

Black History Month: We Should Know Their Names

Fairfax County Park Authority experts explain that the first owners of Colvin Run Mill, Philip Carper and John Powell, were enslavers. Little information, however, has been available about the enslaved.

New on-line genealogical data bases and reorganization and digitalization of Fairfax and Loudoun County Court House records allow us to dig a bit deeper. Not much exists in the way of direct evidence linking the enslaved to the enslavers, so the following should be treated with more than the usual caution. But a few fragments emerge to sketch a faint picture of these individuals who might have participated in the construction or operation of the mill or worked in the surrounding farmland and Carper and Powell households. Even if we don't know what they did, we should know their names.

From 1820 to 1840, the year before he sold the mill to Powell, Carper had between seven and ten enslaved people. Powell's records show eleven in 1840 and 1850.¹ Who were they? Where did they come from? What did they do? What became of them?

Names found so far associated with Carper are Matilda, Joseph, Isaac, John Mason, and maybe Molly. Those linked to John Powell include George, Sinah, Letty, Nat, Daniel, Maria, Eliza, Frank, Tom, Amanda, Jeff, Lizzy, Davy, and Mina.

Time and space preclude researching all these individuals. However, a few examples may help provide some ideas about their ancestry, tasks, and fates.

Matilda

On March 31, 1813, Susanna Fenley, as Executrix of her husband's, John B. Fenley (Finley), estate sold "a negro girl named Metilda, aged about fourteen years" to Philip Carper for \$300, "To have and to hold the said negro girl named Metilda unto him and the said Philip Carper his heirs and assigns,..." The reason for the sale was the death of Susanna's husband, John, whose will "directed that his debts be speedily paid and, there not being assets in my [Susanna's] hands exclusive of negroes, to pay and satisfy the said debts, the county Court of Fairfax....directed that I [Susanna] should sell such slave or slaves as would be sufficient to discharge such debt or debts."²

Two points stand out in this courthouse entry. First, the spelling of the name. "Metilda," as written, does not appear in the index of the enslaved in Fairfax County. The name spelled "Matilda," however, appears 65 times. In this writer's own family history courthouse clerk transcribed an "e" as an "a." In Matilda's case, perhaps the opposite occurred. The local, White clerk perhaps pronounced the name with a short "e" rather than a short "a." The scribe also misspelled Susanna's name as "Finly" and "Finley" while Susanna signed her name "Fenley." Taking account of spelling challenges, it is reasonable to assume her name was "Matilda."

¹ U.S. Federal Census – Slave Schedules

² Fairfax County Court House (FCCH) Bill of Sale, Drawer X # X-I 0372, 31 March 1813

The other notable aspect of the document was that her sale was to settle the estate's debts. Fairfax historian Donald Sweig notes that the death of an enslaver was an uncertain time for enslaved families because individual family members could be sold to extinguish outstanding financial claims, breaking up the family.³ John and Susanne do not appear to have been wealthy. When they came to Fairfax County from Prince George's County Maryland, they were given land from Susanne's parents, John and Sybel Hurst, "as a means of providing support."⁴

Where did the Fenley's live? In 1840 John Powell purchased property on Old Courthouse Road a couple of miles east of the mill south of the Alexandria-Leesburg Turnpike that at one time belonged to John Hurst and bordered Fenley property.⁵ The Hursts and Fenleys might have known and used Carper's mill, the largest in the area.

The Fenley clan possessed a significant number of enslaved people. In 1795 John's father, Charles Washington Jr., bequeathed an enslaved person to each of his seven children. ⁶That same year Charles' wife Martha (Bayne) Fenley filed certificates to import eleven enslaved people from Maryland to Virginia. ⁷

These enslaved individuals could have been members of families that had been in Maryland for generations. Perhaps Robert, apparently the first Fenley of this line⁸ who arrived in Oxford, Talbot County Maryland from Dundee, Scotland in the 1680's⁹, engaged enslaved labor in growing tobacco, a common enterprise of the time. Could his son have carried on the practice in Prince Georges County? And through all these years could the families of the enslaved grown? According to Sweig, estates with many enslaved people had a greater possibility of starting and raising a family within the estate¹⁰. This would have expanded the number of enslaved people without any financial outlay since, under Maryland and Virginia law, a person born to an enslaved mother was considered enslaved.

The 1810 inventory in John Fenley's will lists "Jenny's children, Matilda, Kitty, Harriet, Cicely – together worth \$700 and Henry (\$250) and Celia (\$250)."¹¹ Was Jenny the mother of the Matilda sold to Carper? Did she have younger sisters? Were Henry and Celia older siblings?

