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Terry L. Meyers

William & Mary, tlmeyer@wm.edu

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Terry L. Meyers
 English Department
 College of William and Mary
 Williamsburg, VA 23187
tlmeyer@wm.edu

Writing at the Bray School: Part 2

In the last several years the contested question of whether Mrs. Wager taught writing at the Williamsburg Bray School has come up anew in several venues. In this follow-up to my earlier piece, “Writing at the Bray School,” I examine these recent developments.

Nicole Brown, who portrays Mrs. Wager for CW, has adduced in several venues evidence she sees as supporting the teaching of writing. In a Zoom lecture on, I believe, Feb. 27, 2021, she cited an advertisement for an escaped slave, Isaac Bee, who had been a student at the Bray School:

. . . a likely Mulatto Lad named ISAAC BEE, formerly the Property of the late President Blair, and is well known about Williamsburg, where I am informed he has been several Times seen since his Elopement [escape]. He is between eighteen and nineteen Years of Age, low of Stature [short], and thinks he has a Right to his Freedom, because his Father was a Freeman; and I suppose will endeavour to pass for one. He can read, but I do not know that he can write; however, he may easily get some One to forge a Pass for him. . .
 Lewis Burwell, *VG*, 8 Sept. 1774¹

This is an interesting reference, but one, I think, that is not conclusive. When Burwell says he does “not know that he [Bee] can write,” we need to follow a series of inferences and assumptions to make an argument relevant here. We know Bee was a student at the Bray school, and it seems reasonable to assume that Burwell knew that too. We must then infer that having been a pupil of Mrs. Wager, Bee was taught by her to write (though perhaps without success?). Anyway, the connection is not crystal clear—if Bee could write, he might have learned the skill from some “some One” in the Black community or elsewhere who could write.

Bee’s abilities are discussed too in Antonio T. Bly’s “In Pursuit of Letters: A History of the Bray Schools for Enslaved Children in Colonial Virginia,”² where the agency of Mrs. Wager in possibly teaching writing comes up. I’ve already noted Bly’s pointing to the girl pupils at the

¹ From <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text8/virginiarunawayads.pdf>

² *History of Education Quarterly*, 31:4 (November 2011), [429]-459. In Bly’s earlier W&M doctoral thesis, “Breaking with Tradition: Slave Literacy in Early Virginia, 1680—1780” (American Studies, 2006), the Bray School and Mrs. Wager make no appearance.

Bray School learning to embroider and suggesting, cautiously, that forming letters might be seen as a form of penmanship. With Isaac Bee, Bly seems to go further, saying that Bee “learned to read and write” (p. 430). But Bly is silent on the direct question of whether Bee learned that skill from Mrs. Wager; he cites the Gazette advertisement and notes that Burwell regarded Bee as “quite determined to write himself free” (p. 447). But he also says that Bee, “may have received schooling at home presumably from his father,” a white man, as he declares again that Bee was able “to read and to write” (p. 459).

Bly pulls together an impressive amount of information on Bee and his life, but in the end I don’t think he absolutely proves his assertion that Bee could write, though I agree he might have. More importantly, any linkage of that skill to instruction by Mrs. Wager is not advanced.

In my own piece on “Jefferson on Black Education,”³ I suggest that Jefferson’s plan for educating young Blacks might have been influenced by the Bray School; I infer that Jefferson must have known of Black children being successfully educated within a thousand feet of where he lived and studied from 1760 to 1762. In any case, it appears that Jefferson would have accepted Black children being taught to write (p. 162). Again, though, the argument here is speculative and inferential, and, indeed, Jefferson is supposed to have told Lafayette in 1824 that “whereas it might be useful at some future time to teach slaves to read, it would not be advisable ever to teach them to write. Jefferson feared that such a skill would make it too easy for them to forge passes.”⁴

On October 29, 2021, Nicole Brown was among several people meeting in the Bray School structure with Nick Anderson, a reporter for the Washington Post. One of those present, Matt Webster, mentioned finding a letter by Robert Nicholas Carter where Carter wrote of writing being taught at the Bray School. My recollection is that Nicole nodded in agreement. In any case, that letter (February 16, 1769) had already been published and does not mention writing. Neither Matt nor Nicole could direct me to any other letter that does.

At this same gathering Nicole mentioned that a book used at the Bray School, Dixon’s The English Instructor, offered support for writing’s being taught at the Bray School, but I’m not sure what she had in mind.⁵

³ ANQ, 32:3 (2019), 161-166.

⁴ Alex Bontemps, “The Punished Self”: Surviving Slavery in the Colonial South (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 2008), p. 176.

