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The “Peculiar Institution” In and Near Williamsburg

By Terry Meyers | September 8, 2022

Slavery in Williamsburg and nearby—what was it like?

Depends on who you ask.

Whites overwhelmingly recalled slavery as bathed in a nostalgic after glow (think of Gone With the Wind). One of my predecessors in English at William and Mary, John Lesslie Hall, pointed in 1907 to the soft life and familial support enslaved Blacks enjoyed—free housing, free food, free medical care, free clothing, and limited working hours (he might have added, but didn’t—no worries about saving for retirement!).

And Lyon G. Tyler, W&M President (1888-1919) and author of a text still sacred to White supremacists, A Confederate Catechism, polled his peers for their recollections. Needless to say, all was hunky dory: one W&M professor assured Chandler that the slave-owners were “ever hospitable, courteous, and polite to all classes of white men, and I might say to colored men and women.” Another man echoed this, saying that “negroes too” in days of yore were treated with courtesy and politeness. A former mayor of Newport News joined the chorus, claiming that “[even] the slaves themselves” were met with dignified treatment. Chandler was convinced that “everything about [the South] has been more or less misrepresented at the hands of Northern writers” who, if they would but work at it, might regain an impartiality that would set the South in its true light.

An antebellum law professor at W&M, Beverly Tucker, recalled the jolly scenes at Bruton Parish Church as Whites and Blacks together celebrated weddings among the enslaved:

The Episcopal minister of the village in which I live, [Adam Empie,] celebrates the rites of matrimony between as many blacks as whites; the white members of the family, with their most intimate friends, some- times witness the ceremony, and the parties, with their

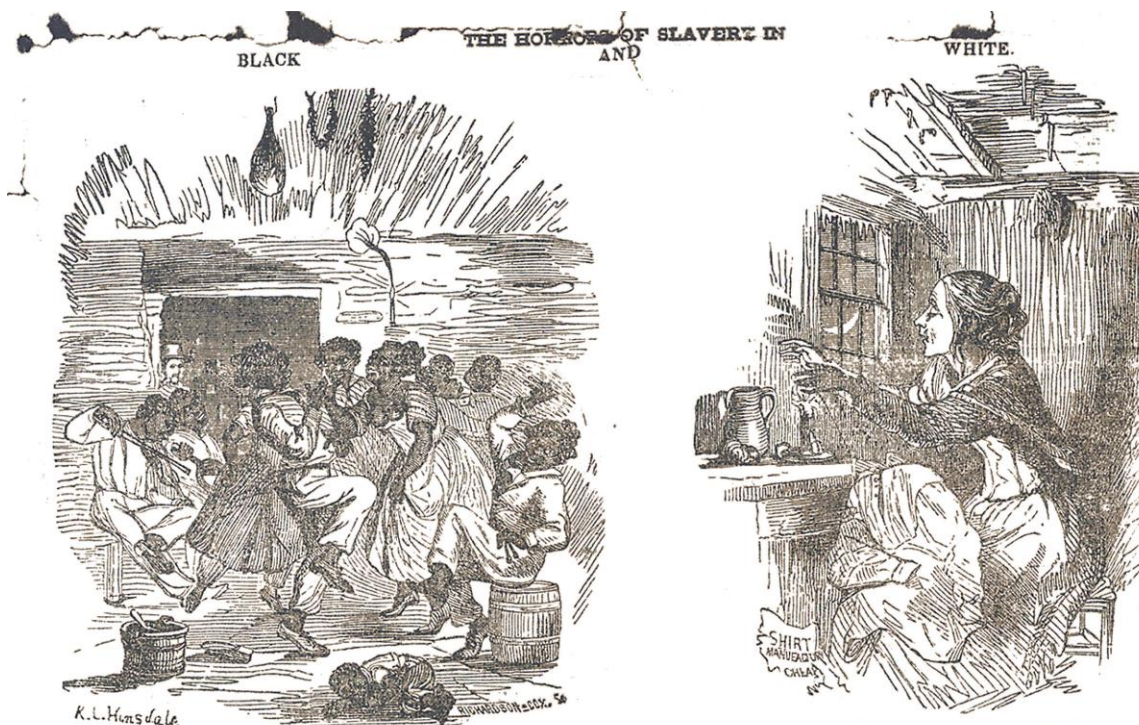
numerous guests, close an evening of festive hilarity with an entertainment of which the most fastidious epicure might be glad to partake.

