

Charley Lamar was always itching for a fight. Once arrested for illegally importing slaves, he quipped that “a man of influence can do as he pleases.” Lucrative profits from blockade running led him to quit his commission as a colonel in the Confederate army and return home. Savannah was landlocked by the Union occupation of Fort Pulaski and fearful of General William T. Sherman’s inexorable advance from the west. Lamar and other wealthy merchants rode out the end of the war in a city full of blacks and imprisoned Yankee soldiers. Lamar hated them all.¹

Rachel Ann Moore was born in the small community of Saltcatcher, Colleton County, South Carolina, on April 2, 1833. Her mother, Julia, was the slave of Irish immigrant Patrick Ryan, who landed in Charleston in 1827. Ryan was a middling farmer who raised and butchered cattle. Julia proved to be a shrewd investment since she bore at least nine slave children by various white men.³

Rachel’s father was New Hampshire native John Moore, a white merchant and postmaster of nearby Gillisonville. Contemporaries described Moore as having “marked integrity of character” and a

did not enjoy.⁴

Moore’s guilt may have been exacerbated when Rachel fell victim to the same abuse and exploitation as her mother. Only fourteen, she gave birth to Julia, the first of three children fathered by local white farmer John Saunders. Faced with raising a growing family under such dire circumstances, Rachel began hiring out her own time “as soon as I became a woman fully grown.”⁵

An opportunity for Rachel to improve her circumstances came in 1850, when Ryan moved his family and his slaves to Savannah. The explosive

The Wealthiest Slave in Savannah

Lamar also resented locals, blacks and poor Irish folks mostly, who shared their meager foodstuffs with the Union captives at the makeshift prison at the corner of Hall and Whitaker Streets. After all, Confederate soldiers reported that they missed many a meal in Northern prison camps. On a given evening, a passing slave could be observed hurling a loaf of bread over the stockade fence or sneaking a pail of milk through to the starving soldiers.²

Rachel Brownfield was just the type of “favored slave” that must have aroused particularly visceral emotions from Charley Lamar. Despite her status as chattel property, she parlayed her intelligence and resourcefulness into several profitable business ventures in a pre-war boom town desperate for labor and services. One evening in 1864, Lamar intercepted Rachel on a mission of mercy. The result was predictable.

Lamar did not need to ask where Rachel was going that night. Slaves and free blacks had a curfew in the city. This uppity slave woman was up to no good. Amid a hail of expletives, Lamar kicked over her bucket and scattered Rachel’s relief package in the street. He then drew his sword and threatened to run her through if he ever caught her aiding enemy soldiers again. Had Lamar known the extent of Rachel’s efforts on behalf of the Union prisoners, he might have killed her on the spot.

“high sense of justice.” Although the rape of female slaves had become widespread across the South, Moore may have been troubled by his sins. He gave large sums of money to Rachel at various times, providing her options that most rural slaves

growth of the cotton industry caused a critical labor shortage in the bustling port city. An influx of seasonal Irish laborers combined with more than five hundred free black workers could hardly satisfy the demand. So-called “nominal” slaves like

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The country has been flooded with anti-slavery arguments; anti-slavery societies have persevered in systematic, vigorous, and ingenious efforts to inculcate their peculiar views by means of public harangues, newspapers, novels, sermons, tracts, pictures, and other means of influencing the public. Meanwhile, but very little has been done to present the other side of the subject. The American people believe in full and free discussion, and can hardly wish to decide any question after hearing only one side, and even those who have formed opinions will be willing to consider arguments, even though they tend to different conclusions, which come from an eminent source, and which are at once able, forcible, and kind.

The present work offers such arguments from such a source.

