

Chronicles of Brunonia

Stories from the Good Doctor's Farm, Colonial Southern Rhode Island

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For a short period in the mid-18th century, the MacSparran farm flourished at the hands of an assortment of free, enslaved and indentured workers. In such a small-scale plantation, typical of Colonial Southern Rhode Island, the social hierarchy was constantly repositioning itself to accommodate emerging colonial ideas about race, sex and religion. This story, based on the diary of Reverend MacSparran and other historical documents, imagines the personal relationships between those who worked and lived in such close quarters.

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Hannibal heaved and did not look backwards as he struggled to outrun Harry. Hannibal was prevailing in this less than amiable footrace. Moving swiftly past their master's fields, he remembered plowing the rye stubble down alongside Harry. In the late July rain, Hannibal and Harry had threshed the rye together. They had sowed turnips. Just yesterday, under the hot August sun they had cut corn stalks in the field. They drank from the same water pitcher during their lunch break.

But now Hannibal was running from Harry. Really though, he was running from the Doctor and his wife. Hannibal had been out the night before, and when the Doctor found out he stripped Hannibal down and began to whip him. Hannibal had begged his master for an end to this bloody reminder of his enslavement.

When the Doctor was satisfied, Harry helped untie Hannibal's limbs. But then the Doctor's wife, Mistress Hannah, she had also begged. She begged the Doctor to whip Hannibal more, said he hadn't received enough. And then she gave him two lashes, herself.

So Hannibal bolted. He was still only half dressed. He ran even harder after his one glance towards to house, where he saw Harry was coming after him.

"Please Harry," Hannibal called without losing speed or looking back. "Just let me go. You know where I need to go."

They got as far as William Brown's plantation. There, Hannibal's legs gave out, perhaps just a few moments before Harry's. Harry pounced on his kneeling prey and gave him a sturdy blow to the face. But just one.

They lay in the forested area behind Brown's fields for a quiet few minutes. Then Harry said, "It would be imposs'ble for me to come back without you."

"Why?" Hannibal demanded. Sometimes it was hard for him to figure out whose side Harry was on anyway. Harry had given him a good beating not three weeks earlier, arguing over Hannibal's frequent escapes. Clearly this chase put the two black slaves on opposite sides, Harry having aligned himself with the Doctor and his wife.

Yet part of Hannibal suspected that Harry chased after him so that he could also get a taste of fresh air. While it was characteristic for Hannibal to take occasional respites from the MacSparran farm, Harry was the one who dutifully slept in his bed at night, who stayed out to finish pulling the corn stalks, who hilled the corn or took the rye to mill by himself. Hannibal hated how Harry picked on him for being lazy or for going out at night to Block Island, how Harry threatened to tell the Doctor about his trips.

But whenever Hannibal remembered Stepney, his venom subsided. He understood that Harry didn't want to come back empty-handed to his master. Not again.

* * *

The Doctor always said, "April showers bring May flowers." The spring of 1745 was no exception. The air was sweet and heavy with pollen, the land blindingly green, and the chirping of birds awoke people in the morning and put them back to bed at night.

As the two men propelled the flat-bottomed boat forward with their oars, they couldn't help but admire the blooming riverbank. The Pettaquamscutt River

ran alongside broad, flat meadows. Looking west from a boat in the water, it was possible to see far out into the landscape, until the green became a rocky ridge. This stony ascension was one side of the MacSparran farm.

Stepney was doing his impression of the Doctor complaining to him about Maroca, another of the MacSparrans' slaves. "I tell you, I am perplexed about her conduct with Colonel Updike's negro," he lectured loudly to Harry, who was seated behind him. Stepney exaggerated his vocal inflection to compensate for Harry not being able to see his comical expression of concern.

"She is a Christian, but seems not concerned about her *soul*," Stepney said mournfully, elongated the last word in his best English accent.

