till she lies in.”[108] His language assumes that William Samuel Johnson was familiar with Till’s identity, and the fact of her pregnancy, although by the time of Johnson’s writing he had already departed for London. Perhaps William Samuel Johnson even knew the father of Till’s child—but if he did, the two men certainly did not mention it in their letters.

In May 1767, Johnson updated his son again on the progress of Till’s pregnancy: “Till not yet a bed.”[109] His comment does not reveal a concern about Till’s well-being so much as a cruel economic calculus, wedged in between an update on the selling and purchasing of other enslaved people in the Stratford household. In her eighth month of pregnancy, Till could not perform all the domestic labor that, in Johnson’s eyes, provided her only value, and until she gave birth she could not be sold. For Till, those weeks must have been excruciating. Perhaps the other enslaved people in the household—Prince, Robin, and an unnamed “Wench” who had been taken into the household “on tryal”—were able to lend her some of the physical and emotional support

that her enslaver did not. Perhaps the father of her child lived nearby and was able to steal time away from his own forced labor to care for her.

Finally, on June 8, Till gave birth. Johnson reported to his son that “Till has got a Girl & has had a very good time; we could hardly keep her in a fortnight.”[110] What did Johnson mean by “we could hardly keep her in?” Maybe Till went out to town to celebrate the safe arrival of her daughter. Maybe she was able to meet up with friends or even family members from neighboring farms, or with the father of her child.[111] Even the relief of Till’s healthy birth, however, was weighted with the knowledge that her daughter had been born into slavery. Enslaved status in the American colonies followed the condition of the mother,[112] meaning that even if the father of her child had been free, Till’s daughter would be consigned to enslavement; and although she would do her best to protect her, there was nothing Till could do to prevent her daughter from experiencing the harsh and dehumanizing conditions that she, too, had weathered. Johnson’s letter provided a cold reminder of this fact, concluding the news of Till’s daughter by noting that “My Daughter can & will soon, sell her.”[113] Clearly Johnson was not willing to have an enslaved mother and her infant as part of his—or his son’s—household.

On July 11, just one month after Till had given birth, Johnson gave one last brief accounting of her existence. He ended a passage to his son about the status of the other enslaved people in the Stratford house, Robin and Prince, by writing that “all things go on very quietly & happily, & we do not miss Till who is sold to David Booth for 52 pounds, & is said to be very well off.”[114] Till’s daughter was not mentioned at all in this aside. In the context of Till’s enslaved condition, and her enslavers’ utter disregard of her motherhood, Johnson’s assertion that Till was “very well off” was a brutal irony. David Booth lived in Stratford,[115] so she might have been still close to the social networks she had formed there—but they were always tenuous when enslavers could sell a friend or loved one away at a moment’s notice.

Till was not the only pregnant woman enslaved by Johnson and his family. Sarah, another enslaved woman, was briefly brought to William Samuel Johnson's Connecticut household a decade earlier, in September 1756. Samuel Johnson wrote in a letter to his son early that month that "Mr. Stuyvesant was here last night, & with his service to you desires me to inform you that Sarah you may have for a shorter or longer time as you please, & she shall go by the first opportunity." [116] Once again, Nicholas William Stuyvesant had served as the broker for this transaction, demonstrating the social network of enslavement that tied together white New England and New York enslavers. As with the anonymous woman enslaved by Willet, his language implies that Sarah had entered the household "on trial" prior to Johnson's deciding whether to purchase her.

By the end of the month, William Samuel Johnson had apparently responded to share his displeasure with Sarah and her labor. Johnson wrote again to his son, this time to say that "I am sorry you are disappointed of Sarah. She has been ailing ever since Spring, & now, tho' well, it seems is with child \* within 2 or 3 months." [117] His letter expressed little sympathy for Sarah's condition, having to make the difficult transition from nearly half a year of illness (perhaps morning sickness) to living and performing domestic labor in an entirely new household—and likely in a new city, as Nicholas William Stuyvesant resided in New York—while pregnant. As in his brief mentions of Till, Samuel Johnson apparently could not be bothered to wonder about Sarah's relationships to the father of her child, or the physical and emotional violence of being ripped away from her support networks and brought into the Johnson household. Instead, he dismissed the matter. He closed his letter by promising that he would find his son a replacement: "I have been at various places to try to get you another, & Mr. Stuyvesant is trying, but hitherto without success. I will send Horace or Ju'ter if you desire it." [118]

