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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

"As to the People": Thomas and Laura Randall's Observations on Life and Labor in Early Middle Florida

by WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS, JR.

MOVING from Baltimore to the wilds of Florida in 1827 held for Thomas and Laura Wirt Randall both promise and uncertainty. He had practiced law in Maryland and would preside as a superior court judge in Florida. Laura, the daughter of United States Attorney General William Wirt, came from a similarly cloistered background and was ill-prepared for life on the frontier. The recently married couple settled in Jefferson County, in the heart of Middle Florida, a region bounded on the east and west by the Suwanee and Appalachian rivers and containing some of the South's more fertile soil.¹ It was here, in what Randall refers to as the "woods country," that they built a home and named the new residence Belmont.²

Judge Randall divided his attention between court duties and plantation affairs. It was the opportunity to raise cotton, other crops, and stock that had partly lured him to Middle Florida. Randall learned quickly. His wife confronted their new situation with uneasy resolve. "I cannot deny that I am . . . disappointed in the country," she wrote in her journal in 1827. Yet, she recorded a determination "to stay here and make the best of it since I have gone so far." Laura was anything but idle. She oversaw the domestic management of Belmont and read voraciously. By 1833, she was the mother of three small girls.³

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1. For Jefferson County and the Randalls' move there see Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County* (Tallahassee, 1976), 16, 21, 28, 94.
2. Belmont was Portia's home in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. See Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (New York, 1985), 85; Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 27.
3. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 28-30, 39, 41, 89, 94-95.

Both Randalls maintained a steady correspondence with William Wirt in Baltimore. The following are excerpts from five letters written between 1828 and 1832. Randall wrote four of the letters, and in them discussed various topics. He and his father-in-law shared a common interest in legal concerns. They also claimed a keen interest in Florida. Wirt planned to move to the territory and was eager to hear about prospects and conditions.

Randall's letters reveal him to be a well-versed planter who had deep affection for his wife. What distinguish the correspondence, however, are his observations about his slaves. He had bought slaves in Maryland (where they were cheaper), and the first arrived in early 1828. Initially, there were fewer than a dozen. Randall's correspondence demonstrates that he was a benevolent master who treated his chattel with consideration. Both he and Laura referred to the slaves as "the people." The slaves' deportment, religious inclinations, and even their singing habits are the subject of comment, approval, and sometimes, amazement. Financial success was important to the Middle Florida planter and slaves were instrumental in that prospect; however, Randall did not consider profits and humane treatment incompatible.

Randall acted on the axiom that a contented slave was a more efficient laborer. The bonds of slave families were strong, and Belmont's master understood as much. Each of the letters contains references to efforts to unite David, a slave, with his wife Sophy. She and their children were in Maryland, and David, at Belmont, missed his family. The dilemma, apparent by the spring of 1828, was solved by the fall of the next year, when Randall purchased Sophy and their children. Yet, problems with the work force remained. Sally, one of David and Sophy's children, was apparently part of a conspiracy to poison the overseer in 1831. Originally a house servant, Sally was exiled from Belmont to the slave quarters. That solution did not resolve matters, and Laura's relationship with Sally became untenable. In the final letter, written in 1832, Laura outlined the situation to her father. Thomas Randall probably never regretted reuniting David and Sophy. Even so, their daughter compromised the best intentions of a man who contradicted the planter stereotype that abolitionists would later describe.⁴

4. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County*, 21, 89, 94-95, 123-24, 136; for slavery in Florida see Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860* (Gainesville, 1973). For correspondence of Randalls and Wirts see William Wirt Papers, microfilm copy on file at Robert M. Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Fla.

Tallahassee⁵ April 13 1828

My dear Sir,

Here I have been for a week most assiduously engaged in the business of my Court. But at once let me satisfy you as to the object nearest and dearest to each of us, Laura is quite well. I yesterday received from her a most charming delightful letter bringing down her diary to Thursday night, and apprising me of her perfect health. . . . As to the people, they turn out remarkably well. They are orderly quiet (no they are not quiet for they are the most interminable singers that ever chanted a_____ they equal the grasshoppers & when not eating or sleeping are ever singing) but they are very well behaved good people, and with one exception appear to be quite happy & contented with their condition. That exception is David whose separation from his family seems to prey upon his spirits. This he advises is the cause, and it may be so far he is a very intelligent & good man. His wife is the woman belonging to a Mr. Thomas whom (I believe) an effort has been made to purchase. They have nearly all been sick . . . since their arrival, and all in turn recovered "sans medicine" under my judicious treatment. Would you believe it that I have become "medicine malgre moi"⁶ without ever having before prescribed a dose even for myself. Our poor woman was very seriously sick— so much so that I wd cheerfully if I could have procured her medical advice, but could not in time and so had to "doctor her" myself which I did most successfully. Laura when she got well laughed a great deal at the dose I gave her. Their sickness arose from exposure & colds contracted on the road & being all similarly affected, the same application cured them all. Some of the men are very religious people. . . . And as I was leaving my house on the way to Town, I discovered that in a beautiful little grove of hickories north of the house . . . they had formed a rude enclosure with logs for seats & something like a pulpit for

5. Tallahassee had been established as the territorial capital in 1823. The village that Randall visited on business was the home of about a thousand people, and claimed a church, school, several hotels, and various businesses. Mary Louise Ellis and William Warren Rogers, *Favored, Land Tallahassee: A History of Tallahassee and Leon County* (Norfolk/Virginia Beach, 1988), 33-36.

