The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott: A Portrait Legacy

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Abstract
The painting of Robert, Calvin, Martha, and William Scott, and Mila (known as *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott*) is not just a family heirloom or a portrayal of Reverend William Scott’s four children and their caretaker, Mila. On the contrary, nearly two hundred years after it was painted, *The Children of Reverend Scott* functions today as a historical document in that analysis of it records the contemporary roles and status of children, parents, and slaves in nineteenth-century Southern life. This paper explores the personal convictions of Reverend Scott as recorded in the portrait—namely his roles as a father, minister, and southern slave-owner—using his personal papers and historical records local to New Orleans and San Francisco for further context and evidence.
The painting of Robert, Calvin, Martha, and William Scott, and Mila—known as *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott*—is not just a family heirloom or a portrayal of Reverend William Scott’s four children and their caretaker, Mila. On the contrary, nearly two hundred years after it was painted, *The Children of Reverend Scott* functions today as a historical document which tells the viewer much about the Reverend Scott and his values. The painting, by an anonymous artist,
preserves the contemporary gender- and race-based social structure of the United States of America in the heart of the nineteenth century in the way its commissioner—slave owner and Presbyterian reverend, William Anderson Scott—dictated that it should be painted.

Should the viewer look closely at The Children of Reverend Scott, she would be able to make out a spire on the skyline of the scene. This is the spire of New Orleans’ First Presbyterian Church where Reverend Scott was pastor when The Children of Reverend Scott was painted, which church, under Scott’s ministration, became the largest and wealthiest in the American South. There are two other identifiable buildings in the composition. The first is the New Orleans’ St. Charles Hotel—a center of pre-war New Orleanian society. The second appears to be a slave cottage, representative of a third, more sinister, element of Southern culture that was essential to the Scott family way of life. The First Presbyterian Church and the St. Charles Hotel were built about three miles away from each other and would not have been visible together from such a vantage point as pictured in The Children of Reverend Scott. Thereby, the viewer may assume that the Reverend wished to highlight these buildings as part of a statement about his family and himself.

Reverend Scott clearly used this portrait to communicate what was most important to him and to what he was most dedicated: first, the running of a proper Southern aristocratic household (which determined the principles that guided the way he raised his children and to whom he entrusted their care), then the Presbytery, and lastly his civic responsibilities. The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott features the family’s domestic slave, Mila, who is painted in a more palatable manner than slaves in most other works from this time period. Mila does not look grotesque or cartoonized, as in this illustration from the January 1, 1876, edition of Harper’s Weekly. Nor does Mila seem emaciated or unhappy, characteristics that abolitionist artists emphasized in their works.

Indeed, Mila looks content, with gentle expression and relaxed, lively posture. Perhaps she was; but, it is also likely that her master wanted for

2 James Curry, History of the San Francisco Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and its alumni (1907): 45–50.
his records a portrait that would paint a rosy picture of slavery,\(^5\) thereby helping to legitimize it. Scott would have wanted to project this image of slavery, as he was a committed defender of states’ rights amid widespread scrutiny of slavery by citizens in the northern and western regions of the United States—a position he would risk his life to maintain.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) John B Astles, “Rev. Dr. W. A. Scott, a Southern Sympathizer,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1948): 149.

\(^6\) “Robert, Calvin, Martha and William Scott and Mila,” *Google Arts & Culture.*
on Education, Rousseau famously argued that children are not victims of original sin but, rather, are unspoiled fountains of virtue that mirror the spontaneous, inherent godliness of nature. “This attitude,” as it was adopted by American parents, “generated a new tolerance for play and toys as inherent to the special qualities of childhood” says Howard Chudacoff, professor of American history at Brown University. In the wake of Rousseau’s work, “some parents now accepted a view that children had an innocent wholesomeness and should therefore delay their assimilation into adulthood so that they could complete a sheltered [edenic] training.”