Till and Sarah were the only enslaved people whose pregnancies Johnson wrote about during his lifetime, but every person he enslaved had a mother of their own. Hagar and

her mother and sister were one such family who at one time had possibly all been owned by Johnson, or by Charity Nicoll's family. The two "Infants" listed on Johnson's 1746 account of his household are reminders of the presence of other enslaved families in his household; too young to be named—or, at least, for Johnson to know their names, since their mothers almost certainly had names for them—Johnson's list does not even account for the identities of their mothers, erasing the bonds of kinship in his callous record of their existence. In the same document, Peg, Dame, and Betty are listed together as "servants" on the same line, their names separated by slashes: perhaps they, too, were a family, or perhaps they were not blood relations but were all enslaved by one of Johnson's boarders.[119] If Johnson's brutal accounting erased the ties between them, whether of blood or of close friendship, there is no doubt that those ties persisted. Motherhood was weighted differently under the violence of enslavement—imbricated with the white valuation of black women's reproductive capacities, with the fear of separation, with the painful knowledge of bringing a child into a world that would deny its very humanity—but Till and Sarah, along with the other anonymous men and women and sons and daughters who Johnson enslaved, experienced it nevertheless.

## Conclusion: Legacy of Johnson's enslavement

In 1788—sixteen years after Samuel Johnson's death—William Samuel Johnson wrote a letter to his own son, Robert Charles Johnson, that mentioned a familiar name. "Mamma writes me that she & Mrs. K. are very well, but poor Prince declining fast," he wrote, concluding that "My Health is, thank God, perfectly good." [120] Despite Johnson's pessimistic diagnosis in the letter, Prince apparently survived his unspecified illness. His name appears in William Samuel Johnson's letters to his own son, Robert Charles Johnson, as late as 1791.[121] Assuming that Samuel Johnson's and his son's

letters reference the same enslaved man, Prince was enslaved by the Johnsons for over twenty years and across three generations of enslavers.

In 1747, long before his death, Samuel Johnson had written to his son to assuage his financial concerns. “You say you are not worth a farthing & it’s true you are not in possession,” Johnson conceded, “but when ever you are disposed to settle yr debt, I can spare you 2000 pounds worth of Land; to dispose of for that purpose, & hope in God’s Time I may leave you a least as much more.”[122] Despite his own uncertainties about prosperity during his lifetime, Johnson remained certain that he would be able to provide for his children. The money that he had earned and the lands that he had acquired were one type of family inheritance, passed down to future generations. For the Johnsons, slavery and its violence was another. They ascribed firmly and unquestioningly to the same logic as New York City customs official Francis Harrison, who wrote that in colonial New York enslaved people were the very “portion which young men have from their parents or received with their wives when they set out in the world.”[123] Although the first gradual emancipation laws were passed in New York in 1799,[124] enslaved people would continue to be mentioned in the Johnson family’s correspondence until the turn of the century.

William Samuel Johnson inherited more than the tradition of enslavement from his father. In 1787, he also took up Samuel Johnson’s professional mantle by becoming the first president of the post-Revolutionary War King’s College, now rebranded as Columbia College.[125] The violence of enslavement was no less inseparable from Johnson’s public life than from his private one. In fact, one of the last mentions of enslaved people in his letters to his son Robert Charles Johnson was directly tied to the functioning of the College. “We hope the Woman is safe arrived and will be so agreeable as to compensate for the great pains we have taken to procure one,” he told his son, having apparently acquired an enslaved woman for Robert Charles in much the same way that Samuel Johnson had for him so many times earlier in life. “We cannot

yet get either Man or Woman for ourselves,” he continued, “but are alone with Edwin. He takes pretty good care of the Horses, but very little of us, so that the Horses are now the best attended part of the College Family. We learn however to wait upon ourselves.”[126]