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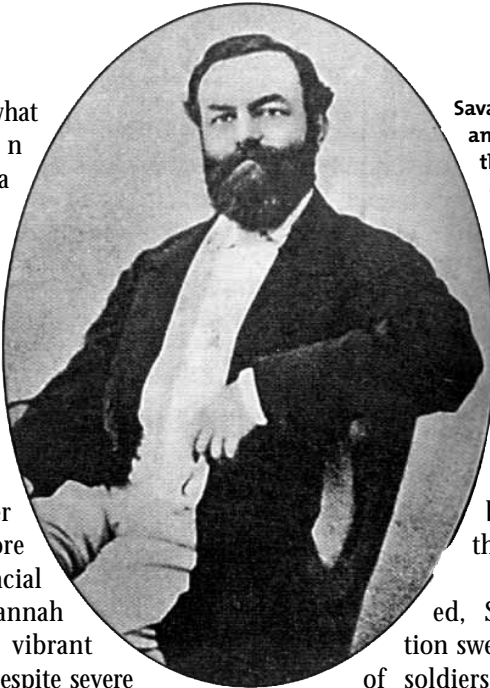
Rachel occupied what Whittington Johnson calls “a middle ground between slavery and freedom,” filling the gaps in a local shadow economy.⁶

Rachel found that this new urban environment offered her young family more than just financial opportunity. Savannah had developed a vibrant black subculture, despite severe legal and social constraints. Antebellum slaves and free blacks worshiped in both black and integrated churches, ran businesses that catered to white customers and even attended clandestine schools. If there was any chance of real family life for slaves in Georgia, Savannah afforded a glimmer of hope.

One example of such aspirations occurred in 1851, when Roman Catholic Vicar General John Francis Kirby married Rachel Moore to the slave Charles Brownfield. Like other slave marriages, the union had no legal standing. Two years later, Rachel and her children were sold to Dr. Eldridge Williamson of Macon, who allowed them to stay in Savannah. As long as Rachel paid Dr. Williamson for her time, she could work as she pleased and he would safeguard her money in the bank.⁷

Rachel leased small houses to rent in various parts of the city, took in laundry, and sold milk to feed her growing family. Although she had far more independence than a typical plantation slave, her status as a married woman hardly insulated her from the sexual appetites of any white man who chose to force himself on her. She bore at least one child from such an encounter in 1858.⁸

By the time Dr. Williamson sold the family to Savannah attorney Young J. Anderson in 1860, Rachel had accumulated several thousand dollars, most of



Savannah's Charlie Lamar, an ardent supporter of the institution of slavery, detested freedmen like Rachel Brownfield.

which was held in a bank trust transferred to her new owner. Anderson was a bright young man with a promising future, but war loomed on the horizon.

The conflict erupted, Savannah's population swelled, and thousands of soldiers and sailors were called to defend the coast. Rachel took advantage of the need for rental housing by leasing a mansion on Bryan Street from local merchant Isaac Meinhard. She paid Meinhard \$10 per month and provided room and board to both white and black lodgers. The business made her wealthy by slave standards, although her later claim to have accumulated nearly \$16,000 seems exaggerated.⁹

At this point in her life, Rachel Brownfield faced an important yet difficult decision. She had enough money to purchase herself and her children, but dare she attempt it?

The number of antebellum slaves who bought their freedom may never be known. The process was fraught with obstacles and risk. Toby Adams was a South Carolina native who lived just west of Savannah. He purchased his liberty, only to have the papers stolen and himself forced back into slavery. Toby's second attempt succeeded, and he established a profitable business carting milk and other goods to and from the city.¹⁰

