

Who got into the slavery business in Shenandoah County?

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“By the early nineteenth century the South had thoroughly committed itself to an economic, social, and racial order based on profitable staple-crop agriculture carried out by a labor force of black slaves,” writes Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard President and native of Boyce, Virginia, in Southern Stories.¹ Under Virginia law, any adult person who had enough money to buy or sell a slave could purchase another person at local or court house auctions, at auctions in surrounding counties or in the cities of Alexandria or Richmond. A deal could always be made with a slave trader who advertised in The Woodstock Herald, or who left advertisements in general stores as to when he would be there, or with a weekly wagon train leaving Strasburg for Alexandria (Wayland 513), or with a trader who seasonally drove African Americans through the Valley to the Deep South to work in the cotton fields.² Sometimes one became a slaveholder by gift. White children, given slaves as playmates, soon learned to control another person. Brides became slaveholders when given an African American woman as a dowry gift. Men willed their slaves to their widows and relatives, and tried, unsuccessfully by law, to will any increase of the African Americans also.

During the years of slavery the business of farming, including stock-raising, was the primary industry in Shenandoah County. Making wheat into flour also involved some African American labor. People without slaves who needed “hands” for hay making, mowing or shocking wheat at the seasonal time rented “hands,” sometimes for a year, beginning January 1 to January 1, or sometimes by the job. Mark Bird, administrator for the will of Mrs. Susan Ann Stover, Woodstock, advertised a public hiring of “likely Negroes, male and female” on 26 December 1851. “Persons hiring will be required to give bonds with good security for the hires and for providing the hirelings with the customary clothing,” usually two changes per year.³ The majority of free African Americans worked on farms with the farmer as day laborers. Some accumulated personal property and/ or land. Free

African Americans who had accumulated some property or land but could not pay their taxes were usually hired out by the Sheriff for the payment of those taxes. William Jones, Daniel Lett, William Loller were so ordered by the Court in October 1821. Thirty years later, in October 1851, however, the Court Minutes ordered the Sheriff to “sell according to law” twenty-three free Negroes who were delinquent for nonpayment of State and County taxes.⁴

Until African Americans themselves were needed as a cash crop or to pay debts, they were producers rather than product in the business cycle. Involved people, such as Anthony and Philip Spengler, Strasburg, needed wagon drivers and loaders to move their flour and products to the Alexandria market weekly.⁵ Merchants, such as Abraham Neff, New Market, needed African American “hands” to load and unload material items from the wagon trains, sometimes forty per day, that traveled the Valley Road or Stage Road from Baltimore or Philadelphia and supplied Shenandoah County residents with products from northern cities or ports. Shenandoah County tavern owners and ordinaries usually had two or more “hands” to help with lodging, food and drink, especially favored by the hucksters from numerous local distilleries. At least one African American is thought to be buried in the small cemetery behind The Inn at Narrow Passage beside the grave of P. Stover, who died in 1850. Tanners and saddle makers, such as George Rye, had free African Americans to help them. The 1840 and 1860 Census shows that free African Americans helped farmers, hotel keepers, physicians, iron masters, butchers, potters, boarding house owners, well diggers, milliners, teachers, blacksmiths, wagon masters, home owners, boot and shoemakers, artists, attorneys, postmasters, collector of claims, coopers, tanners, the railroad, potters, coppersmiths, Lutheran ministers, clerks, and brick makers.

A short summary of Shenandoah County tax lists and census records show the early involvement of white men in the slavery business:

1775 Dunmore County Census: 13 slaveholders

1783 Tax List: 111 slaveholders with 367 African American slaves

1790 Census: 71 slaveholders with 285 African American slaves

1790 Tax List: 77 slaveholders with 134 African American slaves

1800 Tax List: 78 slaveholders with 213 African American slaves⁶

The 1790 discrepancy between the census and tax list occurs because there were eighteen groups of multiple owners identified in the tax list. The 1800 Tax List shows also that sixty-one heads of households held one or two African American slaves, a significant occurrence.