³ *Slavery in Fairfax County, 1750-1860*, Donald Sweig, page 47

⁴ FCCH Deed Book (DB) Q-1, pages 381-2

⁵ FCCH, DB F-3, page 203

⁶ Maryland Register of Wills 1629-1991, Prince Georges County Wills 1770, Vol 1 (T1), page 231-2

⁷ FCCH DB X-1, page557 and DB Y-1, page277

⁸ <https://gw.geneanet.org/rdwoolley?lang=en&n=finley&p=charles>

⁹ https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/26357437/person/13440974276/media/1f869a1d-6911-4195-8b25-bf3b059b0fb7?queryId=5043da98-1a10-4005-a014-50a4c0ad034b&searchContextTreeld=&searchContextPersonId=&_phsrc=OTG13&_phstar_t=successSource

¹⁰ *Slavery in Fairfax County*, Sweig, page 6

¹¹ FCCH WB J-1, page 421

John's father, Charles, bequeathed to his youngest daughter Mary "one negro girl named Jenny one bed and furniture and one Cow and Calf..."¹² Could this Jenny also be Matilda's mother? The other enslaved people Charles gave to his children were Jack, Harry, George, Jean, (another) Jack, and Cassey. Where these Jenny's brothers and sisters? Matilda's uncles and aunts? Each of the bequeaths is identical to that of Jenny, essentially treating the enslaved the same as household objects and livestock.

Although unrelated, it is interesting that another mother/daughter combination of Ginny and Matilda was recorded in 1823 when George Washington's estate released: "Matilda a light-colored Black Woman about 25 or 26 years of age 5 feet 8 inches high, stout, made pleasant countenance with small scars on both of her arms [is] a daughter of Ginny..."¹³

Joseph and Isaac

In his will of 1815 Alexander Dow gave the "service" of Joseph and Isaac to his friend Philp Carper. Dow specified that Joseph and Isaac as well as George, John, Harry, and Alice were to be freed when they became 21 years old.¹⁴ Joseph and Isaac might have been "hired out," a common practice during this period in Fairfax County.¹⁵

In Northern Virginia mixed farming – food crops and livestock – was becoming the norm displacing tobacco. Work was still considerable but not as intensive as growing and processing tobacco. Consequently, the need for enslaved workers declined.

Fairfax County statistics show that the number of enslaved people increased from 1,749 in 1749, to 3,605 in 1782, then peaked at 6,485 in 1810, about equaling the white population (6,626). With the shift in agriculture production, the number of enslaved people dropped by 2,000 over the next 20 years. By 1860 the number had fallen to 3,116, about 40 percent of the white population.¹⁶



Some enslavers resorted to "hire" the bondspeople. A young male would fetch \$60 a year, a female, \$40. Hiring out eased financial burdens on the enslavers and could have provided income

¹² Maryland Register of Wills 1629-1991, Prince Georges County Wills 1770, Vol 1 (T1), page 231-2

¹³ Registration of Free Negroes, 1822-1861, County of Fairfax (Registration) Donald Sweig, page 11.

¹⁴ FCCH WB K-1, pages 256-7

¹⁵ Flexibility and Profit in Slave Hiring System in Fairfax County, 1830-1860, E. Brown Pryor, page 1

¹⁶ Slavery in Fairfax County, Sweig, pages 32-33

for a widow and her family. Abolitionists could justify hiring out enslaved people since, technically, they did not own them.¹⁷

From 1830 to 1860 Pryor estimates that anywhere from 35 to 45 percent of estates included at least one bondsperson hired out.¹⁸ Carper might have recorded Joseph and Isaac as part of his residence in the census because, as the person hiring them, he was responsible for their food and clothing (two complete outfits a year) and medical bills.

Those hired out would labor side-by-side with others, free, White or Black, working on railroads, canal locks, in shad and herring fisheries along the Potomac, tending house and the farm, mending roads, shearing sheep, planting corn, cleaning, cooking, sewing, and cloth-making. Sometimes enslaved people were hired out for 51 weeks of a year, released for a week during the Christmas holidays, and be re-hired in the New Year.¹⁹

Molly

Around 1837 children of Molly and Daniel Sharper sued for 30 acres that Samuel Smith allegedly gave their parents in 1825. A letter from their lawyer states that Molly and Daniel were “free persons of color” and claimed that Philip Carper purchased Molly from Smith “for the sole purpose and effect of giving her her freedom.”²⁰

Others

Philip was living with his daughter Elizabeth Coleman in Loudoun County in 1855 when he bequeathed his servant John Mason to her.²¹ John Coleman, her husband, reported one 45-year-old enslaved male in the 1860 U.S. Federal Slave Schedules. Was this John?