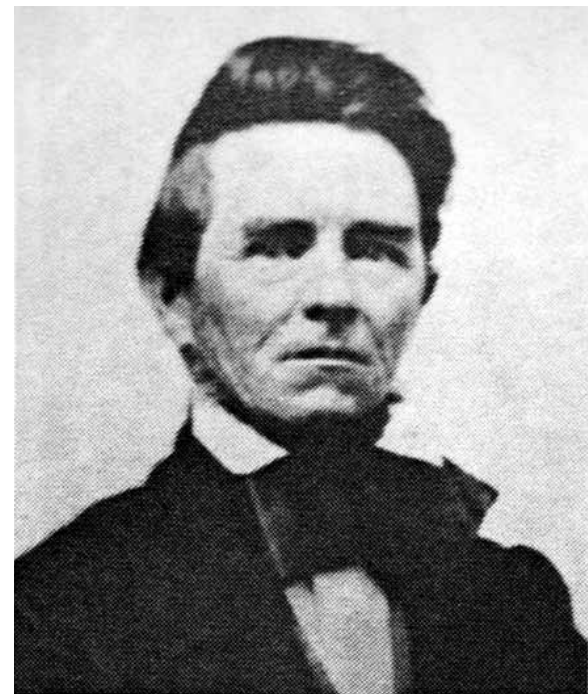
Georgia law required freed slaves to leave the state within a year of manumission, so Rachel might have to leave her mother and even her husband behind if she became free. Other hurdles to real freedom were legal restrictions placed on free blacks in most Southern cities and states. Free blacks in Savannah, for example, had to register, appoint white

guardians and pay tax on a strictly limited array of licensed occupations.

In one of the many tragic ironies of black urban life in the antebellum South, Rachel Brownfield had more employment options as “nominal” slave property than did her free black neighbors. But freedom was to most every slave a fervent dream. Rachel made an agreement with Anderson in February 1863 to purchase herself and her children for \$1900. Anderson promised her that his wife's family would return the money if he happened to die before the obligation was paid.

Rachel continued to rent rooms, sew and take in washing. She paid Anderson for her time plus \$12 per month to hire out daughters Julia and Caroline. She made regular payments of several hundred dollars each in gold, silver and bank bills against her emancipation debt.¹¹

By the summer of 1863, conditions in Savannah were horrendous. Scarlet fever, typhoid, and smallpox ran rampant, and corpses piled up in the streets. The Union naval blockade created a powder keg among the urban poor. Food



John Moore (1804-1871), postmaster of Gillisonville, S.C., and father of Rachel Brownfield. Moore gave Rachel large sums of money before he lost his fortune in the Civil War.

In the years after the Civil War, Savannah was a busy port city in which former freedmen and slaves sometimes thrived but more commonly languished.



ran low while enterprising merchants and blockade runners kept warehouses full to the brim.

The situation boiled over in mid April 1864, when a gang of armed women robbed four Savannah storehouses of bacon and other items. Similar “bread riots” were occurring in other Southern cities. Three Irish women were arrested by city authorities, but were never prosecuted.¹²

Union prisoners in Savannah and Andersonville lived in conditions that Jacqueline Jones has described as “death camps.” Rachel made numerous visits to the Savannah stockade. On one occasion, she was threatened by armed guards, who took the tobacco and clothing she had brought for the captives, claiming that Confederate soldiers were suffering too. Rachel then resolved to take the ultimate risk to help starving Union prisoners.

Overcrowded conditions, hasty construction methods, and the occasional sympathetic guard made escape attempts from

Civil War prison camps fairly common. Union men, free blacks and slaves conspired to aid escapees and deserters. They established networks of safe houses and shepherded runaways to refuge behind Federal lines. Rachel Brownfield’s boarding house was one of these way stations.

The house on Bryan Street boasted sixteen rooms and fine furnishings. The 18-by-30-foot dining room was covered with an ingrain woolen carpet and featured a large leafed mahogany dining table. Thirteen regular lodgers slept under blankets and quilts in eleven beds. Two additional mattresses could accommodate “comers and goers,” according to the proprietress. Black and white renters ran the gamut from slaves working their own time in the city to Confederate Naval officer Robert M. Bain. Boarders dined on fine china services and slept in rooms decorated with walnut and mahogany furniture.