Tucker questioned how a northerner could ever understand the “paternal relation” of a master to the enslaved woman raising his children, who formed “with her own children . . . one family; while the master and mistress are the common parents of all.”

A friend of Tucker recalled the affection he was held in by those he enslaved at what is today the St. George Tucker House in CW:

It was a beautiful sight to contemplate when he came from his room usually about ten o'clock in the morning and walked around his premises to see his servants at their several occupations. His long flowing gray hair, his handsome and venerable countenance beaming with benevolence, his cordial good morning to all reminded one of the patriarchs of Old. Slavery under such a master seemed no bondage and was not felt to be such. They never spoke of him but with veneration nor seemed for a moment to distrust either his wisdom or his goodness.

In 1854, in a W&M student publication, The Owl, perhaps the earliest college humor magazine in America, a cartoon contrasted, on the one hand, the happy lives of the locally enslaved, dancing before a hearth and making merry amidst a plenitude of food, and, on the other hand, the penury and misery of a White woman trying to piece together a life in cold Connecticut: better to be enslaved near W&M than to be exploited near Yale:



As seen in the neighborhood of William and Mary and other Southern Colleges.

As seen in the neighborhood of Yale and other Northern Colleges.

(Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, William & Mary)

Stories by Armistead C. Gordon, a Virginia lawyer and writer, focus on the Williamsburg area during reconstruction and the first years of the twentieth century. His Ommirandy: Plantation Life at Kingsmill (1917) is a stellar example of Lost Cause plantation literature and reflects Gordon's own local experiences during Reconstruction.

Rich in dialect, the stories stereotypically demean African-Americans. The characters almost universally regret that slavery had been abolished and demonstrate a deep devotion to their kindly masters, who remain imbued with the most profound concern for their faithful servants. The Kingsmill slaves, "with an affection generally characteristic of the race, had promptly agreed [after the War] that they would 'stay wid Mars' Jeems'; and they had stayed, evincing a constant and inherited loyalty." The title character, Ommirandy, upholds the old values: "from the moment when the almost incomprehensible news had come to the slaves on the plantation that they were free, the old woman's dominating personality had impressed upon them a sense of their own inconsequence . . . and of the unabated dignity and power of young Mars' Jeems." Ommirandy

positively and persistently refused to recognize her own freedom; and she frequently and volubly denied the right of any power or principality to set free any of the slaves on the Kingsmill plantation, whatever fate might befall other slaves on other plantations less fortunate in their masters than it had been.

The slaves had been loyal through good times and bad, even during “the black years, [when] the Federal gunboats were in the river, and the Union armies had passed on toward Richmond”; “they had stayed at home, with nobody but ‘Mistis’ and the children in the Great House, and had kept the faith.”

Thomas Roderick Dew (President of W&M, 1836-846) was, with John C. Calhoun, one of the country’s most influential defenders of slavery; when, after Nat Turner’s rebellion not far from here in 1831, the Virginia legislature looked into trying to do away with slavery, Dew wrote a blistering account in the cold language of economics and property law as to why slavery should not and could not be done away with. Dew thought such “principles that ‘all men are born equal,’ that ‘slavery in the abstract is wrong,’ [and] that ‘the slave has a natural right to regain his liberty’” were inapplicable “quackery.”

Consider too a nostalgic recollection of the ante bellum “dressing trees,” four old oaks in a row which once stood in front roughly of Blow Hall. Black women, “a basket on each arm and one on their head, shoes and stockings off and their gown tucked up,” would pause before going on to the market to adjust their clothing. To this White man, all was joyful, accompanied by what he thought a nonsense song (but possibly a variant of “Cindy,” a North Carolina folk song): “India cotton petti-coat, india cotton gown. / Shoes and stockings in her hand, and feet upon the ground.” The singing was further “accompanied with a ‘fidango’ dance” or something akin to a Highland fling.”