John Powell acquired George and Sinah²² and Letty²³ from estate sales between 1832 and 1842. In 1846 Powell pledged the following enslaved persons as security for debt owed to Thomas Murray but kept possession of them: Nat, 40, Daniel 35, and Maria 26 who had five children: Eliza, Frank, Tom, Amanda, and Jeff; and Lizzy, a girl.²⁴ Davy and Mima pledged by Robert Coleman to John Powell and Alfred Leigh in 1857²⁵.

Where did they go? What happened to them?

¹⁷ Pryor, pages 5, 8-9

¹⁸ Ibid, pages 2-3

¹⁹ Ibid, pages 4,6

²⁰ Fairfax County, (Va.) Chancery Cases, 1803-1970. Eli Offutt ETC v. Horace Griffith (alias: Forrest Griffith) ETC, 1857-001. Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center. Fairfax, Virginia

²¹ Loudoun County Will Book (WB), Vol 2h-2i, 2k, 1853-1856, page 29

²² FCCH WB R-1, page 27B, estate of Marmaduke Leigh

²³ FCCH WB R-1, page 242, estate of John Moss

²⁴ FCCH, DB L-3, page 32

²⁵ FCCH DB Y-3, page 392

John Powell reported that Maria died in 1853, age 35²⁶, and Daniel died in 1857, age 45²⁷.

In June 1829 Joseph registered as a freeman²⁸. He was about twenty-four years old which suggests he would have been 10 years old when he was hired out to Carper. He stood five feet six inches tall, had a large nose and mouth, a scar on his left elbow, and an impediment in his speech.

The clerk wrote that Joseph “calls himself Joseph Trammell,” a typical entry disparaging his surname. Sweig notes that for the White community recognizing an enslaved person by a given name and knowing the mother one generation back was sufficient. No need for a surname. That said, surnames were important to know one’s father and mother. Some enslaved people in Fairfax had surnames that were unknown to Whites. According to Sweig, there were 26 different surnames used in the Fitzhugh inventory, the family with the largest holdings of bondpeople in Fairfax County, with 155 living in identifiable family groups.²⁹

Alice, mentioned in Alexander Dow’s inventory, registered as free when she was 46 years old and also took the surname Trammell. She stood five feet two inches tall, “had a pleasant countenance, a small scar on the left eyebrow near the outer corner and was missing all of her front teeth but two.”³⁰

Matilda

Did Matilda stay with the Carper family? She fits the census profiles of the Carper residence in 1830, which shows one female between 24 and 35 years old (Matilda would have been 31), as well as in 1840, with a female aged between 36 and 54 (she would have been 41 years old).

Was she passed down to Philip’s children, a custom of the period? Philip’s will makes no mention of other enslaved people.³¹ When Philip’s son Frederick passed away in 1846 his will inventory listed eight enslaved persons but not Matilda.³² Philip’s son Thomas issued a deed of manumission that freed three enslaved who don’t appear to be linked to Matilda.³³

Philip’s daughter Elizabeth’s husband, John Coleman, registered 26 enslaved people in the 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedules. Perhaps the 56-year-old female listed was Matilda, although she would have been closer to 61. Could others have been Matilda’s relatives?

²⁶ FCCH, Death Register (DR) 1853, page 2a,2b

²⁷ Ibid., pages 9a,9b

²⁸ Registration, Sweig, page 56

²⁹ Slavery, Sweig, page 39

³⁰ Registration, Sweig, page 200

³¹ Loudoun County WB, Vol 2h-2i; 2k, 1853-1856, page 29

³² FCCH WB V-1, page 32

³³ FCCH DB W-3, page 169

Matilda Sligo and her two children Benedict and Charles.	1200 00
Harriet Brooks and her two children Marion and Henry	900 00
Evo Fannell and child Susan	550 00
Milley Fannell	690 00
Matilda Carper and her two children Mary and Emily	1200 00

Another lead appears in the Loudoun County Chancery files. In December 1836 a Matilda Carper and her children Emily and Mary were purchased by William Ish for \$1,300.³⁴ That year, Ish of Loudoun County and John Williamson of Richmond had established a firm to purchase slaves and transport them to be sold in Richmond.³⁵

Alexandria and Washington, D.C. were also active trading centers, but Richmond would become the largest. Matilda and her children were part of a batch of nineteen enslaved purchased by the firm.