The secret occupants in the Brownfield boarding house enjoyed no

such luxuries. Concealed during daylight hours, even their nighttime activities were strictly circumscribed. A pair of Union soldiers stayed two months before Rachel paid a local river pilot \$20 in gold to transport them to Fort Pulaski. In May 1864, six more arrived. Rachel played a dangerous game of hide-and-seek with local authorities as rumors of her concealed guests swirled about town.¹³

Boarder Ann Rose Alexander, a slave washerwoman, encountered a prisoner one evening. “Old Aunt Abby told me they were Yankee prisoners and then I got into the secret of it and felt scared,” she later recalled. “If they had caught those people,” she explained further, “there would have been a rope around (Rachel’s) neck.” City officers made a visit to the Brownfield boarding house to search for Union prisoners, but found none.¹⁴

Whispers that Rachel was harboring escapees persisted. Minehardt raised her rent to \$100 per month, thinking this would force her to leave. She paid the new rate, rather than expose her secret and endanger both herself and her hidden boarders. “I did this from charity,” Rachel explained years later. “I felt towards them as if they were my mother’s sisters.”¹⁵

In the meantime, Major Young J. Anderson, Quartermaster in the Confederate Army, had seen his law practice dissolve and his prospects diminish. On September 24, 1864, Rachel paid him the final \$550 to secure freedom for herself and her children. Anderson reneged on the deal. The final payment was in Confederate money, he explained, and besides Rachel and her children were now worth more. He demanded another \$1800 or she could “go up the country and fare the same as the rest of the Negroes do.” Rachel refused, so Anderson went to the bank and withdrew her savings.

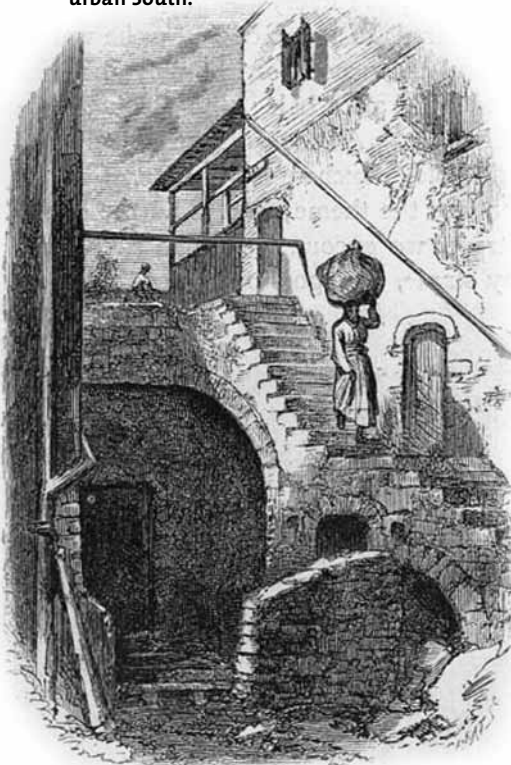
Anderson then tried to sell Rachel to Isaac Meinhard, but his price was too high. Anderson’s nephew Hardy Smith also refused to buy the slaves. As Sherman’s army closed in on Savannah, Rachel’s family must have felt particularly vulnerable. Charles Brownfield was

away serving his master, Flag Officer Secretary Edward C. Kollock, aboard the ironclad *C.S.S. Savannah*. Once it became clear that Sherman's capture of Savannah was inevitable, Confederates destroyed the ship and abandoned the city on the night of December 21.¹⁶

The Confederate exodus saved Savannah but created chaos. Mobs of hungry residents raided storehouses still laden with food and other goods. Charles and Rachel Brownfield were among hundreds of looters running through the streets as Sherman's army entered the city. Rachel was run over by a cart in the confusion and seriously injured. Charles discarded a barrel of molasses he had purloined and helped his wife return home.¹⁷

The initial reaction of Savannah blacks to their deliverance was unrestrained joy. General Sherman was treated as the hero of a long-awaited jubilee. Many years later when she was sixty years old, Ann Rose Alexander would remember her mother and grandmother "talked of it often ever since I was a child;" but Rachel Brownfield, she claimed, "never expected this freedom." At the

Etching of a laundress on the riverfront in Savannah in the 1840s. This was the most common occupation for black women in the urban South.



