John and Susan Kean

And the Culture of Slavery in the New Nation

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Abstract: The correspondence of John and Susan Kean, opened only recently at Liberty Hall Museum / Kean University, offers a first-hand glimpse of slaveholding after the triumph of the American Revolution. The couple's letters narrate a story of contradiction, complexity, and paradox.

As a member of South Carolina's political and economic elite, John Kean owned slaves; indeed, by definition, he had to. Yet his surviving writings demonstrate a marked ambivalence toward the institution of slavery and the slaves he owned. While it is dangerous to call him, or anyone, a "typical slaveholder" John Kean represents many of the most common attitudes and behaviors with regard to slaveholding in the late 18th Century His situation was further convoluted because he had interests and experiences in both the North and South. With one foot firmly in each region, he had experience – as a resident, not just a visitor – with culture and customs in both locales. In his surviving correspondence, John Kean did not grapple with slavery intellectually the way Jefferson or Franklin did. He sought, rather, to come to grips with slavery in America -- its "necessity," but also its implications.

In this effort, I believe John Kean can help us to more fully understand the complicated relationship between elites of the founding era and early republic and the peculiar institution. John Kean demonstrated the planter notions of paternalism, while at the same time and apparently without recognizing the paradox, putting his financial motives first and foremost. [1]

His wife, Susan Livingston Kean (Governor William Livingston's niece), further demonstrates the paradoxes and complexities of understanding slavery in the early Republic, particularly with regard to slavery in New Jersey. We have considerable evidence that Susan bought and sold slaves. Again, this is not surprising as Susan was a savvy investor and entrepreneur – lending money at interest and using her contacts to find investment opportunities and the greatest return. It is reasonable, in the context of the time, that she would have invested in slaves – both to perform household labor and as a financial investment. A preliminary search through her personal correspondence and business records reveals a woman who was fiercely independent. Slavery helped her maintain that independence.

Thus, both John and Susan represent the complexities of slavery in the new nation. One of the more interesting elements of John and Susan's relationship is the fusion between North and South that occurred in their

[1] The John Kean Papers and the Papers of Susan van Brugh Livinsgton Kean Niemciewicz are both held at Liberty Hall Museum in Union, NJ. These have been shortened in the notes to JK Papers and SVBLK Papers.

union. While it cannot be said that they were proxies for a new national culture, there certainly was an exchange of cultural values in their marriage similar to what was taking place more broadly across the nation. Susan lived in South Carolina only for a few months before the family returned to the New York/ New Jersey are in late 1789. John spent more time, before and during his marriage, in the mid-Atlantic region. Both of them, however, showed signs of having incorporated cultural customs and norms from the other. These can be seen as markers of an emerging American culture.

John Kean acquired his slaves the old-fashioned way; he inherited them. His step-father (his father died when he was two years old), Samuel Grove, was a partner with Peter Lavien in a Beaufort, South Carolina, merchant firm. Both men also owned considerable numbers of slaves and thousands of acres of land. They traded in slaves and in products produced by slaves. Kean was apprenticed to Lavien, and later inherited some of his estate as well. Thus, Kean's early life and the financial foundation for his upbringing were based, at least in part, on slavery. Samuel Grove left for England in 1775 and died the following year, leaving most of his estate to John Kean and his half-sister, Jane Grove Corvasier A listing of some

business records with Kean's handwriting in the margins indicates that he owned 116 slaves in January of 1788.[2]

Following the deaths of Grove and Laviem, John Kean assumed responsibility for managing the firm as well as the plantation holdings. That he had not expected to do so, at least to a certain extent, is evident from a statement he made to his wife Susan: "How consequential a being am I on whom depends the feeding and cloathing (sic) one hundred poor creatures who without my superintending care would in all probability perish. It is a great charge undertaken without due reflection but I am too far involved now to go back & I must do the best I can for them."[3] This was written while Kean was literally being measured by several enslaved women who were preparing to sew clothes for his other slaves. While it seems that this would be a waste of the planter's time and energy, it is a perfect example of paternalism – the owner's involvement in the lives of his slaves, even to the point of tending to their "feeding and cloathing," as Kean himself notes in the letter to his wife. [4]

We get another glimpse of John Kean's paternalism in a letter from his overseer, who wrote to him that "The Two Negro Children you sent the