"Her soul," laughed Harry. His eyes shone in admiration of his friend. Ever since Harry arrived on the MacSparran farm, Stepney had been his mentor. Harry quickly observed that Stepney was skilled in both being the master's favorite, and also poking the most fun of him at the same time. Stepney could switch on the charm, the "yes sir no mistress sho' thing" routine at any moment, yet this gracious manner did not seem to affect him during their time away from the MacSparrans' watchful gaze. Moments like these, on the river.

"Good God do thou di-rect me what to dooo with her," Stepney continued with his impersonation. Stepney even attended church and agreed to be baptized by the Reverend, so he was familiar with how Anglican religious rhetoric seeped into white peoples' speech.

"Dear Lord!" Harry refrained. His English accent was nowhere near as polished as Stepney's, but Stepney was feeding on Harry's energy. Stepney

decided to face his friend, and stood in his seat, leaning one foot and one oar on the front of the skow. Stepney waved his free hand in a sermon-like gesture.

“She does not mind her promise of chastity, yet she has made this promise often.” With a wink Stepney added, “...Probably when she was refusin’ *his* advances.”

“No! You think?” asked Harry. Harry never thought the Doctor was that kind of master, but then again he had not been around the farm that long, and Maroca did not confide in him the way she did to Stepney. Everyone felt comfortable with Stepney.

“The Doctor’s soul gets lonesome too Harry...but no Maroca never said it in words. I just sometimes walk in the room and they suddenly uncomfortable is all.” Stepney leaned in. “You don’t think them English are perfect, right Harry?”

“Lord no.”

“Well good. Don’t believe what the Good Doctor says. Just listen. I believe in the Lord, but I don’t know how much the Lord believe in the Good Doctor you know?”

Harry loved how Stepney called him “the Good Doctor.” He was thinking about what Stepney meant about God believing in people when suddenly-

Crack!

The skow hit a rock protruding the surface of the river. The men had forgotten to anticipate this bend in the river, where the stream widens into a small lake. Stepney, who was on his feet, wobbled. He unsuccessfully tried to steady himself with the oar, but he fell backwards into the water, his legs flipping the boat over and sending Harry into the water after him.

Harry was almost caught under the overturned skow, but he managed to lift the wooden vessel away from him. He had practiced swimming in the lake last summer, and was able to tread water and use his upper body strength simultaneously. Harry tried to guide the skow to the nearby riverbank, but it was too heavy. He looked and saw where the rock split open the floor of the skow, and redoubled his efforts to save his master's boat from sinking.

Then he noticed Stepney. Or rather, he noticed that he did not see Stepney. Harry left the boat to drown as he moved with the slow current in search of his friend. Moments later he could see Stepney's body just underneath the surface of the clear water. Harry grabbed him around the chest and swam to shore.

As he pulled his friend his thoughts raced with alarm. "Stepney can't swim. I shoulda helped him first. Why didn't I remember? Why didn't he watch forward? Why didn't I?" Harry jumped onto dry land.

Heave, heave.

Water dripped down off Harry's shoulders as he pulled Stepney out of the river.

Smack. Slap.

He tried to revive his friend. "Come on Stepney, quit playin'." Harry picked him up from behind and shook him.

But it was too late.

* * *

Harry and Hannibal were still sitting in the mud, but their panting had slowed down to an occasional heavy breath as they stared at each other, each

waiting for the other to agree to a compromise. Harry wanted to bring Hannibal home, Hannibal wanted to go to Block Island.

Their master's brother-in-law's house was on Block Island. Harry knew that was where Hannibal went at night, and he was tired of covering for him.

"Look I just can't go back without you, alright? I don't want the Doctor to be mad at me because you're off having fun with your lady friend doin..."

"What?" Hannibal said quizzically.

"I know what you do at the Gardiner's place. I know you go to Block Island with presents to see Phillis."

Hannibal's eyebrows raised. "Phillis?"

Phillis was a slave for the Gardiner family, but floated around between several homes. She had spent a few weeks at the MacSparran's farm when Mistress Hannah was ill. Normally, however, Phillis worked at Henry Gardiner's, Hannah's brother on Block Island. She was beautiful, and Harry had noticed how she looked at Hannibal, and how they would talk in hushed voices in the corner of the kitchen as she prepared the Mistress' dinner.