Brownfield boarding house the celebration subsided quickly.

Sherman's army was hungry after living off the land for five weeks. Soldiers set up camp in the square directly in front of the boarding house. Captain McIntosh and Lieut. Grover commandeered the house for themselves and other officers, leaving Rachel and her children one room. For two weeks, Rachel and her daughters cooked and waited on the officers while Union troops ransacked the property.

The six liberated prisoners tried to stop the pillaging, but Rachel and her boarders lost everything. Captain McIntosh said it was "a shame" the way they had treated her and promised receipts for the damages. They never materialized. "She did more than any two women in town for the Union prisoners," testified former slave butcher and boarder Thomas Steward. Despite risking her life for such harsh rewards, Rachel insisted that she "would do it again tomorrow."¹⁸

Rachel and her husband set out to rebuild their lives immediately after the war. There would be no more assistance coming from her father. Sherman had burned Gillisonville and John Moore's fortune was gone. Young J. Anderson, wounded at Cold Harbor, had died the following spring. Rachel brought suit against his estate to recover the freedom ransom.

Rachel had a strong case. Robert M. Bain, J. Orrin Lee and Patrick Ryan all submitted affidavits that supported Rachel's claims. Signed receipts from Anderson detailed the payments Rachel had made to her master. Judge Thomas E. Lloyd and Freedman's Bureau chief Lieut. J. Murray Hoag agreed that the claims were valid; but a parade of local attorneys refused to take the case. Finally Rollin A. Stanley agreed to represent Rachel. Anderson's executor John B. Woolfe, however, did his best to ensure that the case would not go to trial. Years passed with several lawyers taking the case. Rachel never recovered her money.¹⁹

Rachel Brownfield was nothing if not resilient. Confident that she and her hus-



Free blacks and slaves had regular commerce between the countryside and the city, hauling milk, produce and other goods to market.

band could prosper yet again, she opened an account in the Freedman's Savings Bank in 1866. The following year, she purchased a house and 20 acres on the Montgomery road about seven miles outside Savannah. Charles farmed and worked as a laborer in various city locations, while Rachel supported her young family by sewing and washing. Somehow they made it work.²⁰

In the early 1870s, Congress established the Southern Claims Commission, allowing loyal citizens in the South to recover damages caused by Union troops. Proving loyalty to the Union was easy for Rachel Brownfield. Convincing the commissioners that a slave could have held so much wealth was much more challenging. Rachel hired celebrated black Savannah preacher and attorney James M. Simms to represent her in her claim. Although she applied for just the \$1,659 in losses incurred at the boarding house, the commissioners allowed her only \$253.70.²¹

Rachel used the money to purchase additional rental property. When her husband died in 1875, Rachel was only 43 years old, but fifteen children and thirty years of hard labor made her feel much older. Her rheumatism was so bad that she could not work in 1879. That year

Rachel had a valid claim against the estate of Young J. Anderson. Years passed with several lawyers taking the case, but she never recovered her money.

brought with it perhaps the greatest tragedy of her difficult life. Son Charles Henry Jr. was run over and killed by a train on his twelfth birthday. When the census taker visited their household the following year, he listed twenty-five year old son William as “overstrained” and noted that nineteen year old daughter Margaret had been unemployed for ten months.

Cancer of the uterus finally claimed Rachel Brownfield just a month after her fifty-first birthday in May 1884. Though illiterate with no schooling, being bright and clever had helped her overcome so many challenges and setbacks. At her death, she left her five surviving children three properties and more than \$1000 in cash. She made provisions for the education of her youngest son, Walter Scott. The balance of her estate was left in the hands of her executor to ensure that her legacy endured.