[2] Drafts and Notes, Folder 11, JK Papers, Liberty Hall Museum.
[3] JK to SVBLK, 28 November 1787, JK Papers.
[4] The premier argument for planter paternalism remains, Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974). See also Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1982) for a shining example of the paternalist ethos.

bottle of (illegible) for to be mixt with bitter erbs (sic) don't seem to get any better."[5] While it could be simply that Kean recognized his slaves as a valuable commodity, worth the investment of some small amount of medicine, it could very well be that Kean was in fact genuinely concerned with the health and well being of "his" children. Kean's actions were consistent with those of other southern masters. Peter Kolchin indicates that slaves generally received superior medical care to southern whites. The use of household remedies was common and, while they may not have improved the medical outcomes (as in the example above), their use indicates the concern with which health was held.[6]

Despite this evidence of paternalism, Kean recorded the name of only three slaves -- Caesar, Celia, and Sam (who served as overseer on one of his plantations) – in his correspondence. Each of them held positions of importance in the Kean household and each was personally close to the master.

In his will, John Kean manumitted a single slave, Celia. Celia appears elsewhere in his correspondence as a nurse. It seems that Susan asked John to bring Celia with him when he returned to New York in the spring of 1788 following the birth of the couple's only son. John, however, did not bring

[5] John Stoney to JK, 13 December 1788, JK Papers.
[6] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery:1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 114-115.

Celia with him, outlining his reasons in a letter to his wife. John stated that Celia herself had just given birth, that her daughter could not be weaned and it was cost prohibitive to bring mother and daughter with him. He added, "besides I wish your child's first ideas to be derived from a white person and if he was here Celia is not the wench I should trust him to."[7]

This sentence highlights a number of issues. First and foremost is John Kean's embrace of white supremacy, which would have been not just common but openly accepted at that time. Moreover, it indicates a contrast he saw in his mind between the customs of North and South. In the South, their son would certainly have had a black nurse. But in the North, John Kean believed it was best for Peter's nurse to be white. This is only one of several instances in which Kean can be seen embracing different ideas of cultural norms, depending on his locale. More broadly, he and his wife were firm in their belief in white supremacy, even as they gave important responsibilities to the people they enslaved. Again, we see the Keans struggling with the complexities and contradictions of enslavement.

John Kean's criticism of Celia also is curious, given that we know he would manumit her seven years later. Certainly much can change in seven years, and the critical remarks may merely reflect a moment of pique rather

[7] JK to SVBLK, 8 May 1788, JK Papers.

then a sustained complaint on his part. On the other hand it could indicate discomfort with some element of her work as the lead female house slave. It may also be that he was trying to keep Susan and Celia apart, possibly because of a relationship between John Kean and his slave. He certainly would not have been the first master to father a child with a slave. This hypothesis is complicated further because John had every intention of bringing Susan to South Carolina, and the couple did live their for several months in 1789. These later actions indicate that John Kean was not necessarily intent on keeping Celia (and her children) and Susan apart permanently.

Celia's son, Caesar, served as John Kean's personal servant. In a letter written on December 25, 1787, Kean noted that Caesar was painting their house, part of an effort to get the house ready for Susan and their expected child to take up residence the following fall. Interestingly, this letter contains a separate passage commenting on traditional slave celebrations during the week between Christmas and New Year's. Did Caesar's role as house servant, and in this case as a painter, prevent him from joining the celebrations? The letters are silent. Caesar seems to have

been favored over the field slaves, yet Caesar may well have chafed under the supervision he endured from his close proximity to his master.[8]

John's special concern for Caesar is evident from a sentence in a letter in which he informed Susan: "Caesar is cured."[9] Again we are left with the possibility that John Kean's concern may have been only financial, since a slave was a valuable investment. But the context of the statement lends itself to being read as indicating paternalistic concern on John Kean's part.

