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Schermerhorn Legacy: From Colonial Trade to Columbia's Halls - Unveiling Family Ties to Slavery and the Native American Removal Policy

The \$300,000 used to fund the building of Schermerhorn Hall was donated by the Chair of the Board of Trustees, William Colford Schermerhorn. William graduated from Columbia College in 1840 and received an honorary master's degree in 1860. The University designed Schermerhorn Hall to be a twin to Havemeyer Hall across campus.¹ The Schermerhorn family had built their fortune through trading. They primarily traded back and forth between New York and Charleston, South Carolina. By the early 19th century, they were one of the city's wealthiest and most powerful families. This paper explores the family's ties to the slave trade. The direct descendants of Symon Schermerhorn (1658-1696), who established the New York City branch of the family, have extensive ties to Columbia University.² Thus, to keep a focused scope, this paper focuses on the direct paternal line from Symon to William Colford (and one cousin). This is not meant to be an extensive accounting of all the Schermerhorn family's ties to slavery and the

¹ Chamberlain, Joshua Lawrence., Thayer, William Roscoe., Smith, Charles Henry., De Witt, John., Williams, Jesse Lynch., Van Amringe, John Howard., Wingate, Charles Edgar Lewis., Lee, Albert., Paine, Henry Gallup. *Universities and Their Sons: History, Influence and Characteristics of American Universities, with Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Alumni and Recipients of Honorary Degrees*. United States: R. Herndon Company, 1898.

² Direct descendants of Symon to attend Columbia during this time: John S. Schermerhorn, 1793, Arts. Cornelius Schermerhorn, 1806, Arts. John Schermerhorn, 1827. Peter A. Schermerhorn, 1833, A. M. John P. Schermerhorn, Jr., 1831, Medicine. Bruce Schermerhorn, 1833, Arts. William C. Schermerhorn, 1840, A. M. Henry A. Schermerhorn, 1861-1864, A. M., LL.B. William B. Schermerhorn, Arts. Frederick A. Schermerhorn, 1868-1870, E. M. John E. Schermerhorn, 1874, Law. John E. Schermerhorn, Jr., 1907.

slave trade. Instead, it is intended to be a starting point of what can be relatively easily confirmed.

Jacob

Jacob Janse Schermerhorn was the first of the Schermerhorn family to emigrate to America. It is said he was born in 1622 in Waterland, Netherlands.³ It is suggested in *Schermerhorn Genealogy and Family Chronicles* that he was known as Jacob Janse van Amsterdam between his arrival in America in 1636 and 1648. It is in 1648 when the name Jacob Janse Schermerhorn first appears in the record. Director of the colony of New Netherland, Peter Stuyvesant, had accused Schermerhorn of having been a part of selling guns to the Natives. A man named Jacob Reyntsen would bribe the armorer of the West India Company to sell him guns. Reyntsen, in turn, would deliver them to Schermerhorn, who would sell them to the natives of the Mohawk Valley. Schermerhorn was eventually found guilty and sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted after some lobbying from members of the community to a five-year banishment from the colony and seizure of all his property. But even the banishment was remitted with him being allowed to stay in the colony. His only punishment that stuck was that the government seized his property.⁴

What year Jacob and his family moved from Fort Orange (Albany) to Schenectady is unclear. He was not one of the original settlers in 1662; His wife was called to give testimony of an incident in Schenectady in 1673. No matter when exactly the family moved, Jacob became a

³ Pearson, Jonathan. *Contributions for the genealogies of the first settlers of the ancient county of Albany, from 1630 to 1800*. Albany, J. Munsell, 1872. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/04012546/>.

⁴ Schermerhorn, Richard. *Schermerhorn genealogy and family chronicles*. New York: T.A. Wright, 1914.

prominent trader within the community. There are conflicting reports of when exactly Jacob died; his will is dated May 1688. Most reports indicate he died in 1688. Whenever he left a valuable estate to his sons.⁵ Two of these five sons are relevant to this paper, the eldest Ryer (1652-1719) who founded the Schenectady branch of the Schermerhorn family. The other and more relevant son was Symon (1658-1696), founder of the New York City branch.