⁵ Nicole showed the group a miniature book, “The Tom Thumb Speller,” which she said had not itself been used at the Bray School. But she said that Dixon’s English Instructor had been used in the same small format (32mo, 3.25 x 2.25 inches, as I later learned from Peter Stinely (email of November 9, 2021: “the version of the ‘Tom Thumb’s Playbook’ we reprinted [for Nicole] was done by John Waterman in RI in 1768 as a 32 mo. Printed as a single form of 32 pages.... The original copy in The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA”). Nicole expressed the hope that a copy of the Instructor in that format or bits of it at least might be found in the floorboards of the structure or in a rat’s nest.

I made an extensive search for The English Instructor in that tiny format, but could find no copies

Mark Kostro has addressed the question in “Town and Gown Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg.”⁶ Mark notes the “ecclesiastical” mission of the Bray School and cites the “archaeological evidence” of some 47 fragments of slate pencils “that suggests that writing may have been an informal part of the curriculum” (p. 38). In a judicious survey of the presence and use of slate pencils in Williamsburg), Kostro concludes that “the extensive documentary record of the Williamsburg Bray School makes no mention of writing instruction, suggesting that if writing were included, the school’s mistress Ann Wager could have taken it upon herself to facilitate it” (p. 40).

In a further brief survey of the use of slate pencils in schools later and elsewhere than Williamsburg, Kostro posits the likelihood that “experienced instructors like Ann Wager were exceptionally familiar with their utility, and employed them whenever possible” (p. 40).

I am not unhappy with this line of reasoning and certainly have no explanation for the plenitude of slate pencil fragments.⁷ Until I wrote my original essay on writing at the Bray School, I fully expected that writing was being taught.

But I remain skeptical – Mrs. Wager was tasked with teaching some 30 students the rudiments of Christianity, reading, and several useful skills to at least the girls. Monaghan makes clear that learning to write was a complex undertaking taught separately from reading, and it just seems to me unlikely that Mrs. Wager would complicate her life by adding writing to what she was teaching. And we know the townspeople were largely skeptical of any education being offered to Black students—and writing was likely a skill they feared most since it could be used for forging passes.

More directly, the correspondence between the Associates in London and Robert Carter Nicholas in Williamsburg makes crystal clear how focused, how narrowly focused, the curriculum was, and how seriously all concerned were with advancing that curriculum.

Still, the 47 fragments of slate pencil are hard for me to account for.

The small copies I could find of “The Tom Thumb Speller” typically printed on a page for each letter of the alphabet a picture plus four lines of verse. The English Instructor, however, is some 140 pages of often dense text in tiny type; printing it 32 mo and then binding it would have been challenging, requiring hundreds of pages and being, it seems to me, impractical to use (Nicole had assured me in an email, October 29, 2021, that Historic Trades was the source of her knowledge about a small version of Dixon’s book that “was sent to the school,” but Peter told me he didn’t know where Nicole could have gotten “the idea that the English instructor was done in 32 mo” [email of November 9, 2021]).

⁶ See Historical Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century: Lessons from Colonial Williamsburg, ed. Ywone D. Edwards-Ingram and Andrew C. Edwards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021), [28]-41.

⁷ As an aside, let me mention that when the second site of the Bray School, thought now to be on Francis Street, is someday explored archeologically, I would think the presence or absence of slate pencils might be definitive. The Bray School would have been there nine years so if the pencils are evidence of writing being taught, there should be many of them. If there are few or none, that would, it seems to me, undercut the arguments regarding the pencils at the original site.

In support of Mark is Valerie Trovato's M.A. thesis, which marshals a number of arguments for seeing the pencil fragments as evidence of instruction in writing. Again, I recognize the power of the arguments and note Valerie's caution; she is careful a number of times to say that ultimately we must infer the use of the pencils. For example, in moving from the general duties of a tutor to Mrs. Wager at the Bray School, Valerie says it is "more than likely" (p. 51)⁸ that Mrs. Wager was teaching students to write. In her conclusion, Valerie is similarly cautious. She notes that the pencil fragments "can suggest that writing took place at the Bray School" (p. 82); that the pencils and a small fragment of slate "can infer [i.e., imply]" (p. 83) and "strongly imply" (p. 85) that the children were writing at the school; and that its possible adults were using the pencils or that they were used by a family living at the site (p. 86).

Such caution is admirable and does not undercut the force of Valerie's arguments. But while I continue to think it possible that writing was indeed being taught at the Bray School, I just think it is extremely unlikely.