The biggest surprise in the census records is that one or two African Americans lived with many white families in the county throughout the slavery period, a trend that allowed a much larger involvement of the two races and a much closer relationship than might be supposed.⁷ Many of the one or two African Americans lived in the house with the family, while others lived in the small house in the yard, known today as the “summer kitchen,” clearly visible today behind the houses built around 1800.⁸ Shared work, too, is evident in this story told to John Wayland by Philip Eberly, born in 1822. He recalled a Strasburg corn husking in which whites and blacks participated. “[Anthony] Spengler’s pile of corn was almost as long as the town and the white people and the negroes used to attack it, the whites at one end and the negroes at the other. The husking went on to the songs of the slaves, and the tunes,” Mr. Eberly says, “still ring in his ears.”⁹

Farmers who had large acreage also had log houses farther from the main house in which field slaves lived. Not one of these has been found today, although one may exist somewhere in the county. Andrew Larson, owner of the Jonathan Crabill house on Rt. 11 at Maurertown, knows that at least one log slave house was torn down at the Crabill place and the logs reused or sold.¹⁰ Outlying log houses on the Steenbergen land have also been verified in the writing of John Meem Payne in “My Recollections of Mt. Airy”.¹¹

A close relationship developed in homes where African American women, free or slave, helped households by nursing children, washing and cooking, from the beginning of the county even into the twentieth century. Henrietta Read Green, born in 1848, became a midwife who delivered the nine children of Homer and Margaret Long, including Jim, Homer

and Harry, well known businessmen in southern Shenandoah County, when the Long family lived north of Mt. Jackson. Harry Long remembers with devotion how Mammy Green raised the children as she helped with work at the Long house.¹² Another African American woman, Att Craig, lived with the Robert Lantz family in Edinburg during the twentieth century. She helped to raise Janet Lantz Wagniere, Edinburg, who recalls the care, love and attention with which Att Craig gifted her.¹³ Henrietta Read Green and Att Craig represent many unnamed African American women who influenced children in Shenandoah County with their presence.

African American slave children began to work at least by age six, and free African American children “bound out” to Shenandoah County men and women undoubtedly had chores as did all children in the nineteenth century. Some began working before age six. From 1830-1865, Court Minutes identify ninety-four free African American children with the person to whom they were bound.¹⁴ Because so many Shenandoah County people held very young slaves in 1830, it appears that young African American children were soon sold to neighbors within the communities as a cash crop.

In 1830 African American slaves assisted fifty-two Shenandoah County women.¹⁵ Some slaveholders willed slaves to their wives,¹⁶ but prior to the husband’s death, the wife could hold only a slave that had been given to her as a wedding gift. Mary Katherine Steenbergen, Mt. Airy, Mt. Jackson, who married Rev. Samuel Simon Schmucker on 12 October 1825, was given an African American woman as her dower gift. According to the Black Laws, the wife could not forfeit the slaves and the rest of the dower willed to her.¹⁷ Some female African American slaves had small children with them as they worked in the house or in the field, a big problem for the African American mother, unless an older African American woman also lived with her and could care for the children, seldom the case in Shenandoah County.¹⁸ Often white women kept with them the oldest African American slaves, female and male, who helped with work, even in old age. Census records show

some women and their slaves appear to have aged together, but only nine African Americans were manumitted in Shenandoah County.¹⁹ Shenandoah County women, in the final decades of the slavery business, chose to hire out the slaves rather than to sell them or to be responsible for their supervision. Elizabeth Hickle was the exception.

Christopher Hickle, at Rinkerton, willed his wife Elizabeth his slaves, numbering ten in 1840. She died in 1849 and her 7 January 1850 will states: "Liberty unto all my slaves [13] and each have a horse and \$5."²⁰ One female named Lucinda was not emancipated until 13 January 1861.²¹ Elizabeth Hickle's estate rented Lucinda and she was listed in the 1860 Census at Moore's Store. So enslavement did not end when the slaveholder died. It ended when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863. Finally, the slavery business ended. Slavery, the darkest side of capitalism, ended by law, under which, in Virginia, it had flourished since 1619.²²

Owners of the iron industry in Shenandoah County also heavily used the slavery business for burning charcoal and working iron from ore. The census records show that the largest numbers of slaves were laboring in all aspects of iron production throughout the county. Names of the furnaces and men associated with them are known to most county residents through numerous references by John W. Wayland in A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia: Isaac Zane at Marlboro Furnace (1779-1794); Benjamin Blackford and John Arthur at Isabella Furnace (1818-1822), Blackford and Sterrett (1823), Blackford (1824); Blackford and Arthur at Caroline Furnace in Powell's Fort (1826); Blackford at Union Forge (1840); Dirck Pennybacker at Redwell/Ridwell on the Hawksbill (1808); Benjamin Pennybacker and George Mayberry at Columbia Furnace on Stony Creek (1803-1808); Joel Pennybacker at Pine Forge near New Market (1805? -); Liberty Furnace on Stony Creek (1822-?); Van Buren Furnace 1838 - ?); Myers Old Furnace on Stony Creek near Orkney Springs. In 1820 Benjamin Blackford held 46 African American slaves, 44 males and 14 females. His partner John Arthur held 39 African American slaves, 28 males and 11 females, and at another location 27 African American slaves, 20 male and 7 female. In 1830