The British had taken the colony of New Netherland from the Dutch in 1664 and renamed it New York. By 1689, Britain was in constitutional turmoil. The catholic King James II had fled, and the protestant William and Mary had yet to be crowned. Their subjects in the colonies had become disaffected and revolted. In Massachusetts, they had placed the royal-appointed governor under arrest. In New York, after some hesitation, a man named Jacob Leisler had usurped the government. Upstate, the anti-Leislars quickly gained control of Albany and the surrounding area. The most prominent Pro-Leister member in the area was Reyer Schermerhorn, who in 1683 had become the representative of Schenectady for the colony's first assembly. The summer of 1689 saw Britain declare war on France. The North American theater of this war became known as King William's War. The British Crown wouldn't regain control of the colony until 1691; meanwhile, the anti-Leislars in control of the Albany area refused to acknowledge Leisler unless provided with a decree from William and Mary. Leisler responded by sending a militia to take Albany by force. The situation upstate was tense in the fall as the Leisler conflict continued, with rumors of an impending French attack swirling around.

⁵ Ibid.

Early in 1690, Leisler gained control of Albany and the surrounding areas, where he called for new elections. But in the early morning hours of February 8th, the French and their Native allies attacked Schenectady. 60 Schenectady residents were killed. Symon Schermerhorn became something of a legend when, during the attack, he escaped despite being shot through the leg and rode horseback to Albany to warn the residents of the attack. Symon's oldest child, a son named Johannes, was killed along with 3 of Symon's slaves (there were 11 total slaves killed that night).⁶ The pro-Leisler and anti-Leisler parties were quick to blame each other for the massacre. Anti-Leisler and Albany City Clerk Robert Livingston provided an account of events to Edmund Andros, placing blame on the Leislerians. Meanwhile, Reyer and Symon provided two of six affidavits blaming Livingston.⁷ While Leisler was captured in 1691 and executed, Reyer would remain a central figure in Schenectady for decades to come. For his part, Symon never got too involved in politics, but his older brother and father-in-law were both prominent Leislerians. Symon would spend his last few years operating a sloop from Albany and New York City outside of politics. How Symon's wife and youngest child, a son named Arnout, who was four years old at the time, survived the Schenectady massacre without being captured is unknown.

Arnout

Much of Arnout's early life remains a mystery. He married Marytje Beekman in 1713 but vanished from the record until 1725. It is then that he reappears, following in his father's

⁶ Morgan, C., E.B. O'Callaghan, and New York. *The Documentary History of the State of New-York: 1.* Weed, Parsons, 1819. <https://books.google.com/books?id=KWtAAAAcAAJ>.

⁷ Ibid.

footsteps as a trader. But Arnout had expanded operations to trading between New York and Boston.⁸ He had also traded land, purchasing land from his father-in-law, Johannes Beekman. This land can be seen in a 1728 map of New York where “Schermerhorn Wharf” appears next to the Beekman’s land. What is also notable is the wharf to the direct north of Schermerhorn’s is “Cannon’s Wharf,” a family whom Arnout’s oldest son Johannes (John) would marry into.⁹ From 1728-1730, Arnout made at least three voyages, including a slave in the cargo. Two in 1728 include the listing of “1 Negro” as cargo according to shipping returns, while the 1730 lists “2 Negros.”¹⁰

What exactly happens next is unclear; starting in 1730, Arnout appears less frequently, leaving and returning to New York. In the March 18th, 1733, edition of the New York Gazette, a man by the name of Anthony Rutgers places an advertisement in the paper stating that he and John Van Horne, in two separate lawsuits filed in December 1732, have sued Arnout Schermerhorn. In the advertisement, Arnout is described as “late of the city of New York” as he moved to Charleston, South Carolina, sometime in late 1732 or early 1733.¹¹

In South Carolina, Arnout is listed as a “Shop-Keeper.”¹² Given that his now 18-year-old son John (born 1715) is now listed as the one making the sailing voyages, it appears Arnout had given up sailing in favor of his son. Arnout, meanwhile, had in 1736 been granted 350 acres of

