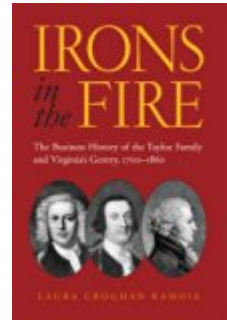


Laura Croghan Kamoie. *Irons in the Fire: The Business History of the Tayloe Family and Virginia's Gentry, 1700-1860.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. xii + 222 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2637-7.



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What explains the economic development of the Chesapeake region, and by extension early Anglo-America, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? What role did Virginia planters, particularly the wealthiest, play in such development? Laura Croghan Kamoie persuasively answers such questions with *Irons in the Fire*. She has written a concise, well-documented, and tightly argued account of how the Tayloe family, its peers, and those who the Tayloes enslaved all played a pivotal role in diversifying the region's economy and making it more commercial, industrial, urban, and cohesive.

Key to Kamoie's case is her claim that wealthy Virginia planters, like the Tayloes, were by no means risk-averse gentlemen content to await what casting tobacco into the Atlantic brought back into their pockets and onto their ledgers. She has sifted through account books, work journals, correspondence, deeds, wills, and tax records to present a very different view of her subjects. They were sophisticated and innovative entrepreneurs who sought and seized opportunities in response to shifts in local, regional, and global markets.

This puts her at odds with Thomas M. Doerflinger, who looked south from the perspectives of the Philadelphia merchants who he studied in *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (1986), and in agreement with S. Max Edelson (*Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* [2006]) and Joyce E. Chaplin (*An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730-1815* [1993]), both of whom have reinterpreted the activities of South Carolina planters during the eighteenth century. It also provides a rather different view of colonial Chesapeake planters than that offered by Trevor Burnard in *Creole Gentlemen: The Maryland Elite, 1691-1776* (2002, especially pp. 21-59), who found that the wealthiest Marylanders became more risk averse and more focused on planting over the course of the eighteenth century. In addition, Kamoie argues that the Tayloes and their peers engaged in many enterprises well before the American Revolution and not because of it. As colonial Anglo-American entrepreneurs, there was nothing particularly "southern" about them, even their decision to expand, diversify, and se-

cure their estates on the backs of enslaved men, women, and children. Here, Kamoie concurs with points that David Waldstreicher (in *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* [2004]) and I (in *Forging America: Ironworkers, Adventurers, and the Industrious Revolution* [2004]) have made.

Irons in the Fire contains five chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter charts the activities of John Tayloe I, who came of age in the eighteenth-century's first decade in the midst of a deep and long-term slump in the Chesapeake tobacco economy. This Tayloe, by acquiring more land and entering the iron and shipbuilding businesses, directed the construction of the diversified empire on which his heirs and those who they enslaved built. The generation to which Tayloe belonged, Kamoie argues, permanently redefined what it meant to be an elite planter.

The heart of *Irons in the Fire* lies in its next four chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the career of John Tayloe II (1721-79), his father's sole male heir. Chapter 2 provides an overview of his entrepreneurship, which took the estate in new directions, such as milling, urban development, and the provision of services and manufactured goods to neighbors. Even more helpfully, Kamoie places such activity within the context and conduct of Virginia's wealthiest men during the revolutionary era. Chapter 3 focuses on Tayloe's conduct as an industrialist and its implications for the enslaved people who staffed and supported his enterprises, which centered on the production of iron. In chapters 4 and 5, Kamoie focuses on John Tayloe III (1771-1828). The author situates Tayloe and enslaved people within the economic transformation of the early national Chesapeake. For those connected to the Tayloe estate, this entailed the virtual abandonment of tobacco for grain, the shuttering of unproductive colonial ironworks and the launching of new ones in western Virginia, and becoming major players in the region's transportation and lodging networks as

well as in urban real estate, particularly in the nation's new capital.