Advice on parenting contemporary to The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott evidences the pervasive effect of Rousseau’s work on day-to-day, turn-of-the-century parenting practices. Samuel G. Goodrich (who wrote under the pen name Peter Parley and was one of the most successful children’s authors of the nineteenth century) urged parents:

If God places our offspring in Eden, let us not cause less or carelessly take them out of it. It is certainly a mistake to consider childhood and youth—the first twenty years of life—as only a period of constraint and discipline. This is one-third part of existence—to a majority, it is more than the half of life. It is the only portion which seems made for unalloyed enjoyment.

Because of these changes, children were actively encouraged by parents and caregivers to play; in this period, a separate children’s culture of games and toys (some that American children still enjoy today, like “Blindman’s Bluff “and marbles) began to form as children were given free time to associate with one another, often out-of-doors. Robert, Calvin, Martha, and William reflect this new children’s culture, being pictured playing with a hoop, hobby horse, and jump rope.

Reasoning for this transition in American parenting style extends beyond philosophy. At the turn of the century the average number of children per family fell from six or more to three or four at the time Scott commissioned his children’s portrait. This change in average birthrates

9 Ibid., 46.
10 Ibid., 40.
11 Ibid., 43.

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meant, among other things, that parents had (on the whole) more time to spend with each of their children individually. An increase of individual time allowed for a more nurturing style of parenting than was possible for wealthier families during this period of American history. Falling mortality rates also ensured that age gaps between surviving children were smaller than they had been before, which created a more distinct generational difference between adults and children—whereas, in former eras older children often operated as adults caring for their infantile siblings as well as helping to earn wages for the family.12

Economically, the rise of industrialization in the United States meant that the home was no longer the center of the means of production.13 Children (especially those in rural areas and those of means, like the children of Reverend Scott) were freed by the industrial revolution from some of the at-home work responsibilities that characterized the childhoods of their parents. Freed from the labors of previous generations, the prevailing instructions to children in the mid-nineteenth-century were to play, as exemplified by this 1803 poem for children:

Be just and true, and kind to all,
Play with a top, a bat, and ball,
He who does what good he can,
May gain the love of God and man.
And he who does no hurt all day,
May go some other time to play.14

The aforementioned changes affected not only the lives of nineteenth-century children but also the lives of their mothers. As women in the growing middle-class (such as Mrs. Scott, who is conspicuously absent in this portrait) were freed from many of their labors by the industrial revolution, a part of women’s roles became the domestication of children. Mothers (and women in general) were now more than ever before expected to occupy themselves with protecting the innocence of America’s children, “not only by educating them in the ‘moral arts’ but also by sheltering them from death, crudeness, and sexuality.”15 Reverend Scott is adamant in his writings about the role of mothers, especially their

13 Rebecca De Schweinitz, “Women and Slavery” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, September 19, 2016).
14 Chudacoff, Children at Play, 45.
15 Ibid., 42.
role as caretakers: “It is the mother that molds the destiny of the child.”\textsuperscript{16} Mrs. Scott, though, is not featured in *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott*. Rather, the domestic slave Mila is shown caring for the Reverend’s young children.

The most benevolent masters in this period viewed slaves (male and female) as perpetually childlike beings who, like animals, were by nature wild yet could be domesticated and trained to occupy a supervised position in civilized society. In *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott* the slave Mila appears bright, attractive, and youthful. This portrayal is by all accounts an idealized representation of the domestic slave.\textsuperscript{17}

The circumstances of slavery for African American men and women until the turn of the century were fairly homogenous. Female slaves worked alongside their male counterparts in hard, agricultural labor until shifts in the prescribed roles of white American women began to color opinions about the roles of women of all races. Indeed, in colonial America, slave women were rarely domestics and were not seen by white masters as women in any sense other than their ability to bear children.\textsuperscript{18}

As white men departed from the home to work in industrial settings, white women were regarded more than ever before as caretakers of home, family, and virtue. In response to greater demand, slave owners moved increasing numbers of female slaves (usually the better-looking ones) indoors to help the mistress maintain the home. Within a generation there occurred a shift in the

\textsuperscript{16} Scott, William Anderson, “William A. Scott Papers,” Online Archive of California, 1997. In the original manuscript Scott has double underlined the word “mother” and written it in comparably large writing. I have bolded and underlined the text to communicate this original emphatic intent.

