

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 and contributed to 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.

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, and perhaps Molly. Those linked to John Powell include George, Sinah, Letty, Harriet, Kitty, Verlinda, Nat, Daniel, Maria, Eliza, Frank, Tom, Amanda, Jeff, Lizzy, Davy, Mina, and Jarrett.

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."

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. This writer's own family history discovered that 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."

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. 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."

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. 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. That same year Charles' wife Martha (Bayne) Fenley filed certificates to import eleven enslaved people from Maryland to Virginia.

These enslaved individuals could have been members of families that had been in Maryland for generations. Perhaps Robert, apparently the first Fenley of this line who arrived in Oxford, Talbot County Maryland from Dundee, Scotland in the 1680's, 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 estate. 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)." Was Jenny the mother of the Matilda sold to Carper? Did she have young sisters? Were Henry and Celia order siblings?

John's father, Charles, bequeathed to his youngest daughter Mary "one negro girl named Jenny one bed and furniture and one Cow and Calf..." 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.

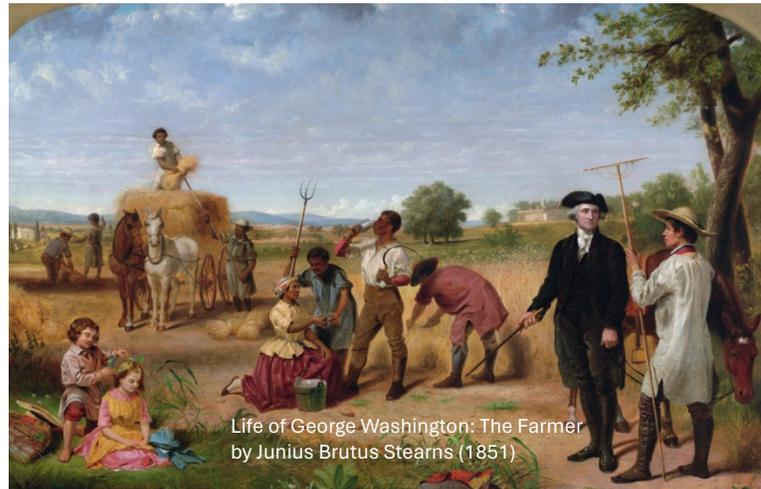
Although unrelated, it is interesting that another mother/daughter combination of Ginny and Matilda was recorded in 1823 when George Washington's estate released: "Matilda a light-Colored black Woman about 25 or 26 years of age 5 feet 8 inches high, stout, made pleasant countenance with small scars on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

Joseph and Isaac

In his will of 1815 Alexander Dow gave the “service” of Joseph and Isaac to 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. Joseph and Isaac might have been “hired out,” a common practice during this period in Fairfax County.

In Northern Virginia wheat and other grains had become popular crops displacing tobacco. Mixed farming – food crops and livestock – was becoming the norm. Work was 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.



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 or might have provided income for a widow and her family. Abolitionists could justify hiring out enslaved people since, technically, they did not own them.

From 1830 to 1860 Sweig estimates that anywhere from 35 to 45 percent of estate accounts included at least one bondsperson hired out. 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.

Molly

Around 1837 children of Molly and Daniel Sharper sued for 30 acres that Samuel Smith allegedly gave their parents in 1825. An 1837 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.” In 1860, Daniel Sharper, perhaps Molly’s son, owned 30 acres on Towlston Mill Road, about a mile east of the mill.

Others

Philip was living with his daughter Elizabeth Coleman in Loudoun County in 1855 when he wrote his will bequeathing his servant John Mason to her. 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 Sinah, Letty, Harriet, Kitty and her child Verlinda 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. Cuthbert Powell of Loudoun County, apparently John's father, loaned sixteen-year-old Jarett to John then in his 1852 will, bequeathed Jarett to him. Davy and Mima were "old," and pledged to Powell by his neighbor, Alfred Leigh in 1857.

Where did they go? What happened to them?

John Powell reported that Maria died in 1853, age 35, and Daniel died in 1857, age 45.

In June 1829 Joseph registered as a freeman. 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.

A free Black man, Joseph Tramel, died of consumption on September 29, 1859, in the poor house, according to Loudoun County data.

Alice, mentioned in 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."

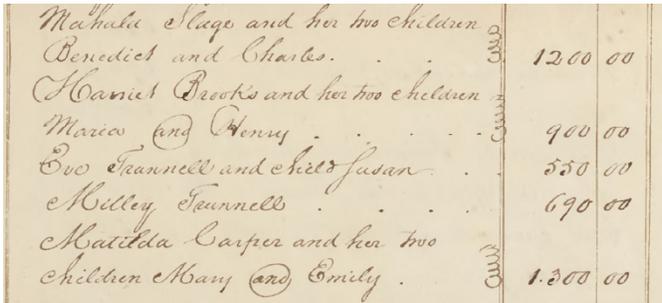
Matilda

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. When Philip's son Frederick passed away in 1846 his will

inventory listed eight enslaved persons but not Matilda. Philip's son Thomas issued a deed of manumission that freed three enslaved who don't appear to be linked to Matilda.

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?



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

One other 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 \$1,200. That year, Ish of Loudoun County and John Williamson of Richmond had established a firm to purchase slaves and transport them to Richmond to sell them.

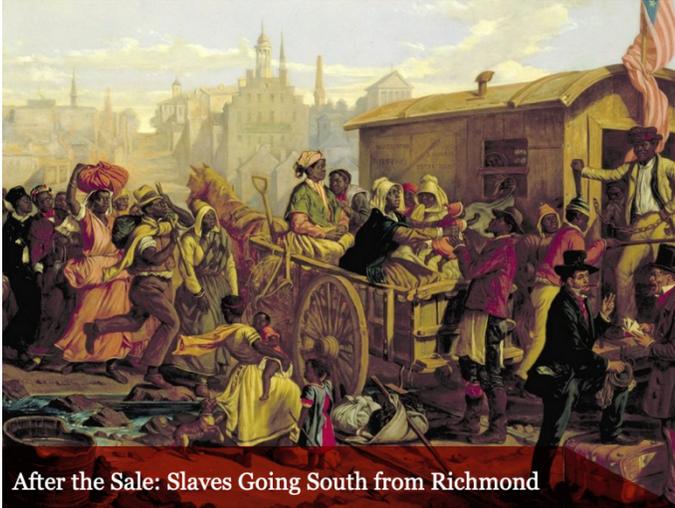
Alexandria and Washington, D.C. were also active trading centers, but Richmond would become the largest. Matilda and her children were part of a second batch of enslaved purchased by the firm that contained nineteen people.

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*.



Family units did not command a premium price and were broken up to secure the best price. In 1837 Matilda and Emily were sold for \$800 and Mary sold separately for \$600.



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), 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. 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 Susanna Hurst, her maiden name, was recorded with seven enslaved people in Georgetown, Kentucky. 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." New research tools and better access to documents have made a dent into the "unknowing." More work is needed to identify those who labored around Colvin Run Mill. We should know their names.