If the many letters of Samuel Johnson are any testament, William Samuel Johnson’s assurance that “We learn however to wait upon ourselves” must be taken with a grain of salt. As much as the Johnsons might have liked to see themselves as independent, self-sufficient, self-made men, the labor of the many people they enslaved makes an implicit argument to the contrary. Without Robin, Hagar, Horace, Jenny, Cloe, Sarah, Till, Robin, and Prince; without the other anonymous enslaved people who cooked Johnson’s food and made his bed and went to market and cleaned his home; without the enslaved children who were born in his house and grew up there or were sold away, denied the childhoods that Johnson fiercely protected for his own children; there would be no Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College. It was their existence and their labor that made King’s College possible—but their lives and aspirations also far exceeded it, stretching beyond Johnson’s own narrow perceptions of their worth to make spaces for themselves outside the violence of a world that negated their very humanity. From Hagar’s letter to Horace’s refusal to Jenny’s will, their stories deserve to be told. It is my hope that this is only the beginning.

## Endnotes

[1] Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, eds., *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1: 38. Johnson wrote that in October 1759, after the death of his daughter-in-law Gloriana from smallpox, he "left the care of his house and Mrs. Maverick's son, to his housekeeper, and retired with a servant to his son's at Stratford, where he spent the winter."

[2] Eric Foner, "Columbia and Slavery: A Preliminary Report," *Columbia University and Slavery*, <https://columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/content/eric-foners-report>.

[3] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

[4] Michel Foucault, quoted in Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 2.

[5] Eben Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Correspondence of Samuel Johnson, D.D* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1874), 5, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJL7451.0001.001>.

[6] Eben Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Correspondence of Samuel Johnson, D.D* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1874), 20. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJL7451.0001.001>.



[7] Larry Lee Bothell, *Cloak and Gown: A Study of Religion and Learning in the Early Career of Samuel Johnson of Connecticut* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1967), 236, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

[8] William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 480, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[9] A series of deeds to Johnson for land in Woodbury from individuals including Hezekiah Tuttle, Joseph Treat, Thomas and Abigail Daskem, Samuel Munn, Andrew Hinman, and William Lanson, along with maps of Johnson's property, can be found in the Johnson Family Papers at Yale University, Box 17, Folder 163. For a history of Woodbury's settlement, see William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 170, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[10] T.B. Chandler, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, D.D.* (New York, 1805), 132-133, <https://books.google.com/books?id=J1FAAAAAIAAJ>.

[11] Charity Floyd Nicoll's wealth and connections are commented upon in almost all of Johnson's biographies; one biographer commented that Johnson's marriage to her made him "allied to some of the most prominent families in New York." Don R. Gerlach, "Johnson, Samuel" in *American National Biography*, online ed., February 2000, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.0100456>. The extent to which Johnson's marriage to Charity influenced his future success, and shaped his purchases of enslaved people, is a compelling area for further study.

[12] Samuel Johnson to the Revd. Mr. Beach, October 18, 1754, in Samuel Johnson, *President of King's College: His Career and Writings*, ed. Herbert and Carol Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1: 202.

[13] Samuel Johnson, "People who have been of my household," 1746, vol. 1, p. 105, Samuel Johnson Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. On the page of the scrap of paper on which Johnson wrote the account is written, in a different handwriting, "List of Persons in Daddys Family." The simple annotation is a chilling reminder of how the institution of enslavement was normalized for the white members of the Johnson family, even from early childhood.

[14] This name is listed twice, implying that it referred to two different enslaved people.

[15] Larry Lee Bothell, *Cloak and Gown: A Study of Religion and Learning in the Early Career of Samuel Johnson of Connecticut* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1967), 240, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

[16] William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 478, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[17] Samuel Johnson to the Revd Mr. Beach, November 1750, vol. 1, p. 137, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[18] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 1754, vol. 1, p. 209, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[19] Although the level of involvement Johnson would have had in the actual oversight of the College's construction is unclear, he clearly felt himself to be involved and at least partially responsible for it. He wrote in a letter to William Samuel Johnson regarding his move to the Spring Garden house that "This will be best situated for me for the Future, as it is equally convenient for both churches & for the College, as a part of my Care will probably be turned towards the Building, as well as the daily duty, for we seem resolved to begin to build in Spring, having settled the plan we are to go upon, and are next week to order Timber to be prepared as well as other materials." Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 20, 1756, in Samuel Johnson, *President of King's College: His Career and Writings*, ed. Herbert and Carol Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:241.