"What are you on about? Phillis isn't even at Block Island," Hannibal informed Harry.

"What?"

"That's right, she works for Mrs. Almy now, master's mother."

"Then...why you headed to Block Island?" Harry insisted.

Hannibal was confused by Harry's confusion and the sun was quickly coming down. He didn't want to waste time, but he wasn't used to speaking

directly. It usually just got him in to trouble. “I think you must have had the wrong idea. I go to the Gardiners to visit Belco.”

The two men drew their breath in and locked eyes.

“Maroca’s baby?” Harry finally asked. Harry remembered how Maroca was the first slave he met upon his arrival at the MacSparran’s farm. Maroca brought him bread and cheese to his room for dinner. The tray was balanced on her round stomach so that at first he didn’t notice how pregnant she was. She was friendly but did not stay to speak with him. He was impressed with her warmth, though, considering the unfortunate personal situation his presence represented to her.

Harry had arrived at the farm as part of a swap made by his previous master and the Reverend. It was simple: MacSparran’s slave Richard in exchange for Harry. It seemed rather cruel to Harry, considering Richard was Maroca’s husband, and she was pregnant with their second child at the time.

Shortly after Easter, Maroca was confined to her bed, and it was only a few months later that Belco was sent away. The baby was baptized by the Reverend immediately after her birthday and sent to Block Island to the Gardiners. Maroca went back to working around the house and in the fields, and she never spoke about Belco — at least not with Harry. He noticed she would often spend weekends with her baby at the Gardiners, but in the last year or two Maroca usually was rarely permitted to leave the MacSparran farm.

“Maroca still sees her sometimes, right? The Reverend lets her go by.” Harry said.

“That’s right. But he don’t let *me* see her so often,” Hannibal said, irritated and looking away.

“Why do you want to see her?”

Hannibal sighed. “Because she’s my daughter, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “But...What about Richard...Why’d you never say anything?”

“It’s not something we love to talk about up at the Reverend’s farm, Harry. There’s a reason for that. There’s a reason Richard left.” It happened so long ago that telling this story was not particularly painful for Hannibal. Anymore. But since it was all new to Harry, Hannibal thought he should go slowly.

“The Reverend sent Richard away because he started picking fights with me. Because he knew the baby Maroca had in her was not his. But Reverend did not figure, at first, that was the problem between us. He just knew Richard was causing a fuss, refusin’ to work. That’s why Master traded a strong man like him for a young one like you.”

A flicker of irritation passed over Harry’s eyes at the reference to his age. Hannibal noticed and took a secret pleasure in reminding Harry who was the older (and in his opinion, wiser) of the two of them.

Hannibal continued, “But one day after Belco was born the Mistress overheard me and Maroca with the baby. She told the Reverend and they figured out what happened. He was so angered with Maroca. He had baptized her and Richard, and married them both just years before. ‘Sfar as he understood it, they had offended the Lord.”

“So why did he send off Belco and not Maroca? Or you?” Harry asked.

“What good is keeping a baby, no, a *bastard-child*, to the Reverend?” Hannibal said with a small tide of contempt. “And Maroca was also a regular

hand at the house. Mistress liked the way she cooked, and she had been with Mistress for a long time. As for me, he needed me to stay and work hard. Stepney was training you at the time. Besides, I never been baptized. He knew I profess'd no faith. He figured it was easier to give the baby to the Gardiners. Phillis been taking care of her."

Harry stood up. "So you sneak over there to visit your daughter?"

"Master and Mistress don' ever let me go with permission."

Harry wandered over and put one hand on the rough bark of a nearby tree. He broke a small strip off and turned it over in his hand.

"Go on then."

Hannibal nodded and rose to his feet, brushing dirt off his pants. He was relieved there were no more questions. As he began to jog off, Harry called out to him.

"But I'll be there to get you in the morning though, Hannibal."

Hannibal paused, without turning around, and then continued running.