Rachel Brownfield was proud of her accomplishments in a hard life filled with danger, disappointment and disrespect. As a lasting symbol of her defiance to the slave-owning society that had taken so much from her, she willed that the remainder of her estate be used for the “care and adornment of my lot and gravestone” in Laurel Grove Cemetery. There she could gaze northward in perpetuity towards important white people like Charley Lamar, who were buried in a separate section. Bound together by economic necessity in life, Savannah whites insisted that they be segregated from their black neighbors after death.²² ■

David Dixon earned an M.A. in History from the University of Massachusetts and resides in Santa Barbara, California.

Endnotes

1. Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar (1824-1865) was a wealthy slave trader and commission merchant, the son of Gazaway Bugg Lamar of Savannah. He was reputedly “the last important man killed in the Civil War,” when he was shot by Union soldiers in Columbus, Georgia. See Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) 100-107, 120, 126.

2. Jones, *Saving Savannah* 194-197.
3. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, Chatham County, Georgia, 1873, Southern Claims Commission (hereinafter abbreviated as “SCC”). Accessed through Ancestry.com database. Testimony of claimant. Records of the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Co., Records of the Office of the Comptroller, Record Group 101, National Archives (hereinafter abbreviated as “FBR”). Accessed through Ancestry.com database. Savannah depositor #239 Rachel Brownfield, 28 June 1866.

4. George Washington Moore, *Genealogy of the Moore family of Londonderry, New Hampshire, and Peterborough, New Hampshire* (Peterborough, New Hampshire: Transcript Printing Co., 1925) 47. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant.

5. FBR for Rachel’s children and sisters see: Richmond Brownfield #1739, Caroline Gatewood #1354, Susan Palmer #3142, Willie Preston #1738.

6. Whittington B. Johnson, *Black Savannah 1788-1864* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1996). 85-106.

7. Petition of Rachel Brownfield to recover debt, 1867, MS 603, box 2, folder 14, William Wissham Paine Papers, Georgia Historical Society. No record of this marriage exists, but the baptism of Charles Henry Brownfield Jr. by Father Van Roosbroeck was recorded in the records of the Archdiocese of Savannah on May 19, 1867 (email from Gillian Brown, archivist, August 14, 2013). Black and whites worshipped together in Savannah’s Roman Catholic churches before and after the Civil War.

8. This child was Richmond, born at Mulberry, South Carolina. His father was “Peter of White Bluff.” His complex-

ion is described as “very light”. FBR Richmond Brownfield #1739.

9. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant. Petition of Rachel Brownfield, William Wissham Paine Papers.

10. Claim #3928, Toby Adams, Chatham County, Georgia, 1874, SCC. Testimony of claimant.

11. Petition of Rachel Brownfield, William Wissham Paine Papers.

12. Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 186-194.

13. Ibid, 195-6. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant.

14. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of Ann Rose Alexander.

15.. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant.

16. Petition of Rachel Brownfield, William Wissham Paine Papers. C.C. Marsh, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921) 304-305.

17. Claim #5235, David R. Dillon, Chatham County, Georgia, 1877, SCC. Testimony of claimant and Charles Brownfield. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant. Information on the family of Young J. Anderson was furnished by Ranny Brewer.

18. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Testimony of claimant, Anne Rose Alexander, and Thomas Steward.

19. Petition of Rachel Brownfield, William Wissham Paine Papers.

20. FBR, Rachel Brownfield #239, 1866.

21. Claim #13361, Rachel Brownfield, SCC. Approved claim receipts.

22. Chatham County Deeds 3Z:298, 4W:389, 6X:371, 6X:373. Chatham County Wills: O:414. Savannah Georgia Vital records 1803-1966, accessed at Ancestry.com. 1880 Federal Census, Savannah, Chatham, Georgia; Roll: 138; Family History Film: 1254138; Page: 599C; Enumeration District: 030; Image: 0761