\textsuperscript{17} De Schweinitz, “Women and Slavery.”

\textsuperscript{18} De Schweinitz, “Women and Slavery.”
role of slave women that relegated them to domesticity and the care of home and children. Mila’s role as caretaker to the children of Reverend Scott is in and of itself evidence mid-century changes in regard to slavery. However, the representation of Mila fails to follow the more conventional stereotypes of slave women in several crucial ways.

Portrayals of nineteenth-century domestic slaves were most often the well-known “mammy” caricatures of then-popular culture (see illustration from the 1888 edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as appendix A and B). According to Harris, of the Journal of Reformation Life, the warm and motherly “mammy” caricature was meant to differentiate the domestic slave from white mistresses. “Mammy” was “the opposite of idealized white womanhood . . . dark-skinned, usually smiling, and covered from neck to ankle with clothing. She wore a bandana and apron, both of which signified that she was a worker doing cleaning, laundry, or cooking.” While Mila clearly embodies some elements of “mammy” iconography (dark-skinned, even for a slave, smiling, and modestly dressed), she departs from the female slave stereotype in notable ways. Rather than deferentially avoiding the gaze of the viewer, as was typical for slave subjects in nineteenth-century painting, Mila “confronts the viewer with a direct, confident gaze . . . Furthermore, she is not wearing the head wrap often found in depictions of African American nursemaids of the period, but rather wears her hair in two elegant plaits, each encircled with a gold band” that mark her not as a “mammy” character but, as Reverend Scott’s personal papers denote, a valued member of the Scott family. Her clothing, plain, but clean, modest, and well-pressed, identifies Mila as below the children in station but also as well taken care of and dignified.

Mila’s position in the composition is further evidence of Reverend Scott’s desire to defend Mila’s relative station. In the antebellum period slave owners often commissioned portraits of domestic slaves with members of the family. However, they typically manifest the servitude of these individuals in very clear ways—as in this photograph of an unidentified mid-nineteenth century New Orleanian mother, her three children, and

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19 De Schweinitz, “Women and Slavery.”
22 Ibid., 122.
their slave nursemaid, whose face is nearly entirely covered by the head of the infant she holds. Mila, in contrast, is fully visible from the waist up and shown in a relaxed and open pose; although, she does occupy the far edge of the frame, Reverend Scott clearly did not intend for her to be hidden from view.

Why was the Reverend so interested in portraying Mila in this way and featuring her deliberately in the portrait of his children? It may simply be that Mila was regarded as part of the family. Indeed, his records suggest as much.24 Though Scott was a slave owner, Professor Harris argues that he was almost indisputably one of the oft-cited “benevolent masters” of the period.25

Yet, Scott’s support of slavery in general and the brusque, racially derogatory commentary in his personal journals26 hint at a conviction that extends beyond his valuation of Mila and remains a blight on his personal history. Reverend Scott commissioned this portrait in the mid-1840s, when Civil War tensions were just beginning to brew. The persecution he faced at the height of the American Civil War therefore serves as the best evidence of why he may have purposefully attempted to project a positive image of slavery at this time.

