

Smithfield Slave Tour Script

1. Cook's Cabin -- General slave overview incorporating books-- Preston

At this point in America slavery was extremely prominent and practiced throughout all of the 13 colonies. Slavery was important to the westward expansion of our country and the economy at this time. As John Michael Vlach discusses in his book "Confronting Slavery" many slaves had a very harsh life. The Smithfield Plantation slaves are no different. Smithfield was a working plantation and required many slaves just to keep it running smoothly. Recent revisionist thought have caused many museums and public history venues to re-evaluate their tours and offer their stories from alternative perspectives, whether of women, immigrants, African-Americans, etc. We decided to do something similar, and try to show you, "the viewer," what this house and property would have been like if you were a slave that called Smithfield home. We believe that people should be given the opportunity to see this plantation through the eyes of a slave, because without them this plantation would not have thrived. We will be describing three consecutive generations of Prestons' interactions and relationships with slaves, including Col. William Preston who established Smithfield Plantation in 1774, one of his sons, Maj. William Preston, and one of his grandson's William Ballard Preston. We will look at these three generations in reverse-chronological order, and will take you from the Civil War-era to the Revolutionary period. We hope that the route of this tour and the things we discuss will help you understand what Smithfield Plantation might have looked like from the perspective of the Preston slaves.

We're going to move closer to the house and have a look at the Garden.

2a. Garden -- Plantation work (flax and apples) + Introduction to domestic side of slavery-- Shea

When most people think of slavery in south, they think of slaves working in fields. However, this is not the case for Smithfield Plantation. Smithfield Plantation did have a small garden mostly producing flax, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and perennials. Each of these plants had specific uses as food crops, medicines, insecticides or repellents, dyes, textiles, flavorings, and preservatives. These crops grown in the garden were important, but this was not a main job for a slave on the Smithfield Plantation. The slaves would use the crops grown to make clothes for their master, children, and themselves. Former weavers visiting the house are rumored to have taught the slaves the textile arts. These types of tasks were not common for Smithfield Plantation slaves, though. The slaves at Smithfield were regarded as servants because of the type of services they provided. These servants focused more on the domestic side of slavery in which there was much interaction between the slaves and their Preston family owners within the house itself rather than out in the fields.

Now lets enter the house through the Winter Kitchen, which is how many Preston slaves would've entered.

2b. Kitchen -- General tools used-- Shea

The kitchen was a busy place. Although we do not know exactly which slaves were the cooks, we do know a lot about what tasks were performed and the tools used in the kitchen. Enslaved African American women prepared meals, preserved goods from the garden, concocted medicines from herbs and other plants, and made candles and soap. The skills needed to create a large and well presented meal using these tools and the hearth took long years of practice to manage with ease. The cooks used the crane to lift heavy pots by swinging the pots out from the first at knee height. Using the “s” shaped hooks, the cooks and her helpers raised and lowered pots and griddles, thus controlling the cooking temperature. On the table are many utensils like those used here at Smithfield. For doing the laundry, the laundresses heated the heavy flat irons, wiped them carefully before pressing the linens or crimping ruffles. Additionally, there is a grinder, apple peeler, food choppers, cookie molds, and butter paddles—all used in the endless round of food preparation.

Now we'll go up the stairs to the Schoolroom.

3. School Room -- Ballard's story + slaves' role in room-- Allison

William Ballard Preston was born November 20, 1805, and died November 16, 1862-- both here at Smithfield. He was the grandson of Col. William Preston, who established Smithfield Plantation in 1774. He served as a member of the House of Delegates in Virginia, a member of the House of Representatives, Secretary of the Navy, and a Senator of the Confederate States of America from Virginia. Ballard, as he was known, was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1830, when he was just 24. Many Virginians had slaves at the time, most of them were in the East, and those living in the West were not as dependent on slave labor. Ballard himself was an only son with no family, and was yet to inherit the enormous amount of land and slaves that came with Smithfield. In 1831, Nat Turner led his rebellion, making many of the legislators, especially those from the West, feel that something had to be done about slavery in Virginia.

Ballard was young and restless, and ready to make his mark in the political arena. He attacked the pro-slavery position that approved property ownership of slaves, and attacked the notion that slaves were content with their lot-- an argument used by many to justify the morality of slavery. He supported a measure that would have begun a gradual process of emancipation for the state of Virginia. For all slaves born after July 4, 1840, emancipation would come after they had reached adulthood, 18 for women, and 21 for men.