Harry took it as an acknowledgement of assent. He turned in the other direction and began practicing aloud what he would tell the Reverend.

* * *

His boat approached a bend in the river. The water gurgled on either side of him. He saw his brother-in-law in the distance. "Gardiner!" he shouted out and motioned with both arms over his head.

Just as the men met one another's gaze, a tidal wave came from in front of the boat. Splash, crash! The Doctor could not breath. His eyes were burning from the water, which was surprisingly salty, like the ocean.

He managed to breach the surface, and called out to his friend who was untouched by the water. "Henry!" he gurgled.

But no help came from the shore, and the Doctor sank into darkness.

Doctor MacSparran woke up from his nap in sweats.

Even his thin shirt made the August heat unbearable. He had been surprised to fall asleep at all when he put his head down for a rest while the sun was still high. He was not even in his bedroom, but in his study on the main floor of the house. This room was particularly suitable for summer napping, since the windows on all three sides of the room could be opened to facilitate an ample cross-breeze.

"Good Lord, avert troubles if they be signified by water," he said aloud. These recurring nightmares involving water and boating accidents were most frequent in the year after Stepney's death. Now they came by every so often, and they always made him think of his favorite servant. The Doctor smoothed out his clumpy white hair and reached around for his journal.

But before the Reverend could record his dream or reminisce about Stepney, he began to remember the day's events. He remembered trying to work on his sermon that afternoon, but had been so distracted by the drama of his household that he had decided to nap instead. Reciting a prayer under his breath, the Doctor rose to check for his slaves' whereabouts.

Stepping outside, he rested his portly frame on the side of his house. He admired the lilacs that hedged his garden. He looked out to his fields, thinking about the corn stalks that needed to be cut, the beans that needed to be picked,

the apples that needed to be pressed. He supposed that would all have to be done another day. Preferably tomorrow.

That Hannibal always caused trouble. Always running away. But he always came back — Harry saw to that. Lately the Doctor actually thought Harry was sometimes too rough with Hannibal, pushing or bullying him. The Doctor tried to chastise Harry for it, but really he thought Hannibal deserved to be treated harshly. Looking back, the Reverend wished he had the insight to send Hannibal away instead of Richard. But there was still the matter of Hannibal's soul.

Hannibal was still refusing salvation. But the Reverend knew that it was his duty to make him a good Christian. His arguments had not persuaded Hannibal when he was younger, and Hannibal continued to prove himself unworthy when he fathered a child out of wedlock. But the Reverend would continue to punish Hannibal — physically, verbally — until he understood that he needed to accept the Lord's judgments. And letting Harry be harsh with Hannibal was a good supplement to the task.

It did seem like a good idea to keep order between his slaves, but not so much camaraderie that they might plot to run away as the Mumford slaves had done. Those men were not just slaves, as the Reverend recalled with a shudder, but several indentured Irishmen who brought the Negroes along with them. Thank the Lord, Harry was shaping up to be as good a servant as Stepney had been.

The Reverend closed his eyes when he thought about Stepney. He missed his friend. Stepney had always listened to the Doctor practice his sermons, and brought the Doctor extra dried fruit or biscuits to his study. Stepney was the only

one of his slaves who the Doctor felt he could speak to as a person. Stepney never talked back, or sired bastard children. He did his work with a smile and went to bed with a prayer on his lips. If only Harry had paid more attention to Stepney that day, he knew Stepney couldn't swim...

He felt tears rally behind his eyelids. When he fluttered his eyes open, he saw a figure coming towards him in the post-sunset dusk. It was Harry. He was alone.

"Boy, what happened?" the Reverend shouted, unable to wait until Harry got closer.

"Hannibal ran so fast I couldn't catch up at first, Master. I caught him but he slipt from me again as we coming back here. I believe come morning, when there be light out, I could go with a search party and we..."

Smack

Harry had gotten within the Reverend's reach and was met with a blow in the face, half-punch, half-slap. The Reverend looked at him with watery eyes for a long time. Harry looked away. They both remembered the last time Harry had come home alone.