In 1854 (circa fifteen years after The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott was painted), despite the Reverend’s great success in the southern United States, the Scott family moved from Louisiana to the milder California climate at the recommendation of Scott’s doctors.27

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27 Delilah L. Beasley, “Slavery in California,” The Journal of Negro History 3, no. 1 (1918): 33–44. It is unknown whether Mila accompanied the Scott family to California for certain; but I would say it is doubtful that she came, given that slavery had been illegal in California since Mexico banned it in 1823.
While in California, Reverend Scott was to serve as the Pastor of the Calvary Presbyterian Church, San Francisco. Scott, a gifted speaker and elsewhere beloved public figure, faced significant persecution while in California. Antagonism toward Reverend Scott in San Francisco climaxed after an 1861 meeting of Presbyterian leaders in California during which local ecclesiastical authorities discussed whether the church should speak out against slavery. Acker summarized Scott’s position at the meeting as follows:

Scott did not believe the Presbyterian Church should condemn slavery. Consistent with the position taken by the Old School branch of Presbyterianism, Scott argued that the issue of slavery was political, rather than ecclesiastical, in nature, and was therefore outside the purview of the church. In an article he published in the July 1859 issue of the Pacific Expositor entitled ‘Mission of the Church,’ Scott [argued] that ‘synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs.’

Soon details of this meeting were public and on Sunday, September 22, two thousand union-loyal civilians gathered in front of Calvary Presbyterian, angered that Reverend Scott would defend slavery to any degree and in any regard. When morning broke, authorities found that the rowdy throngs had posted Union flags in the streets outside of the church as well as an effigy, hung by the neck, labeled “Dr. Scott, the reverend traitor.” After Reverend Scott delivered that day’s sermon he was escorted home by local police because a violent mob waited for him outside. After Scott was escorted from the scene, this same mob attacked Scott’s by-then seventeen-year-old son William (the infant pictured in The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott). William was forced to defend himself from the angry throngs with a gun—evidence of the amount of hostility San Francisco Union loyalists held for the Scott family because of Scott’s refusal to condemn the institution of slavery.

Rumors circulated around San Francisco about bodies of men who had sworn to kill Reverend Scott should he remain in California; so Scott sold his house that very same day and began preparations to sail with

28 Curry, History of the San Francisco Theological Seminary, 45–50.
29 “Two Untold Stories”, Leben, 1. Italics added for emphasis.
30 Astles, “Rev. Dr. W. A. Scott, a Southern Sympathizer,” 151.
31 This was not Scott’s first symbolic hanging. A similar likeness of Reverend Scott had been used in a previous San Francisco demonstration. See Ibid., 151.
32 Ibid., 152.
33 Ibid., 152.
his family to Europe. He then sent in his resignation, unable to remain with the seminary he (to his death) considered his greatest achievement because of his indefatigable and unabashed support of the Confederate cause. The shift of popular opinion prior to the outbreak of the Civil War certainly had an effect on Reverend Scott’s life, and evidence in his own records as well as other sources show that he certainly had an interest in defending the American South’s right to practice slavery in whatever ways he could—in word or in paint.  

Reverend Scott, like many other fathers before and after him, wished to preserve what he saw as his most important legacies. This he did through his portrait of his children and their slave caretaker, Mila. *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott* as a text manifests the philosophies regarding gender and race that prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century—especially relating to Romantic-era childrearing, Civil War-period domesticity, and slavery. No less so, *The Children of Reverend William Anderson Scott* is also a deliberate testimony of Reverend Scott’s unwavering dedication to his roles as a father, minister, and southerner.◆

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34 Curry, *History of the San Francisco Theological Seminary.*

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Unidentified artist, Robert, Calvin, Martha and William Scott and Mila, ca. 1843–45 painting, 1193.8 x 990.6 in. De Young Museum, New Orleans.

Figure 2: Sol Eytinge, “No Small Breed Fer Yer Uncle Abe Dis Christmas! Ain’t He a Cherub?” 1876 engraving for Harper’s Weekly, dimensions unknown.


Figure 4: Unidentified artist, photograph of a New Orleans mother, three children and slave nursemaid, ca. 1850, dimensions unknown.

Figure 5: Ellsworth Woodward, Black Woman in Tignon, 1910 etching, 9.5 x 7.5 inches, Louisiana.

Figure 6. J.M. Tarbell, Christmas Morning in the Sunny South, 1897 photographic print on card, dimensions unknown. Library of Congress.
Bibliography


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