Blackford's number of African Americans increased to 53 slaves, 44 males and 9 females, as well as seven free African Americans, and John Blackford held 18 African American slaves, 14 males and 4 females, and 1 free. In 1830 James Arthur held 40 African American slaves, 33 males and 7 females; Joseph Arthur worked 24 males and 11 females to total 35 African American slaves while Margaret Arthur had 3 males and 3 females. Indeed, African American men, women and children slaves and free adults labored to produce the iron that left the county and brought profits to the owners of the furnaces.²³

Religious beliefs appear to have prevented a number of citizens from participating in the slavery business in the county. Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Church of the Brethren, Dunker and Mennonite citizens did not approve of holding another in bondage, and they did not. The English population, as well as some Germans, had no problem with buying, selling or holding slaves. In Shenandoah County, Lutheran ministers A. Rude, Peter Muhlenberg, Samuel S. Schmucker, and John P. Cline held slaves, according to census records. Rev. Paul Henkel encountered slaves, several of whom saved him from drowning in swollen streams, when he arrived to minister to the Germans who held them. Henkel had no slaves and he baptized and taught many African Americans in his travels.²⁴ Also the German Reformed and the Presbyterians could not say that slavery was a sin, an omission which led to toleration and involvement of members in the slavery business.²⁵ Some Shenandoah County church members heard sermons that dealt with the business of slavery, persuasive sermons that slavery was wrong, while others heard sermons that encouraged a paternalistic responsibility toward the slaves. No religious faith except Quaker in Shenandoah County appears to have restricted the hiring of free African Americans.

The slave business spread rapidly, like a disease, until it consumed the power of human reason. Because Shenandoah County had fewer slaves than eastern counties, even Valley counties, people accepted the reasoning that one or two slaves was acceptable. Every citizen lived with slavery, if not in homes or on farms, then in each

community. Slavery, accepted and tolerated, even by those who opposed the business on religious beliefs, reminds one of the slave labor camps in western Europe during Nazi occupation: no one saw anything! Business was business, and the business of slaveholding belonged solely to the slaveholder, who was protected by the Black Laws of Virginia. It is no surprise that politics filled the Woodstock newspapers from 1806-1861; the wealthy slaveholder leaders in Shenandoah County, though few in number, controlled politics.

Notes

- ¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) 31.
- ² Henkel-Renalds Connection, 142.
- ³ Shenandoah County Archives, Reel #7 Collection #2 412.
- ⁴ Book #III for names.
- ⁵ Wayland 513.
- ⁶ Book #I.
- ⁷ Books #II and #III for names, numbers, sex, and ages.
- ⁸ Books #IV and #V for pictures of these houses throughout the county, and especially near the Shenandoah River.
- ⁹ Wayland, A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia 514.
- ¹⁰ Andrew Larson, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2008.
- ¹¹ John Meem Payne, "My Recollections of Mt. Airy" 1913.
- ¹² Harry Long, personal interview, 15 June 2008.
- ¹³ Janet Wagniere, personal interview, 20 September 2007.
- ¹⁴ Book #II for names.
- ¹⁵ Book #II.
- ¹⁶ Shenandoah County, Virginia, Abstracts of Wills, 1772-1850. Comp. Amelia C. Gilreath, 1980. See Names of Slaves and Slaveholders, Book #II, for names of Slaves and Slaveholders.
- ¹⁷ Guild 65.
- ¹⁸ Books #I,#II,#III.

¹⁹ Shenandoah County Court Minutes, Book #II. 1850 and 1860 Census records, Book #III.

²⁰ Shenandoah County Court Minutes, 7 January 1850.

²¹ Shenandoah County Court Minutes, 13 January 1861.

²² Guild 21.

²³ Nancy B. Stewart, "The Presence of African Americans in the Shenandoah County Iron Industry," Book #I.

²⁴ The Autobiography and Chronological Life of the Reverend Paul Henkel 1745-1825. Trans. W. J. Finck. Ed. Melvin Miller and others. n.p.: Rev Anthony Jacob Henkel Family National Association, Inc., 2002), 155, 200, 219, 273.

²⁵ Robert R. Hewitt, III, Where the River Flows. (Charlottesville: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 2003), 105-6, 113-15, 116, 164-65.