A few months later John wrote again to Susan, covering the usual matters of weather, his health and family finances, before a paragraph on his slaves. He began with the shocking statement "Mr. Caesar behaves tolerably well, I have not been obliged to flog him above a half dozen times." The offhand manner in which Kean mentioned the physical abuse of his personal slave and assistant is shocking. Yet it stands in considerable contrast to the next sentence in which John stated: "my field slaves are more troublesome, they have been so long indulged that work goes hard with them."[10] If tolerably good behavior was rewarded with a half-dozen whippings, one can only imagine how the "troublesome" field slaves were abused. This

[8] JK to SVBLK, 25 December 1787, JK Papers. While some historians have argued that house slaves enjoyed favored status, others have argued that in fact house slaves were nearer the bottom in the slave's own hierarchy. For a fuller discussion see Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 108-109. For a discussion of the custom of slaves having the week between Christmas and New Year's "off" see Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 115-116.
[9] JK to SVBLK, 9 December 1787, JK Papers.
[10] JK to SVBLK, 3 March 1788, JK Papers.

treatment is of course consistent with the findings of scholars who have shown that house slaves were treated "better" than a typical field slave.[11]

Another letter, however, further underscores the complexity of the master-slave relationship. While he was living and working in Philadelphia, John Kean wrote to a friend and neighbor that if the white overseer he hired, a Mr. Boyd, was in "anyways troublesome" he should be fired and "put Sam [a slave] to manage the plantations, getting Grieves [a white neighbor] to oversee him." The implication here is that the slave Sam was likely to do a better job then the white overseer Mr. Boyd. That John Kean believed he needed a white overseer is consistent with plantation practices during this time. But it was just as common for slaves to be more skilled than their white overseers and to put the management of all field slaves in the hands of a black leader. As Philip Morgan has noted, overseers were in an extremely weak position, as masters were more likely to listen to their slaves, both because they found them reliable, and because it reinforced their own notions of paternalism. Grieves's oversight of Sam was likely to be minimal at best.[12]

Throughout these letters John Kean demonstrates his unease with the institution of slavery, even as he fully embraces its financial importance.

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[11] Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 108.
[12] JK Business Papers, 39-65. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 326-334.

Heavily in debt, Kean needed the profits his slaves would produce. He showed no qualms about forcibly removing them to a new plantation, setting them to work clearing land and preparing for what he anticipated would be a much better crop of indigo compared with the previous year's harvest.. Yet this same man purchased medicines for his slaves, was eager to hear about new births among his slaves, and eventually manumitted one of them. Certainly it could be argued that all of those actions can be explained by economic motives or the psychological comforts which paternalism granted. Perhaps. But the tenor of the letters indicates a man struggling with the morality of what he understood as economic necessity.

As a South Carolinian planter and politician, Kean's wealth, status, and power were inextricably linked to slavery.. Yet Kean, like many others, perhaps most notably Thomas Jefferson, could not fully reconcile the institution of slavery with his own ideas of liberty. He was uncomfortable with the decisions he, in the context of his world, believed he had to make. That he still made them and engaged in horrific acts is not softened by the sense of unease he possessed – but that discomfort can tell us much about changing notions of slavery and slave ownership in the early republic. This is especially significant because John Kean was most active in the years between American Independence and the invention of the cotton gin. The

period from 1783 to 1793 represented an era when slavery was taken for granted, but when careful observers could foresee a time when slavery might, many of them hoped, fade away.

John Kean, like almost all of the delegates to South Carolina's ratification convention, did not mention slavery in his speech supporting ratification of the United States Constitution and in other writings with regard to politics in this period.[13] He was a member of the committee that authored the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, although his precise role on that committee and in particular in the drafting of that law has been difficult to determine. That law prohibited slavery in all territory north of the Ohio River. While some scholars have seen that as a strong anti-slavery provision, others have argued that it protected slavery in the South and in fact in all places where it was not specifically prohibited by Congress.[14]

After John Kean died in 1795, his widow, Susan Kean, bought and sold slaves on her own account and also for her son Peter throughout her tenure in New Jersey. Her purchases continued even after she married a visiting Polish writer and nobleman, Julian Ursin Niemcewicz. Her personal records give no indication of her own feelings on the subject one way or another. Yet her surviving business records and other source materials

[13] Drafts and Notes, Folders 27-31, JK Papers, undated.
[14] Paul Finkelman, "Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance, A Study in Ambiguity," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 6, 4, (Winter 1986), 345-346.

clearly indicate that slave labor was a vital component of her household and her financial success. What I have attempted here is only an introduction into her mentality regarding slavery.

Susan was born and bred in New York City and the surrounding area, so her encounter with slavery was very different than her first husband's. She clearly saw the utility of slave labor, however, asking that John bring Celia with him when he was returning to New Jersey. She filled out a pass which allowed her slave, Tom, to travel from Elizabeth to New York (and return immediately), an indication that slaves where a central part of her household labor.[15] The pass also indicates that she was confident that Tom would return despite the possibility that he might find freedom in New York.

