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Two Sisters and Their Suriname Plantation:  
Fairfield Estate, Absenteeism, and New England's Political Economy of Slavery

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This essay examines absentee plantation ownership in eighteenth-century New England using the lives of two sisters, Elizabeth and Mary Mackintosh, who owned Fairfield plantation in Suriname, as a case study. Compared with the historiography of slavery in Britain and the British Caribbean, the impact of absenteeism in New England has been neglected by historians. Nevertheless, during the colonial era, there were plantation owners living in New England, and their presence affected the region in important ways. Absentees such as the Mackintosh sisters, many of whom were already wealthy, managed plantations from afar and folded the profits of plantation and slave ownership into a larger business portfolio. It is impossible to separate the mercantile activities of some New England families, including the Mackintosh sisters and their husbands, from their plantation ownership. Nor can their ostentatious lifestyles be divorced from the immiseration of enslaved Africans abroad. Profits from these ventures returned home, fueling the expansion of commerce and industry in New England. Ultimately, exploring the history of Fairfield helps us understand how embedded and entangled New England's development was with the wider world of slavery and why absenteeism should be considered a factor that contributed to the rise of capitalism in the region.