The Reverend wordlessly turned and went back to the house. Before Harry went to get his face cleaned up he heard the Doctor speak.

"Go get someone to help you. You'll go back out tonight. Try Dr. Gardiner's place on Block Island."

* * *

The next morning Hannibal and Harry were silently operating the apple press together. They dumped more ground-up apples into the machine, which

groaned and spat in response. They turned the wooden wheel and listened to the juice cascade into the trough underneath. As the basin got full the two men poured the hard-earned liquid into jugs that lined the ground beside the press.

“Here you go lads,” Tom said. He put down two more buckets full of ground apples, and swapped them for two empty containers. These heaping collections of apple bits made a surprisingly unattractive site that resembled regurgitated food.

“Thanks,” Harry said to Tom. Hannibal nodded. Tom Walmsley was a neighbor of the MacSparran farm whose family had lived in the area for two generations. He would tell Harry and Hannibal that his family was both Indian and African; somehow the Doctor has shorthanded this to “mustee,” a term the English used which Tom was not particularly fond of — probably because no one in his family ever used it.

Tom was the only person Harry and Hannibal knew that had dark skin who was not a slave or a servant; in fact, Tom had a servant of his own, a sailor named Commok who owed Tom some money. Tom worked seasonally for the Doctor and received wages for his time and effort. It was an awkward position for Tom, knowing Harry and Hannibal were not paid, but he dealt with this guilt by taking on a more supervisor-type role to try and distinguish his work from theirs.

Today Tom could see the fresh scars and bruises, the dried blood on Hannibal’s back, neck and face. Tom did not want to think about the origins of these blemishes, and decided that he would do the apple grinding himself and leave the slaves to the pressing. Tom had learned from experience that grinding apples rather than slicing them was a crucial part of juice extraction, and led to

greater cider production at the end of the day. Since Harry and Hannibal looked so tired to Tom, assigning both of them to share the task of pressing apples seemed like a reasonable delegation in the name of efficiency.

It was a good thing the two of them were assigned to a chore that could be performed by one person. Hannibal's physical strength was stunted by his aching muscles and cuts; Harry's mental fortitude was shaken as a result of what he saw the night before. Both had not slept. Combined they almost amounted to one person that morning.

"Ow!" Hannibal grunted as he tried to pick up the heavy bucket.

"Let me." Harry rushed over and filled the machine. Hannibal had not acknowledged his pain until now (in fact they had not spoken since they were left alone), and Harry was eager to let Hannibal simply sit out this morning's work.

"Whach you doing?" Hannibal asked, rubbing his shoulder. "You gonna help me *now* Harry, huh?"

"Just let me, okay?" Harry said irritated, but quietly and without meeting Hannibal's gaze.

"You gonna tell on me later if I sit down? Huh? Look at me Harry. Have you never seen pothooks before?"

Indeed, Harry had heard of this form of punishment, but never seen it administered until last night. Along with Peter, one of the white indentured servants on the MacSparran farm, Harry had gone out to get Hannibal. They found him, of course, at the Gardiner's home, and Peter was a bit surprised at how easily Hannibal had come home with them. Harry had also been a bit

surprised, and relieved, that Hannibal kept his word and understood that Harry needed to bring him home. To bring his body back to the Reverend.

“Answer me child. What, you not talkin’ to me now Harry?”

But when the Doctor met up with his slaves, he said no “thank you” to Harry. He ordered that Hannibal be taken to the Duglasse farm. Hannibal immediately became upset, kicking and spitting in contempt, trying to run away again, but Peter and Harry restrained him and literally carried him to the neighbors’. Halfway there Hannibal gave up his struggle. Harry could feel his will recede, his body acquiesce to whatever fate he was imagining. Harry had never been to the Duglasses, but Hannibal seemed to know what punishment awaited him there.

“No, alright? No.” Harry said, looking at Hannibal’s face and walking towards the press. Suddenly Harry could picture the pothooks on Hannibal, and he had to look away. “I did not know what they were. Or, not in person anyway...and I did not know that Duglasse...I am sorry.”