Once in the city they were held in “slave pens” or “jails,” sold at auction at the slave market, then taken further south where demand for labor to tend cotton crops was high. According to one estimate, as many as 660,000 enslaved people were relocated from the Upper South (Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina) to the Lower South (Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana).

English painter Eyre Crowe visited Richmond in 1853. At some personal risk, he sketched an auction and the transport of enslaved people that formed the basis for two paintings, *After the Sale: Slaves Going South from Richmond* and *Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia*.³⁶



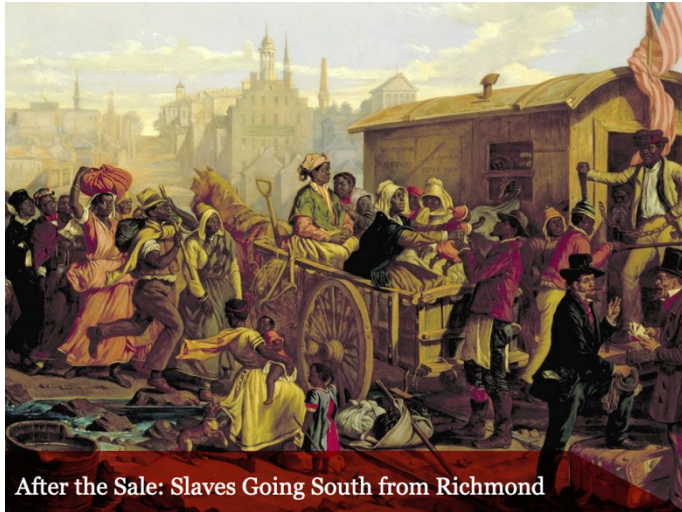
Family units were broken up to secure the best prices. In 1837 Matilda and Emily were sold for \$800 and Mary sold separately for \$600.³⁷

³⁴ Loudoun County Chancery Cases (LCCC), Admr of John Williamson vs William Ish, 1855-014, page 41 accessed by Library of Virginia, Chancery Records Index

³⁵ Ibid, page 6

³⁶ “Eyre Crowe’s Images of the Slave Trade”, in Virginia Humanities Encyclopedia Virginia by Maurie D. McInnis https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/entries/slave-trade-eyre-crowes-images-of-the/#start_entry

³⁷ LCCC, 1855-014, page 42



After the Sale: Slaves Going South from Richmond

Was this the same Matilda who Philp Carper had purchased 23 years earlier? According to the 1830 census, he had one enslaved female between the ages of 24 and 35 (Matilda would have been 31) and three enslaved females between the ages of 10 and 23, perhaps Emily and Mary.

Ish's trading practice was known in Fairfax County. In June 1832 he was deposed at the Fairfax County Court (in the tavern of Gordon and Robert Allison),³⁸ in part responding to a deposition by several men, including James Coleman, possibly the

brother of John Coleman, Elizabeth's Carper's husband. James also had dealings with John Powell. The topic: the price of enslaved people in the south. Ish stated that a young male would fetch \$550 in New Orleans, a young female \$400. Transport would cost \$18 by sea, \$15 by land.

What about Matilda's kin? Did they remain with the Fenley family? Anna Fenley Barker, the daughter of John and Susanne Fenley, bequeathed enslaved people to her grandchildren.³⁹ Were any of them related to Matilda? Interestingly, Anna named a daughter Ann Matilda.

After her husband's death, Susanna Fenley and two of her daughters appear to have moved to Kentucky. In 1820 Susan Finley was recorded with seven enslaved people in Georgetown, Kentucky.⁴⁰ Four of her enslaved males were at least 45 years old. Could these individuals have accompanied her from Fairfax? Matilda's kin?

Local Fairfax historian John Browne has remarked that "If you try to trace slaves all the way back you run into a wall of unknowing."⁴¹ New research tools and better access to documents have surmounted some of the "unknowing." More work is needed to identify those who labored around Colvin Run Mill. But now we may know some of their names.

³⁸ Fairfax County, (Va.) Chancery Causes, 1803-1970. John Sullivan vs Zedekiah Kidwell, 1834-009. Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center. Fairfax, Virginia
FCCH, CFF #82Dd, Index 1834-009, page 10

³⁹ FCCH, WB U1, page 98

⁴⁰ US Federal Census 1820

⁴¹ Quoted in "The Plantation and the Pizza Hut: A Suburban County Reconsiders Its History," by Tom Shoop in Route 50

<https://www.route-fifty.com/management/2021/08/plantation-and-pizza-hut-suburban-county-reconsiders-its-past/184762/>