⁸ The British National Archives Kew, Shipping Returns from New York 1725-1730, CO 5/1224

⁹ Lynne, James. A Plan of the City of New York from an Actual Survey, 1728

¹⁰ Kew, Shipping Returns from New York 1725-1730, CO 5/1224

¹¹ Advertisements, New York Gazette, March 18th, 1733

¹² Stumpf, Stuart O. “South Carolina Importers of General Merchandise, 1735-1765.” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 84, no. 1 (1983): 1–10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27567776>.

land in Granville County, South Carolina.¹³ Counties at the time were not planned or laid out; the term meant more a rough area of land. Granville County represented the very Southern part of South Carolina along the border of what in 1732 would become the Colony of Georgia. More specifically, Arnout's land grant is on the "N side of the Savannah River."¹⁴ This land is particularly interesting because the city of Savannah was established in Georgia in 1733. South Carolina was on the opposite side of the Savannah River from the city of Savannah. The land in South Carolina was swampland and quickly became used for tidal rice plantations. This area is one of the only places where land could accurately be described as being on the north side of the Savannah River, as described in the land grant. Whether or not Arnout ever developed his land is unclear; there is a 1777 newspaper advertisement from the estate of Francis Roche advertising for sale "350 acres granted to Mr. Arnout Schermerhorn in 1736,"¹⁵ so presumably Arnout had sold the land sometime between 1736 and his death in 1749. This swampland eventually became rice plantations; whether or not Arnout had ever developed the land is unclear, meaning the possibility remains of Arnout having been a plantation owner.

Johannes (John)

John had taken over the sailing business in 1733, first appearing and returning to New York from Rhode Island.¹⁶ John, of all the Schermerhorn, had the most prolific sailing career. From age 18 in 1733, he sailed for 35 years until his death in 1768. With only a handful of

¹³ South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Plat For 350 Acres of Land In Granville County, Series: S213184 Volume: 0003 Page: 00126 Item: 01

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The South-Carolina and American General Gazette, May 29th, 1777

¹⁶ The Pennsylvania Gazette, June 21st, 1733

exceptions, he sailed almost exclusively back and forth between New York and Charleston, South Carolina. John had married childhood neighbor Sarah Cannon of the prominent Cannon family. On the surface, John's voyages seem relatively innocuous. Newspaper advertisements suggest he was hauling passengers, various foodstuffs, and dry goods back and forth. But going beyond advertisements reveals a different story. John gives a deposition in 1745 of a gunfire exchange with Spanish pirates during a trip from New York to Charleston in his sloop Carolina.¹⁷ In 1739, the ship Two Brothers sailed from Charleston to New York, captained by Peter Cannon. The ship, which was co-owned by John, was hauling rice, logwood, and two slaves.¹⁸

A 1753 shipping return from Kingston, Jamaica, lists the previously mentioned Sloop Carolina, a 35-ton ship built and registered in New York and owned by "John Schermerhorn" on a voyage from Kingston to Curacao carrying "Negroes and Dry Goods." Notably, the return does not list the quantity of each.¹⁹ Slave ships averaged 1.5 to 2.4 slaves per tonnage of ship.²⁰ Thus, the Carolina, being a 35-ton ship, could fit 52 to 84 slaves. A conservative estimate might split the cargo in half, with half being slaves and the other being dry goods. This would leave 26 to 42 slaves on board. The Kingston voyage would be John's biggest confirmed voyage. However, it is quite possible that John, who was in the sailing business for over 30 years, was the most extensive trader of slaves, but the British National Archives, which houses the shipping returns,

¹⁷ South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Schermerhorne, John, Master Of The Sloop Carolina, Deposition About An Encounter With Gunfire Between The Sloop Carolina And Two Brigantines, One A Spanish Privateer, While Near Cape Romain During Voyage From New York To Charles Town

¹⁸ Kew, Shipping Returns from New York 1735-1752 CO 5/1226

¹⁹ Kew, Shipping Returns from Jamaica 1752-1762 CO 142/16

²⁰ Klein, Herbert S. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. 2nd ed. New Approaches to the Americas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511779473.

is missing decades' worth of South Carolina Returns during John's life. This leaves his son Peter Schermerhorn Sr. as having traded the most slaves within the family.