In a speech given to the House of Delegates, Ballard advocated this plan on the grounds that the state government, not the federal government, had the power over property rights. He also was against the institution of slavery on moral grounds, stating that “The slave has the natural right to regain his liberty—and who has as high a right to reduce him to slavery again?” However, the rest of the legislature did not share his views on slavery and his proposition was voted down.

Years later, Ballard inherited the property of Smithfield from his father, including all the slaves that worked there. When the nation was facing conflict in the 1850s, Ballard was much wealthier and much older than he had been in the 1820s. He owned over fifty slaves and had invested thousands of dollars in the labor force that gave him profit. The institution of slavery had moved to the center of his

world.

Following the election of Lincoln and the secession of South Carolina, Preston participated in Virginia's secession convention to decide what the state would do. He came committed to avoid secession, although he believed that the state had a right to do so, and he believed that Congress could not interfere with the issue of slavery in individual states. The first vote on secession in 1861 was defeated easily by Ballard and others who thought like him. Ballard went with several others to meet with President Lincoln personally, and reported back that Lincoln had left no room for the middle ground regarding states' rights. The convention passed the second vote and Virginia seceded from the Union. It would seem that our man Ballard found it much easier to fight for the emancipation of slaves, however gradually, in his youth-- when he didn't own a plantation's-worth of them.

Next we'll go into the Dining Room.

4. Dining Room -- Maj. William's story + slaves' role in room-- Alison

This is the dining room, where the Preston slaves would have served family meals. This room would generally be reserved for the adult members of the family, especially when hosting guests. The servants would create separate meals for the family children, usually eaten in the Winter Kitchen or schoolroom. The multiple doors in the dining room would have allowed for optimal service by the slaves before, during, and after the meals, as they are convenient both to the stairs leading to the Winter Kitchen as well as to the outdoor Cook's Cabin used in the Summer. Having numerous slaves preparing and serving lavish meals would have shown dinner guests the wealth and power of the Preston family.

Here we will tell you the story of another generation of the Preston family. Major William Preston was the third born son of Col. William Preston, who had Smithfield constructed. Born in 1768, he would also become the uncle of William Ballard Preston, who we just discussed. This second generation of Prestons were of age during the time between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Specifically, Major William had very interesting ties with slaves during his life. After growing up at Smithfield, Maj William and his wife eventually settled in a house in KY, but Preston himself had been greatly involved in the Slave Trading business that had developed near Norfolk, VA. There is evidence of much correspondence to and from Major William concerning the buying and selling of slaves, both for his own use, as well as for the use of his siblings at Smithfield. In these letters, he refers to the servants as "negroes" and tends to reference them mainly as objects of business. These letters would seem to characterize Maj William as the stereotypical slavemaster who regarded slaves as little more than property to be bought and sold with limited consideration.

However, the story of one of his own slaves, Nassau, shows him in a bit of a different light. In an 1821 letter from Maj William's sister Eliza Madison to his wife Caroline, Eliza explains that "for the affectionate attentions evinced by Nassau & his great fidelity towards my brother during his long protracted illness, that as reward for such services, he has emancipated him after serving you five years, in which time he though you could [find] another Servant to [re]place [him] without inconven[ience] to you..." Her letter goes on to say that her brother further wished for Nassau to be furnished "with a

new suit of fine broad Cloth on his arrival here, as his services deserved it." Thus, it appears that Maj. William, who might have been characterized by some as an apathetic slave trader only concerned with the financial value of slaves, came to appreciate the devoted service of one of his own slaves so much, that he sought to reward him with his freedom after five years of service to his wife Caroline. This story demonstrates a caring human connection Maj. William developed with at least one slave during his lifetime, and complicates our perception of him in terms of his attitudes towards slavery. Incidentally, the letter describing Nassau's "going off" written by William and Caroline's daughter Henrietta is dated May 5, 1828-- seven years after William's death, rather than the prescribed five. And his departure was described as "quite unexpected" that "certainly occasioned much inconvenience and confusion for a time." We don't know the exact circumstances surrounding Nassau's departure from service and why it was two years past his required time, but it does show that he did eventually get the reward promised by his deceased master.