A June 21, 2022 podcast from Ben Franklin's World, created most likely in March or April 2022, also mentions the question of writing at the Bray School (<https://benfranklinworld.com>). Episode 331, "Discovery of the Williamsburg Bray School," handles the matter judiciously, acknowledging that "the writing debate is still very much alive and well" and that although it's possible Mrs. Wager was teaching writing, perhaps "probable" (from Ron Hurst), it is not certain.

Probably the greatest hope for resolving the question comes from the Bray School Archive recently accessible at the Rockefeller Library, a broader and deeper collection of documents even than that published by Van Horne. I've made a quick dive into those materials and found nothing to suggest that any of the Bray Schools taught writing. The one mention I did find in the annual reports of writing being taught is in a letter from "the Rev. Mr. Dent, Rector of St. George's, Grenada," May 12, 1792. The Rev. Dent writes of writing being taught not in a Bray School but in a school seemingly organized independently by "the free coloured Parents in this Town and Parish." There the "Instruction extends not only to Reading, but to Writing and Arithmetic both for boys and girls" (pp. 27-28).

The upshot of all this is that I remain skeptical but open to further evidence.

Appendix: Comments and Responses

From John C. Van Horne:

Dear Terry,

Thanks very much for keeping me in the loop on this, and for your very thoughtful second draft. I have some further thoughts on the subject that lead me to conclude, with you, that writing was not taught in Williamsburg. In addition to all the reasons

⁸ "Slate Pencils?: Education of Free and Enslaved African American Children at the Bray School, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1760-1774," M.A Thesis in Anthropology, College of William and Mary, 2016.

you adduce for being skeptical, I found that some of the logic used by those addressing this question whom you quote seems like wishful thinking, or maybe confirmation bias.

For example, the owner of Isaac Bee says in the runaway ad “but I do not know that he can write.” Having read thousands of historical documents and having become familiar with earlier eras’ peculiar locutions, I read this to mean, quite possibly, “I doubt if he can write.” And if he needs someone else to forge a pass for him, doesn’t that suggest that he can’t do it for himself?

Similarly, Mr. Bly apparently states that Burwell thought Bee was “quite determined to write himself free.” What Burwell actually said was that Bee “thinks he has a Right to his Freedom.” Not quite the same thing!

Finally, you write that “it appears that Jefferson would have accepted Black children being taught to write,” and then in the next sentence contradict that by stating that Jefferson thought “it would not be advisable ever to teach them to write.”

Fragments of pencils aside, I see nothing here that would support any inference of writing at the Bray School.

I’d like to report on something I’ve discovered recently about the Philadelphia school, although it’s probably not too relevant to the history of the Williamsburg school. As you know, my book on the Associates’ American correspondence carries the story only up to the Revolution, when all their activities here ceased for obvious reasons. Because the Associates had invested in income-producing property in Philadelphia (owing to Benjamin Franklin’s influence), that school was the only one that reopened following the Revolution, and in fact it operated, in various ways, until 1844. In preparing to give a talk about the history of the school, I read all of the Associates’ records for the 1780-1844 period, including the annual reports filed by the several teachers that listed the students, their ages, sometimes their parents’ or owners’ names and addresses, and often their curriculum. Of course, following the passage of Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, these students were for the most part free, so their experiences and opportunities were different from those offered students in Williamsburg in the earlier period. I expect at some point to publish an account of the full history of the Philadelphia Bray school, including all of the data on more than 400 individual identified students (inspired by what you are doing with the demographic information about the Williamsburg students). But in the meantime I thought I should share with you that writing was definitely part of the curriculum in Philadelphia.

The teachers’ various words for the curriculum (in addition to different kinds of reading and arithmetic) included “spelling,” “letters,” “ABC’s,” and “writing on slate,” “writing,” “writing, joining hands” [cursive]” and “lettering on slate.” The very few pre-Revolutionary student lists (all reproduced in my book) never mention the

curriculum. Perhaps this will be helpful, although I'm not sure of its relevance to the Williamsburg experience.

P.S. If you want to hear my talk on the Philadelphia school, you can go to this link and start at the 18:10 mark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK1SV3yP-9s>

Best regards, John

John C. Van Horne
Director Emeritus
The Library Company of Philadelphia

[In John's lecture on the Philadelphia Bray School (September 27, 2021) he also mentions the Bray School Lab. See approximately 42 minutes into

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK1SV3yP-9s>

At one point (at about the one hour mark), he comments that "writing came later for the older students and only in Philadelphia there's no evidence that writing was taught in any of the other schools, especially down south in Fredericksburg and Williamsburg, but they did teach writing to the older kids in Philadelphia." TLM]