Peter Sr.

Peter Schermerhorn Sr. took over the shipping business in the late 1760s. By the time he retired in 1811, he had transformed the family from simply wealthy to one of the richest in the city. During his life, Peter served as a Director of the Bank of New York and a Governor of New York Hospital. How did Peter revolutionize the family business? From 1768 to 1774, Peter shipped at least 94 slaves from Charleston to New York.²¹ Further, unlike his father, Peter was also paying the import duties in Charleston on the slaves. From 1771 to 1773, he paid 740 pounds of import duties with duties of adult Africans, costing, on average, 10 pounds per person.²² The only reason Peter had stopped was the revolution, where he took his family (and ships) to shelter in Hyde Park, New York.

After the revolution, Peter seems to have shifted to selling slave goods rather than slaves themselves. A seemingly endless supply of newspaper advertisements shows Peter Sr. advertising for the sale of cotton and rice from Savannah or Tobacco from North Carolina. An 1808 manumission of a slave confirms Peter owned a slave.²³ In fact, he owned slaves in New York as late as 1820.²⁴ His son Peter Jr. joined the company in 1802, while his other son

²¹ South Carolina Department of Archives and History, *Duty Books of the Public Treasurer of South Carolina, Journals A-C, 1735-76*

²² Higgins, W. Robert. "Charles Town Merchants and Factors Dealing in the External Negro Trade 1735-1775." *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 65, no. 4 (1964): 205–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27566541>.

²³ Yoshpe, Harry B. "Record of Slave Manumissions in New York During the Colonial and Early National Periods." *The Journal of Negro History* 26, no. 1 (1941): 78–107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715051>.

²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 1820 U.S. Census, Peter Schermerhorn, New York City, Ward 9

Abraham joined in 1808. In the first two decades of the 19th century, the family traded in Coffee, Cotton, Rice, Sugar, and Tobacco. After his death in 1829 Peter and Abrham split the family business into two separate firms.

Peter Jr. and William

Other than their fortune, Peter Jr. and his son William Colford have no real ties to slavery and, for the most part, have uninteresting New York socialite lives. Peter Jr. was born during the revolution in the family's retreat in Hyde Park. With Peter Jr.'s takeover of the family business, the family largely moved into land speculation. Peter Sr. had done a little of this toward the very end of his career with the building of Schermerhorn Row. But Peter Jr. would amass most of the land from East 64th to East 69th, from the East River to Third Avenue, for a summer house. Another perhaps interesting anecdote is that in March 1831, Peter was in France, and Alexis de Tocqueville was on his ship back to America. The young Frenchman was on his way to tour America, which resulted in the publication of *De la démocratie en Amérique (Democracy In America)*. Peter and de Tocqueville talked, and de Tocqueville reported on the encounter: "When I spoke to Mr. Schermerhorn of the possible division which might take place between the united provinces [states], he did not seem to believe that it was the least in the world to be feared in the near future." But the merchant did think that "it would come someday, *by and by*."²⁵

²⁵ Schleifer, James. *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1980.

William's legacy has nothing to differentiate him from any other rich New Yorker of his time. He was a member of the American Natural History Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, etc. He is arguably most known for the donation to Columbia for Schermerhorn Hall. At the dedication ceremony for the building, a speech was given by Henry Fairfield Osborn, who was a professor at Columbia at the time.²⁶ Osborn was a notable eugenicist and White supremacist. Three decades later, Osborn would co-found the American Eugenics Society and host the Second International Eugenics Congress. Topics such as the "elimination of the unfit," the discouragement of large families in the "ill-endowed," and the encouragement of large families in the "well-endowed" were discussed.²⁷ Osborn would also write the second and fourth prefaces for Columbia Law alum Madison Grant's infamous *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History*.

