

# Bogs of Death: Slavery, the Brazilian Flour Trade, and the Mystery of the Vanishing Millpond in Antebellum Virginia

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“Were I living in the neighborhood of a millpond,” wrote a planter in the pages of Virginia’s *Farmer’s Register*, “I should consider the right of property in [my land] no more than that of a tame bear, that was devouring my child.” The unfortunate landowner whose property abutted one of the upper South’s thousands of millponds (which were used to power small gristmills) was forced “to calmly sit by and see all one’s children and dear companion pale as corpses,” spectral victims of a “violent disease” that would drive them to early graves. “To know that all those heartrending sufferings arise from the malaria of the various millponds in your neighborhood,” the writer reflected, “must evince [in the planter] a degree of forbearance beyond Christian, and an obduracy of heart, in the owner of mills, almost equal to that of cold-blooded murder.”<sup>1</sup>

Having equated the planter to a submissively bleating lamb of God and denounced the country miller as a villain of near-homicidal proportions, the correspondent declared that he would “accept the dictatorship of a country” if he knew such a government would have “the power to constrain the inhabitants in the bilious fever region to remove all stagnant waters from it.” Recent research shows that many elite antebellum slaveholders were strong advocates of the expansion of the federal government, particularly in its military guises. In light of that scholarship, a southern planter claiming to welcome an intrusive central government is perhaps not as surprising as it might once have been. Nevertheless, the writer’s rhetorical excess suggests the degree

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, “Malaria and Millponds,” *Farmer’s Register*, 8 (March 1840), 141.