[20] See Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), for more on these internal disputes.

[21] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, March 31, 1755, vol. 1, p. 255, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[22] Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 82, EBSCOhost. See also Allegra di Bonaventura, *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2013) for an in-depth look at the labor performed by one specific enslaved man, Adam, in a New London farming household. My sense of the work that Robin might have performed in Stratford is indebted to di Bonaventura's historical research.

[23] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 11, 1755, vol. 1, p. 235, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[24] Eben Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Correspondence of Samuel Johnson, D.D.* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1874), 190, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJL7451.0001.001>.

[25] Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1993), 97-98.

[26] Timothy Dwight, *Travels, in New-England and New-York* ( New Haven: T. Dwight, 1821-1822), 3:518, Sabin Americana, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/apps/doc/CY0105455465/SABN?u=columbiau&sid=SABN&xid=29d6dbfd>. This is the equivalent of one black inhabitant for every 23 non-black members of the population.

[27] William Samuel Johnson to Samuel Johnson, June 14, 1754, vol. 1, p. 179, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[28] *New York, Estate Inventories and Accounts, 1666-1822*, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

[29] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 17, 1754, vol. 1, p. 181, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[30] Antonio Bly finds that of the 91 enslaved people who were mentioned in New York runaway ads in the 1750s, when Hagar wrote her letter, 5 were noted as being able to read and write. Antonio T. Bly, "'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in

Colonial America, 1730–1776,” *Early American Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 270, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23546575>.

[31] William Berrian, *An Historical Sketch of Trinity Church, New-York* (New York: Stanford and Swords, 1847), 35, *Sabin Americana*. When the Social for the Propagation of the Gospel agreed to supply Neau with editions of the Lord’s Prayer in English as well as several African languages, he responded remarking upon their popularity, admitting that the enslaved people he gave them to “did not continue to come, but I believe came only for the books.” Elias Neau in Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 60.

[32] “A Law for Regulating the Burial of Slaves,” November 18, 1731, *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 4: 88-89, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097878565>.

[33] Johnson told his son in a 1754 letter that “All agree that it is best I lodge with Benny this winter, so that I believe I must be without Ana”—his stepdaughter Gloriana, who had apparently been providing live-in assistance to him. Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 1754, vol. 1, p. 209, *Samuel Johnson Papers*, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[34] The location of “Spring Garden,” once a public gathering place, is described in Frederic Taber Cooper, *Rider’s New York City: A Guide-Book for Travelers* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923), 182.

[35] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 6, 1756, vol. 2, p. 7, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[36] Jill Lepore, "The Tightening Vise: Slavery and Freedom in British New York," in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 72.

[37] Eben Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Correspondence of Samuel Johnson, D.D* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1874), 247, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJL7451.0001.001>.

[38] One of the conditions that Johnson negotiated for upon accepting the presidency at King's College was the right to leave New York City whenever smallpox erupted—a right that he acted upon more than once in his brief presidency. See Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 19-20.

[39] See the discussion of Jenny's and Cloe's experiences with the smallpox later in this essay.

[40] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 22, 1762, vol. 2, p. 197, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[41] Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, eds., *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:38.

[42] Samuel Johnson to Ann Watts, January 15, 1759, vol. 2, 95, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[43] Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, eds., Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:38.

[44] Samuel Johnson to Mrs. William Samuel Johnson, October 27, 1760, vol. 2, p. 119, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Johnson's language of the "Parade of dressing & visiting" emphasizes not only the domestic but the social labor that his wife would be expected to perform.

[45] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 16, 1761, vol. 2, p. 143, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[46] Samuel Johnson to J. Berriman, December 24, 1761, in Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings, ed. Herbert and Carol Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:316.