In total, across four generations, the family had owned at least six slaves. Symon had three killed in 1690 (Ryer almost certainly owned slaves as well), Arnout possibly owned a slave plantation, one manumitted by Peter Sr. in 1808,²⁸ and having owned two more slaves in the 1820 census.²⁹ Arnout had traded at least four slaves in three voyages between 1728 and 1730. John traded at least 39 slaves in three voyages between 1733 and 1768. Then, Peter traded at least 94 over ten voyages in just seven years, from 1768 to 1774. These numbers mean the

²⁶ Chamberlain, Joshua Lawrence. *Universities and Their Sons: History, Influence and Characteristics of American Universities, with Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Alumni and Recipients of Honorary Degrees*. United States: R. Herndon Company, 1898.

²⁷ New York Times, Want More Babies in Best Families, September 25th, 1921.
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1921/09/25/98744440.pdf>

²⁸ Yoshpe, Record of Slave Manumissions in New York

²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 1820 U.S. Census, Peter Schermerhorn, New York City, Ward 9

Schermerhorn family is responsible for at least 137 slaves traded.³⁰ The slave voyages ranged from one slave to Peter's 1771 voyage of 33 slaves. Depending on what number is attributed to John's Jamaica voyage, the range is potentially as high as 80. It is also perhaps of note that one of the slaves Peter Sr. owned was Boston Crummell, father of abolitionist and first black student at Cambridge University, Alexander Crummell.

“Skaynooyaynah”

But slave trading wasn't the only thing members of the Schermerhorn family were up to at the time. Returning back to the 17th century and Ryer Schermerhorn. Following the Schenectady Massacre, Ryer and his family would stay in Schenectady, where he would continue to be a politician. His direct descendants would also stay in Schenectady. One of those descendants, his great-grandson Rev. John Freeman Schermerhorn, is of particular interest. John would have been 1st cousins with Peter Sr. John F graduated from Andover Seminary in the spring of 1812.³¹ Upon graduation, he went on a tour of the frontier of the US. The first leg of their journey took them through the Midwest, and eventually into Nashville, Tennessee, "Where we put with Mr. (Gideon) Blackburn, a Presbyterian' minister."³² John describes the next phase of their tour:

³⁰ Number calculated using: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Duty Books of the Public Treasurer of South Carolina, Journals A-C, 1735-76; Kew, CO 5/1226, CO 142/16, CO 5/1223, CO 5/1224

³¹ *General Catalogue of the Theological Seminary*, Andover. Massachusetts 1808-1908 (Boston: Thomas Todd, n.d.)

³² Schermerhorn, J.F., and S.J. Mills. *A Correct View of That Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Allegany Mountains: With Regard to Religion and Morals*. Peter B. Gleason and Company, printers, 1814.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=03sAAAAAMAAJ>.

"We consulted with Mr. Blackburn on the expediency of pursuing our course down the river to New Orleans. He advised us to go, and assisted in making the necessary preparations. General (Andrew) Jackson was expecting to go in a few days with about 1500 Volunteers to Natchez. Mr. Blackburn introduced us to the General, who, having become acquainted with our design, invited us to take passage on board his boat. We accepted the invitation; and after providing some necessary stores for the voyage, and making sale of our horses, we embarked the 10th of January 1813."³³

Schermerhorn and Jackson would remain friends for the remainder of Jackson's life.

Schermerhorn even campaigned for Jackson in 1824 and 1828. On October 22, 1832, Jackson's Secretary of War, Lewis Cass, informed Schermerhorn of his appointment. In his letter, the Secretary instructed Schermerhorn to go to Fort Gibson.³⁴ On the same day, Schermerhorn accepted his appointment "with much pleasure," noting its importance both to the country and to "the future welfare and prosperity of the Indians." He informed the Secretary that as early as 1812, on his missionary tour to the West, he had been persuaded that for the best of the Indians, would require their removal to the West.³⁵

Completing his assignment at Fort Gibson in the spring of 1834, Schermerhorn returned to Washington. In February 1835, President Jackson appointed him to negotiate a removal treaty with the Cherokee Indians East of the Mississippi River.³⁶ At this juncture, the Cherokee

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Schermerhorn to Cass, Oct. 22. 1832, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received. 1830- 1840. National Archives. Record Group 75

³⁶ Cass to Schermerhorn, April 2. 1835, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Sent. 1830- 1840. National Archives, Record Group 75

community was divided into two factions: a minority pro-removal group led by Major Ridge and his son John Ridge, and a majority anti-removal group led by John Ross. The initial attempt at negotiation took place in October 1835 at the Council of Running Waters and ended in a resounding failure, as the overwhelming majority of Cherokee voters rejected the proposed treaty.