Now let's move into the Master Bedroom.

5a. Master Bedroom -- Col. William's story + slaves' role in room - Ashlynn

Now this room, as you can probably tell, was the Master bedroom, however it also served to be the guest bedroom, family room and even an office space. Just some quick things to highlight in here would be the bed curtains that surround the beds. These were used for both privacy and warmth during the cold winters. Also, the beautiful Prussian blue color that the fireplace has was a very expensive pigment during the 1700s. The ceramic containers located next to the fireplace were called "pigs" and were used by the slaves who would fill them up with hot water and place them at the foot of the beds to keep the family warm. Some other tasks that the slaves would do in this room, would be taking care of the master's wigs, shaving his master, and doing the laundry and "tending" to the clothes. Slaves would also bring in hot water for bathing.

An interesting account is found in Patricia Given Johnson's book titled, William Preston and the Allegheny Patriots, about how the Preston's treated their slaves. Johnson begins by saying, "Like most plantation owners Preston treated his slaves as valuable property with the few available medicines." This concept seems contradicting however we must remember that the slaves were looked at as "property," which slave owners would want to keep healthy so that they were productive. They had medicines such as smelling salts, Anderson's pills, Bateman's drops, and a few others though they were not particularly strong enough to battle smallpox, tuberculosis, and other unfortunately diseases that were spreading during this time period. Many of the slaves, as Patricia says in her book, believed that they were being bewitched. It's important to realize that the slave owner, Col. Preston in this case, would also have been the one to administer the medicine to his slaves, which would involve direct bodily contact. While interracial contact was a very hot issue during the 20th century Civil Rights movement, and essentially ever since the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case that allowed for segregation, it was not at all a concern in the pre-Civil War era. It was not uncommon for adult female slaves to become pregnant at the same time as their mistresses so that they could be the ones to actually

nurse them, so it's very important to understand the level of bodily contact slave-owning families would have had with their slaves.

Let's continue to the children's bedrooms which are located upstairs.

5b. Upstairs Landing -- Slaves' role (watching over kids) - Ashlynn

The Preston's had 12 children who all lived in these bedrooms, some of which we cannot peer into since they have been changed into office space. The landing, which we are standing on, is where the slave(s) would pull out a pallet/blanket to sleep and watch over the children at night. They were the primary care takers of the children as well as the ones who tended to their rooms. Here, again the slaves would bring hot water to help bath the children and keep the room clean. They also commonly fixed the trundle beds that are located beneath some of the larger beds in the room. One slave would tighten the ropes while another would retie them. Since the "mattress" was composed of hay and other items, bugs from outside would usually get stuck in them. Hence this is where we get the phrase, "sleep tight and don't let the bed bugs bite!" The slaves would help the children dress for the day and would be in charge for settling them all down for bed. Some of the toys found in this room were made by some of the slaves for the children. The slaves, who were women, had a lot of daily interaction with the children as we can see from their involvement in the Preston's' bedrooms.

Let's move back down the stairs carefully to come to our last part of the tour.

6. Outside Porch -- Cemetery + Concluding Analysis - Leah

The outside porch is where we end our slave tour of Smithfield. We would have liked to end it at the Preston Family Cemetery, but in the interest of time and practicality we have decided to provide pictures instead. Although we don't have enough time to visit the cemetery, it IS important to mention. This particular cemetery includes something unusual-- there are slaves are buried in the family's private plot. There are three slave graves, but only one is marked. Her name was Virginia Capers, and she took care of the children of Hugh Caperton and Cary Baldwin Preston, placing her in close relations with the family. This practice was generally unheard of, and it proves that the residents of Smithfield may have not viewed their slaves as simply "property." There was a certain amount of respect and gratitude towards the slaves that worked in the household, and while these people still had no freedom and were, at least on paper, property, Smithfield may have not been the worst place to be a slave. As we have described with our three case studies, each Preston had a different attitude towards the practice of slavery, but it does not seem as if they were without compassion. Thank you for joining us on our tour. We hope you've enjoyed viewing the house from a slave's perspective, and learning about their roles in the lives of Col. William, Maj. William, and William Ballard Preston. Our goal is that you come away with a more focused idea of the Preston slaves, and with a general understanding that stereotypes regarding slavery tend to fall away when it is studied more intimately.