[47] Samuel Johnson to Mrs. William Samuel Johnson, August 18, 1760, vol. 2, p. 113, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[48] "Petition Against Gaming Houses," March 31, 1736, Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 4: 311, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097878565>.

[49] According to Jill Lepore, “On Sundays, while most whites went to church or stayed at home with their families, slaves spent their day of rest traversing the city to see family and friends. Especially in summer, black men and women went ‘frolicking in the Fields,’ a wide swath of land north of the Negroes Burial Ground.” Jill Lepore, “The Tightening Vise: Slavery and Freedom in British New York,” in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 68.

[50] As just one example, Graham Russell Hodges wrote that “The court of general sessions convicted Catherine O’Neal in 1765 of permitting ‘Negroes and others at unlawful times . . . Night and Day . . . drinking, tippling, whoring and misbehaving themselves to the great damage and common nuisance of all.’” Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 115.

[51] “A Law Restraining Slaves, Negroes, & Indians from Gaming with Moneys or for Moneys,” November 18, 1731, Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 4: 88, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097878565>.

[52] “Petition to Fill Markett House,” July 4, 1760, Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 6: 215, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097878573>. It is also notable that one of the “Assistants” present at the Common Council meeting that heard this petition was Garrit Van Horne, whose name is included in the list of “Boarders” in Johnson’s 1746 household account.



[53] Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans In New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 46, <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/2027/heb.06703>.

[54] T.J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The 'Great Negro Plot' in Colonial New York* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 3.

[55] Johnson wrote that "A few hours after my last came Horace and Terrence, and I am obliged to you for sending them (only you gave them each an [----] more than their due) and for sending the other things." Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, July 25, 1755, vol. 1, p. 239, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. The bracketed word is illegible.

[56] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, July 25, 1755, vol. 1, p. 239, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[57] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, August 2, 1755, vol. 1, p. 241, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[58] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 8, 1755, vol. 1, p. 253, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[59] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, April 23, 1756, vol. 2, p. 31, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[60] Johnson wrote to his son that “I have been at various places to try to get you another, and Mr. Stuyvesant is trying, but hitherto without success. I will send Horace or Ju’ter if you desire it.” Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 28, 1756, vol. 2, p. 53, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Apparently William Samuel Johnson did not take him up on this offer; or Horace had returned to Johnson’s New York household by 1760.

[61] Samuel Johnson to Mrs. William Samuel Johnson, August 18, 1760, vol. 2, p. 113, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Johnson’s being “obliged to by my service to Mr. Winslow” indicates that he may have either sold or leased Horace’s labor to Winslow, who is not mentioned again in his letters.

[62] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, October 6, 1760, vol. 2, p. 115, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[63] William Samuel Johnson to Samuel Johnson, April 25, 1755, vol. 1, p. 229, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[64] In terms of non-domestic labor, Horace may have also been responsible for caring for the animals in Johnson’s household, though it is unclear whether or not Johnson owned horses while in New York. In his letter to his son that recounted Charity Nicoll’s death, Johnson wrote that Charity had “rid out the day before, and conversed and walked about as usual, and would have rid out that day but the wind was too high,” but it is unclear whether the horse that Charity rode would have belonged to him or to a host they had been staying with. Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, May 29, 1758, in Samuel Johnson, *President of King’s College: His Career and Writings*, ed.

Herbert and Carol Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:277. Later in life, Johnson or a family member either purchased or hired an enslaved man named Mingo to drive the horses in their chaise; in 1769 he wrote of his granddaughter Charity that “my daughter & Charry with Mr. Kneeland & Mingo to drive, set out yesterday for New York where they are to lodge at Mr. Stuyvesant’s.” Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 25, 1769, vol. 3, p. 143, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[65] A letter from Johnson to his son indicated that Jenny had her own apron for cooking: “Our Respects to Molly Russell, I was mistaken about 2 Aprons. One it seems is Jenny’s, & I shall send the other.” Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, July 27, 1761, vol. 2, p. 153, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[66] An addendum to one of Johnson’s letters read simply: “Jenny sent a Ball of Soap.” Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, January 3, 1763, vol. 2, p. 201, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[67] Samuel Johnson to Mrs. William Samuel Johnson, August 20, 1761, vol. 2, p. 157, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[68] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, August 24, 1761, vol. 2, p. 159, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[69] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, October 12, 1761, vol. 2, p. 163, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[70] Vivienne L. Kruger, *Born to Run: The Slave Family in Early New York* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1985), 165.