6. "doctor in spite of myself"

their religious exercises. This was the first I had seen of it, and it augers a commendable zeal in the good faith for folks to erect such an establishment even before they had finished their own dwellings. . . . Please make my dutiful & affectionate respects to my dear Mrs. Wirt & remember me to the rest of the family, with entire respect & regard. Yrs most truly, Thomas Randall

Sunday morning June 15, 1828

David had just got a letter from his wife stating her readiness now to join her husband— with a note from her Master Nicholas Thomas containing his consent to sell her & three of her youngest children. But the purchase yet is out of the question unless I can sell my carriage & get the \$500 for the _____. I however flatter David with some faint hopes of doing it, and at all events as soon as I am able. He has become so unhappy, so impatient as even to beg to be sold to Georgia to N. Orleans or any where, any change seemed desirable & . . . I thought seriously of doing so fearing he would infest the whole body of the black community with his despondency. The rest seem all contented & even David has written favorably of his treatment to his home. . . . Now I have not I believe left unnoticed a single part of your letter. If this is not sent this evening, I will add still later advice about the health of your Dear Daughter & grand Daughter . . . Yrs most sincerely. Heaven keep you & yrs. T. Randall

Belmont December 20, 1828

I shall write my Brother to ascertain the price of David's wife, with a view to her purchase. I wish as well to gratify him & put him at ease, as to have her services. He is a good, well disposed man & one of my best hands & has been in better spirits in the expectation of a union with his family.

Belmont November 20, 1829

I regret I was not at home to witness the union of David & his wife to give you the interesting particulars. They are very happy, I am sure.

Belmont 31 [sic] June 1832

My dear Father,

The object of the present letter is to consult you about selling Sally, the eldest child of our Cook, Sophy— or rather the eldest with her. Mr. R[andall] says she is your property, as the money you advanced for the purchase of the family has never been repaid to you, & is a debt which Mr. R. is most anxious to liquidate. This girl has never been employed about the house since the attempt to poison our overseer last year, in which she appeared to have been concerned—if not actively, (as was first apprised by the woman who actually administered the dose/at least by connivance & previous consultation. She was immediately banished from the house & as Mr. R. wd not (through regard to her parents) sell her with the others, she remained at the old woman's house in the negro quarters, where she assisted for some time in making up peoples clothing. But that business being got through there was nothing more for her to do, without putting her in the field, which her master was unwilling to do as she wd be the only woman there, & too young to be left to her own discretion, She was, therefore, at my request instance, sent to Town to be hired, that I might not see her loitering about the yard and kitchen—indeed besides the horrid crime in which she appeared to have participated, she has long been disagreeable to me— so devoted to dress, vanity, & visiting, that I could never keep her in the house, and moreover had begun to show a vile temper, & was frequently overheard cursing & swearing. I have so extreme a dislike to her, besides the horror with which I regard her since the crime already mentioned, & the distrust in which I cannot fail to hold her, consequence of it—that I am resolved never to give my consent to her coming here again. Her mother & father being employed about the house, as well as the other children, it wd be impossible to keep her from coming up even if she worked in the field, & I had as lief see a toad or scorpion about the house, or yard. In short, so strong & disagreeable is my antipathy to her, that I am resolved, if it be possible, to have her sold, that I may no longer have any connection with her, or any property in

her. Mr. R. has shown a strange backwardness to take any steps toward it. It was only through the greatest importunity that I got her sent off to town. Her father who drove the carriage, also looked for a place for her the day that he remained in town, but not finding one, or preferring the comparative freedom of the situation, she was placed with a black woman the wife of the Barber at the Tavern, to assist her in her business of washing. There she has remained ever since, & is likely to do so, as Mr. R. refuses to advertise her either for sale or for hire. His motives may be partly regard to her parents, to one of whom, the mother, I have no partiality, & no reason to think well of, or make any great sacrifice to oblige. And as I am resolved that Sally shall never darken my sight again, at home. . . . When I press Mr. R. to sell her & get rid of her at once, he says she is *your property* & he has no right to sell her. But I last night obtained his consent to ask your permission and I entreat you to command her sale as soon as it can be effected & to receive whatever price she may bring as so much towards the discharge of the debt we owe you for the purchase of the family. Mamma can better enter into my feelings on this subject than perhaps either you or Mr. Randall-and when she is told that it has been my most anxious wish to get rid of this girl ever since the event alluded to in the first part of this letter-and my unceasing endeavour for nearly two years she will not wonder that I have lost all expectation of doing so except by assistance . . . I entreat you, my dear father to give me a speedy and favorable answer. I wrote a letter to by this mail which will give you all our family matters & supply the entire omission of them in this letter. I therefore only add to this letter that I am, my dearest father, your affectionate daughter, L. W. Randall