With *Irons in the Fire*, Kamoie has, in my judgment, made at least two significant contributions to our collective understanding of early Anglo-America. The first and perhaps foremost is how she has connected entrepreneurship, Virginia's planter elite, and the economic and social integration of the Chesapeake region. Scholars will find her elaboration on Jackson Turner Main's list of the one hundred wealthiest Virginians invaluable.^[1] Kamoie does an excellent job of pointing out the problems with Main's method, which relied on census and tax records in which planters had incentive to conceal their wealth in land and enslaved people. She sought to mitigate such problems by examining wills, estate inventories, and, more impressively, materials from family manuscript collections, such as correspondence and account books. Such tough and tedious work gave her sixty-five men to whom she could compare John Tayloe II and gave us a handy list conveniently contained in an appendix. Kamoie's use of a John Tayloe II account book to document transactions at Mount Airy plantation's blacksmithing shop shows a community linked by the services that enslaved smiths provided. I also found intriguing the ways in which the Tayloes, especially John Tayloe III, tied the pursuit and performance of gentility to enterprise. Particularly striking here is Kamoie's account of Tayloe's interest in breeding and racing horses, which enslaved men cared for and sometimes rode in derbies.

This points to Kamoie's other key contribution: she carefully and frequently connects the trajectories of the Tayloes' various enterprises to the lives and labor of enslaved people. Readers (of H-Southern-Industry in particular) will note that Kamoie argues for the profitability of industrial slavery, though she mercifully does not dwell on the issue. What matters more is that Kamoie never forgets that enslaved people tended the Tay-

loes' many irons in the fire; their production and reproduction was key to whatever success the Tayloes enjoyed. John Tayloe I inherited 21 enslaved people in 1710; he left 327 to John Tayloe II in 1747, who, in turn, left around 500 to his son in 1779. In 1828, John Tayloe III divided more than 700 people among his heirs. The diversification of the Tayloe estate's enterprises went hand in hand with the diversification of the skills of its enslaved people. This process began early and only intensified with time. Kamoie estimates that by the 1740s between one-quarter and one-third of those who John Tayloe enslaved did craft or industrial work year-round. For enslaved people, a diversified Tayloe estate was a decidedly mixed blessing. It offered more autonomy at work to enslaved artisans and craftsmen, and it gave enslaved people more opportunities to travel and forge ties off the Tayloe estate. It also separated families, particularly during the early republic and antebellum eras, as John Tayloe III decamped permanently for Washington DC, as the Tayloes opened ironworks in western Virginia, and as John Tayloe III's heirs established plantations in Alabama.

I do have a few reservations or questions about what Kamoie has wrought in *Irons in the Fire*. Most relate to her discussion of slavery and her use of sources. Kamoie, on occasion, falls into seeing the world as the Tayloes did, such as when she seeks to explain the apparent absence of "misbehavior" among enslaved ironworkers (p. 146). At others, more careful attention to gender would be in order. Surely not "all of Tayloe's skilled slaves experienced a high level of mobility and autonomy," particularly the women who made cloth or were domestics (pp. 116-117). I also wondered about what role a sense of masculinity might have played in the conduct and rhetoric of the Tayloe scions as entrepreneurs and masters, as Toby L. Ditz has documented for northern merchants.[2] Kamoie's discussion of John Tayloe II's preference for enslaved labor over free white labor at his ironworks is problematic in two ways: it does not fit some of the evidence that she

presents and it could present the relevant historiography on this issue more accurately. A complaint about the unreliability of white skippers who proved to be "generally as bad as the Blacks" would suggest that concerns about white free labor influenced Tayloe, while I have argued in *Forging America* that both northern and southern ironworks, rather than just northern ironworks as Kamoie claims, turned to enslaved labor because their proprietors had come to consider white ironworkers too bothersome (p. 83).

All that said, *Irons in the Fire* is a good book. Historians of the Chesapeake region, early Anglo-American business and economics, and slavery should be reckoning with it for years to come.

Notes

[1]. Jackson Turner Main, "The One Hundred," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 11 (1954): 354-384.

[2]. Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 51-80.

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