



**Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom:  
Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South (Studies in  
Early American Economy and Society from the  
Library Company of Philadelphia)**

*Calvin Schermerhorn*

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Once a sleepy plantation society, the region from the Chesapeake Bay to coastal North Carolina modernized and diversified its economy in the years before the Civil War. Central to this industrializing process was slave labor. Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom tells the story of how slaves seized opportunities in these conditions to protect their family members from the auction block. Calvin Schermerhorn argues that the African American family provided the key to economic growth in the antebellum Chesapeake. To maximize profits in the burgeoning regional industries, slaveholders needed to employ or hire out a healthy supply of strong slaves, which tended to scatter family members. From each generation, they also selected the young, fit, and fertile for sale or removal to the cotton South. Conscious of this pattern, the enslaved were sometimes able to negotiate mutually beneficial labor terms -- to save their families despite that new economy.

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