[71] Vivienne L. Kruger, *Born to Run*, 177.

[72] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 14, 1763, vol. 2, p. 223, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[73] The name "Cloe" also appears in Johnson's 1746 account of his household members. If this is the same Cloe, it would mean that she was enslaved by Johnson for at least seventeen years, and that she moved with Johnson from Stratford to his first house in New York, and then again to his new house in Spring Garden. These two letters are the last and only mentions of her existence in Johnson's correspondence.

[74] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 3, 1763, vol. 2, p. 207, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[75] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 11, 1763, vol. 2, p. 223, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[76] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 8, 1755, vol. 1, p. 253, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[77] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 16, 1755, vol. 1, p. 257, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Enslaved people negotiating their ability (or 'right') to choose their own enslaver was not unheard of in eighteenth century New York, and Johnson's resignation at the enslaved man's decision indicates that he, too, recognized this 'right.' In one oft-cited letter, for example, Aaron Burr's mother Esther Edwards Burr told a friend that "our Negroes are gone to seek a master. Really my dear I shall be thankful if I can get rid of them." Quoted in Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 111.

[78] Nicholas William Stuyvesant is listed as one of the "Vestrymen" of Trinity Church between 1760 and 1773, explaining why Johnson would have seen him at church. William Berrian, *An Historical Sketch of Trinity Church, New-York* (New York: Stanford and Swords, 1847), 357, Sabin Americana. Even beyond the traffic of human beings, Johnson and Stuyvesant appear to have exchanged many commodities between their two households over the course of their friendship together. In a 1762 letter to Stuyvesant, Johnson described a cart and a yoke of oxen that he was sending his friend, and in the same letter informed him that "'My wife says she fears you will think the Pegs she sent you too old, but assures you they are young and have been fed wholly on Milk and Corn so that she Imagines the Pork will be good.'" Samuel Johnson to Nicholas William Stuyvesant, 1762, box 1, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[79] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, October 6, 1756, vol. 2, p. 57, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[80] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 15, 1756, vol. 2, p. 65, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[81] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, April 24, 1767, vol. 3, p. 45, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[82] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, May 17, 1767, vol. 3, p. 47, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[83] Allegra di Bonaventura, *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 45.

[84] William Samuel Johnson to Samuel Johnson, December 31, 1762, in Samuel Johnson, *President of King's College: His Career and Writings*, ed. Herbert and Carol Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:330.

[85] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, January 3, 1763, vol. 2, p. 201, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[86] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, January 11, 1763, vol. 2, p. 203, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[87] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, February 3, 1763, vol. 2, p. 207, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[88] William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 560, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[89] Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, eds., *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 1:42.

[90] The only letter from Ann to her husband preserved in Johnson's archives is a mere note appended at the end of a letter from Samuel Johnson, which reads "My Dearest I have only time to thank you for your very obliging favour of June the 7 & beg you will make your Self quite Esey about Sally She wants only time to get Strength is quit rid of the disorder — has no fever — yours Ann Johnson." Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 5, 1769, vol. 3, p. 141, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[91] In particular, many of the mentions of Johnson women in the letters were direct requests to purchase items, especially clothing, on their behalf for a particular enslaved person. Johnson wrote to his son in August 1761, for example, that "Your Mother [Sarah Beach] desires your wife to get 15 yard of Linen proper for shifts for Jenny against winter," and later that "Your mother desires me to thank you for sending the Cloth for

Jenny, & desires you to procure about 10 yds something coarser for Horace.” Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, August 3, 1761, vol. 2, p. 155, Samuel Johnson Papers; Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 9, 1761, vol. 2, p. 167, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[92] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, April 24, 1767, vol. 3, p. 45, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[93] This “Mr. Chapman” is likely George Chapman, an Englishman who lived in Stratford on a house in West Broad Street, near William Samuel Johnson’s home, that he built in 1759. A photograph of the house with reference to Chapman can be found in William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 450, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[94] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, May 17, 1767, vol. 3, p. 47, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[95] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 8, 1767, vol. 3, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[96] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, October 5, 1767, vol. 3, p. 65, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.