Undeterred by this setback, Schermerhorn redoubled his efforts to exert pressure on John Ross and the anti-removal faction. His strategies included deploying the formidable "Georgia Guard" to maintain "peace and order." This force was tasked with safeguarding the property and individuals aligned with the pro-removal stance while actively creating difficulties for Ross and his associates.³⁷ Furthermore, Schermerhorn took a proactive approach by crafting and disseminating leaflets that impugned John Ross's character. Additionally, Schermerhorn pursued support from missionaries through bribery, further amplifying his campaign to force the Cherokee into submission to the terms of the proposed treaty.³⁸

John F. became widely unpopular not only among the Native American population but also with White individuals; missionaries harbored resentment, stating that he should never have been acknowledged as a minister of the gospel or a professor of religion.³⁹ Natives aligned with Ross were profoundly angered by Schermerhorn's behavior, bestowing upon him the

³⁷ "Schermerhorn to Lumpkin, Sept. 18, 1835, "Cherokee Indians Letters, Talks, and Treaties, 1786- 1838," MSS collection in Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Ga.

³⁸ Schermerhorn to John C. Ellsworth, Nov. 17, 1835, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, MSS documents Houghton Library, Harvard University

³⁹ Ellsworth to Greene, Nov. 13, 1835, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, MSS documents Houghton Library, Harvard University

derogatory nickname "Skaynooyaynah," which translated to the 'Devil's Horn.'⁴⁰ Despite facing opposition, Schermerhorn achieved his objective by convening a council at New Echota while John Ross and his supporters were away in Washington.

President Andrew Jackson submitted the Treaty of New Echota to the Senate on March 5, 1836, and following an extensive debate, it was officially ratified on May 23, 1836. Two years later, in a pivotal chapter of American history, the U.S. Army initiated the coercive relocation of the Cherokee people from their longstanding ancestral homelands to a newly designated territory situated west of the Mississippi River. This tragic event, part of the Trail of Tears, marked a distressing period in which thousands of Cherokee endured immense suffering and loss as they were forcibly uprooted and displaced from their homes. Estimates suggest that approximately one-fourth of the Cherokee tribe perished during this harrowing process.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Schermerhorn had been reassigned to New York, tasked with negotiating treaties with the "Six Nations of Indians." Here, he successfully managed three treaties before being removed from his position in November 1837 by the newly elected President, Martin Van Buren. Throughout his career, Schermerhorn engaged in negotiations for twenty distinct treaties with Native peoples, solidifying his legacy as a central figure in the execution of President Jackson's policy of Native removal. In a retrospective account of his tenure as commissioner in 1839, Schermerhorn penned his reflections on the events:

⁴⁰ Elihur Butler to Greene, Jan. 15, 1836, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, MSS documents Houghton Library, Harvard University

⁴¹ Perdue, T., M. Green, and C. Calloway. *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2008. <https://books.google.com/books?id=b6aMEAAQBAJ>.

"My goal as a commissioner was always to preserve the Red man from further degradation and final extermination and ruin; to secure to them a permanent and peaceable home; to deliver them from state oppression and aggression; to protect them in the enjoyment of all their personal and political rights, which they had lost or could no longer enjoy ... while they continued to reside within the jurisdiction of the States; and finally to civilize and Christianize them by every proper means and as soon as they were qualified for it to give them a name and rank in our federal Union."⁴²

⁴² Schermerhorn To Poinsett, Nov. 11, 1839, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received. 1830- 1840. National Archives.