Master Duglasse kept the pothooks in his hallway cupboard, and it had taken no small effort for Duglasse to lift them off the ground. When Harry first saw the pothooks he had let out a loud gasp, mistaking their rusty spots for blood. Pothooks that were not yet fashioned together look like two wavy iron clubs. Harry had wondered if the pothooks were going to be used as a blunt object to beat Hannibal.

Duglasse ordered Harry to drag Hannibal out to the barn. Peter had brought a candle outside. By the faint yellow light, which turned everything shades of orange and brown, Harry suddenly saw that the curves on the rusty

iron pieces were not meant as handles for wielding the pothooks as a weapon. The shapes on each half of the pothooks were complementary, and fit perfectly around a person's shoulders and neck.

Duglasse had attached the two sides of the pothooks together by hammering copper pegs in pre-made holes in the iron. When Duglasse misfired and accidentally hit Hannibal's shoulder blade with the hammer, Harry had again changed his mind about the origin of those rust-colored stains.

The result was awkward and humiliating. Hannibal's arms were suspended midway in the air. It was incredibly uncomfortable, and the intention was clearly to disable him from running away. Peter and Harry walked home with Hannibal. Harry tried to focus on the noise of the pebbles under their feet, instead of the steady beat of Hannibal's shoulder hitting the hard frame of the pothooks. Hannibal had to stay up all night because it was impossible to sleep in that binding. Harry had stayed up all night because he could not sleep.

That morning, the Doctor took the copper pegs out so that Hannibal could come to work. Harry was surprised at the brevity of the whole pothooks experience, but he supposed that the Doctor simply wanted the chores done without further interference. Now, still avoiding Hannibal's eyes, Harry turned the press violently.

Crunch crunch

The apples yielded. The juice flowed.

"Well now you know Harry," Hannibal said, lifting the next bucket up to the mouth of the press, grimacing through the hurt.

* * *

This is a work of historical fiction, based on information from the diary of James MacSparran (written during the years 1743-1745 and 1751), the St. Paul's Church Records (of this same period) and several secondary sources that provided a physical description of the MacSparran farm including Plantation in Yankeeland by Carl Woodward.

The events of one particular diary entry were central to this story. On August 29, 1751, MacSparran wrote:

I got up this morning early, and finding Hannibal had been out...I stript and gave him a few Lashes till he begged. As Harry was untying him, my poor passionate dear, saying I had not given him eno', gave him a lash or two, upon which he ran, and Harry after him as far as William Brown's. As they were returning he slipt from Harry naked as he was above y waist. Peter and Harry found [him] toward night at Block Island Henry Gardiner's, bro't him Home, and then carried him to Duglasse's where he had what is called Pothooks put about his Neck. So y it has been a very uneasy Day with us o that God would give my servants — the gift of chastity.

The real inspiration for this story, however, came from the next day's entry, on August 30, 1751:

Harry, Hannibal an Tom ground an put up a Pressing of Apples.

It was startling that the drama of the first day was not reflected in the second day's entry.

It does make sense that the account is lacking, since so much of these events and interactions occurred outside of the Reverend's presence. In order to

fill in the outline of events provided by the Reverend, some relationships/events and dialogue were imagined. No characters were created that did not appear in the documentary record, and no interaction was suggested that could not have occurred. For instance, Harry was with Stepney when he drowned, and the Reverend did mourn Stepney and have nightmares about boats and water; also Belco was born to Maroca, and the Reverend had married Maroca to Richard. In addition, some of the dialogue attributed to the Reverend (or to Stepney when he impersonated MacSparran) was directly quoted from the diary.

Beyond these provable events, others had to be inferred or invented. For example, Belco and Richard disappear from the written record after Belco was born, and Harry does not appear until after that time. Since Belco and Richard were baptized by the Reverend, if they had died their burials would have likely been noted in the church records. Instead, this story suggests that Harry was traded for Richard, and that Belco was given to the Doctor's in-laws on Block Island. Slaves were often traded, and the Reverend did give away some of Maroca's other children when they were infants.