More indicative of her attitudes toward slavery and her slaves is an 1829 indenture purporting to free two of her slaves, Peter and Sarah van Horne. This contract awarded freedom to Peter and Sarah, but compelled them to remain in service to Susan at a salary of $100 each per year. While we would associate wages with a release from slavery, it seems likely that Peter and Sarah's lives did not change very much despite winning their "freedom." They were still in service to Susan, performing the same duties and functions they had while enslaved. The year of this indenture seems

[15] SVBLK Papers, miscellaneous.

important. New Jersey instituted gradual emancipation – at the age of 21 for female slaves and 25 for male slaves – for children born to slaves after 1804.. Thus, the indenture may have been a way for Susan to act in the spirit of the law, freeing Peter and Susan (ages unknown) 25 years after the law was passed. The fact that they would remain in service with Susan is also consistent with the actions of New Jersey slaveholders, and slave owners elsewhere in the North, who frequently kept their former slaves in service to them even after they had technically been freed. Another such example was Celia. John Kean's will stipulated that while she was to be given her freedom, she would only receive the $50 annual year annuity that he had granted her if she continued to perform loyal service to Susan (though the will added that the annuity was not to be considered as part of her compensation for working for Susan).[16] Ira Berlin has found that throughout the North slaveholders limited the freedom of blacks, even after they had technically been "freed." The van Hornes's experience certainly supports Berlin's statement that "Often newly emancipated black people left bondage and entered servitude in the same motion."[17]

It is important to remember, too, that Susan's situation was quite different from that of her first husband. When her second husband, Count

[16] Will of John Kean, JK Papers.
[17] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The first Two Centuries of Slavery in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 228, 238.

Niemciewicz, returned to his native Poland, Susan was responsible for maintaining her own affairs and household. While her son Peter executed some transactions in her name, every indication is that Susan was in charge and enjoyed being a head of household. Under these circumstances, Susan required more labor and likely had to exercise more stringent control over her workers. Certainly more research needs to be completed on Susan, with regard to her actions as a slave mistress and in her capacity as a head of household more generally, but her actions are consistent with those of other slave owners, male and female, in New Jersey.

John and Susan Kean demonstrate the complexities and ambiguities of slave ownership in the Early Republic. Combining, as they did, notions of paternalism and management from both the North and South, and at a time in the nation's history where the peculiar institution appeared far from secure, many of slavery's most daunting paradoxes appear: the same slave could be the victim of physical abuse and the beneficiary of paternal affection. The Keans held notions of white supremacy, yet trusted their slaves with more responsibility than white employees. Slaves won their freedom, yet were forced to remain in essentially the same position, with simply a new title. These contradictions underscore the idea that America in the 1780s and 1790s was far from fully formed. Indeed, slavery would be

transformed by the invention of the cotton gin and with it the massive expansion of the peculiar institution into the 19th century. Notions of freedom and liberty and their limits, set forth during the American Revolution, were being questioned, challenged and adapted to a post-war world. Southern traditions might be weakened by sustained contact in the North, yet slavery and other forms of black unfreedom persisted well into the 19th century in New Jersey, even as it expanded in Deep South.

The Keans' experiences actively engage one of the prevailing debates with regard to slavery: the dualism of commercial activity with the feudal/paternalistic ethos of non-capitalist relations between capital and labor.[18] Their presence in the North and South, the clear concern about commercial activity, seemingly combined with paternalist concern supports this notion first put forth by Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Equally important is that the Keans were engaged in these practices in the 1780s, before the dominance of cotton in the slave South. Thus, while we might expect a more commercial orientation among Northern slaveowners, that does not seem to be the case with the Keans.

In their words and deeds John and Susan Kean embody all of these complexities. They lived in a society with slaves and struggled to reconcile

[18] Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 173.

their experiences in the North and South, as well as their personal values and desires, with what they believed American society could and should be. They manipulated and abused their slaves in the pursuit of profit and to provide for their own liberty, even as they regularly recognized the humanity of their human property. While the choices John and Susan Kean made are consistent with those of elite slave owners in both the North and South, they also hint at an emerging culture of slavery that cut across sectional lines in the new nation.