[97] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 8, 1767, vol. 3, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[98] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 8, 1767, vol. 3, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[99] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, July 11, 1767, vol. 3, p. 53, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[100] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 22, 1767, vol. 3, p. 63, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[101] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, November 15, 1767, vol. 3, p. 69, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[102] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, August 15, 1767, vol. 3, p. 57, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[103] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, December 16, 1767, vol. 3, p. 77, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[104] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, January 15, 1768, vol. 3, p. 83, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[105] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, March 20, 1770, vol. 3, p. 153, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[106] In a 1756 letter to his son, Samuel Johnson describes his one request to his host while visiting outside the city: "I told him, When at Home I always had my Family together morning & evening to prayer, & should be glad to do the same here." Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, December 19, 1756, vol. 2, p. 71, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[107] "On the Eternal Rule of Justice." In Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, eds., Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 3: 476

[108] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, April 24, 1767, vol. 3, p. 45, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[109] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, May 17, 1767, vol. 3, p. 47; Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[110] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 8, 1767, vol. 3, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[111] Alternately, a temporal rather than spatial reading of this quote would be that Johnson was merely expressing his desire to sell Till as soon as possible.

[112] Jennifer L. Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (March 2018): 14. Morgan discusses how this legal conception of enslaved status codified the gendered and sexual violence of enslavement: "Thus, in essence, slaveowners and slaveowning legislators enacted the legal and material substitution of a thing for a child: no white man's child could be enslaved, while all black women's issue could" (5).

[113] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, June 8, 1767, vol. 3, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[114] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, July 11, 1767, vol. 3, p. 53, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[115] Booth is mentioned in William Howard Wilcoxson, *History of Stratford, Connecticut, 1639-1939* (Stratford: The Stratford Tercentenary Commission, 1939), 338, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89100782945>.

[116] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 6, 1756, vol. 2, p. 49, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[117] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 28, 1756, vol. 2, p. 53, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[118] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, September 28, 1756, vol. 2, p. 53, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[119] Samuel Johnson, "People who have been of my household," 1746, vol. 1, p. 105, Samuel Johnson Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

[120] William Samuel Johnson to Robert Charles Johnson, June 22, 1788, Box 1, William Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[121] In 1789, William Samuel Johnson wrote to his son Robert Charles that "We received the things by [Corlin?] but neither the weather nor the Childs Health, would permit Mamma to go up at present. She will come as soon as possible & bring Prince some Potatoes." William Samuel Johnson to Robert Charles Johnson, April 26, 1789, Box 1, William Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. In January 1791, he mentioned Prince a third and final time, again in relation to his wife Ann Beach ("Mamma"), in a letter telling his son that "Mamma will tell you that she has supplied herself with Muslain, & the Majr. need give himself no further trouble about it, but if he can yet learn anything from Prince with respect to the Silk, we shall be glad to be informed of it." William Samuel Johnson to Robert Charles Johnson, January 23, 1791, Box 1, William Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Robin, Prince's companion in Johnson's Stratford house, was never mentioned after Johnson's death. Perhaps Robin's disappearance supports the idea that Prince was younger than he was; perhaps he was sold by Johnson's son after his death to pay off lingering debts; or perhaps he fell ill with smallpox or another disease, like so many of the other people in Johnson's life.

[122] Samuel Johnson to William Samuel Johnson, 1747, vol. 1, p. 111, Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

[123] Francis Harrison, quoted in Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 79, EBSCOhost.

[124] Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 174.

[125] George Cuthbert Groce, *William Samuel Johnson: A Maker of the Constitution* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 172, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015011042945>.

[126] William Samuel Johnson to Robert Charles Johnson, July 28, 1794, Box 1, William Samuel Johnson Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

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