Though many Whites took a rosy view of slavery, not all did, of course. Even in the deeply racist Notes on the State of Virginia (1787), Jefferson saw the evil of slavery and its corruption of all involved. He called

the whole commerce between master and slave ... a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.

And George Wythe ruled as a judge that "Virginia's Declaration of Rights... included African Americans among the 'all men' born free and equally independent. 'They should,' Wythe said, 'be considered free until proven otherwise.'"

The English writer Thomas Day in 1776 described what appears to be a slave auction in Yorktown or Williamsburg in the 1750's or 1760's. Day likely drew some details from what he learned in talking with his mentor, William Small, who had taught at the College from 1758 to 1764. Day noted how the enslaved "are brought into the market, naked, weeping, and in chains;—how one man dares to examine his fellow creatures as he would do beasts, and bargain for their persons;—how all the most sacred duties, affections, and feelings of the human heart, are violated and insulted."

Day further evokes slavery in "the southern colonies" in terms that are surely informed by what Small saw in and near Williamsburg: Black men and women forced "to labour naked in the sun to the music of whips and chains," being robbed "of every thing which is now dear to your [Whites'] indolence, or necessary to your pleasures," goaded "to every species of servile drudgery," and punished for Whites' "amusement and caprice," their youth exhausted "in servitude" and finally abandoned in "age to wretchedness and disease."

In a letter in 1762, Robert Carter Nichola, member of the House of Burgesses from York County, wrote of the enslaved in Williamsburg and nearby that "they are treated by too many of their Owners as so many Beasts of Burden, so little do they [the owners] consider them as entitled to any of the privileges of human Nature."

And though St. George Tucker settled into easy comfort among those he enslaved, seeing them as members of his extended family (some of whom he willingly sold), he did see the incongruity between slavery and America's values as professed in the Declaration of Independence and he did offer in A Dissertation on [the Gradual Abolition] of Slavery" (1796) an impossible (and wholly ignored) scheme for abolishing it in Virginia.

In the Dissertation, Tucker calls America "the vale of death to millions of the wretched sons of Africa." Even as Americans were "offering up vows at the shrine of Liberty," they were, he wrote, "imposing upon our fellow men, who differ in complexion from us, a slavery, ten thousand times more cruel than the utmost extremity of those grievances and oppressions of which we complained."

In an essay on "Benevolence and Slavery," Tucker recounted the harshness of local slavery:

But he [a slave owner near Williamsburg] always makes it a point of having, what is called, a smart Overseer, whose duty it is to keep them [the enslaved] tightly to their work. That is, the negroes are to be in the fields at the first dawn, of the day, and at their work, as soon as they can see to do any thing, in dark nights, when there is no moonshine; but, when the moon shines the latter part of the night, they must be at work before three O Clock, in summer, and before four in winter. And when the moon shines in the Evening, they are to continue at work until nine a-Clock, except in the Tobacco-season, when they are not dismissed until eleven

Scarce a month passes that he is not visited by one, or two negroes from his distant plantations with some complaint or other against the Overseer, such as over severe chastisement, the want of a due allowance of victuals, or the want of cloaths, which have not been made up for them, though provided by their master; but [it] always happens that the Overseer is either justified, or excused.

By the bye, this class of men [overseers] are generally very unfeeling: I recollect staying at the house of a very particular friend in the Country once, about midsummer ... & made a point of setting out early, to avoid the heat. My Servant called me a few

minutes after day break: I rose, and looking out of the window saw a negroe woman whose appearance indicated that she was advanced in a state of pregnancy, walking tolerably fast towards the Corn field: she was presently met by her overseer, who gave her at least half a dozen severe stripes over the shoulders by way of quickening her pace. I can not well describe the shock I felt at this wanton act of inhumanity. Yet I found this fellow was not under a bad character for his Ill-treatment of Slaves.

Philip Fithian in 1773 had described slavery not too far from here by quoting an overseer on how he disciplined the enslaved:

He said that whipping of any kind does them no good, for they will laugh at your greatest Severity; But he told us he had invented two things, and by several experiments had proved their success.—For Sullenness, Obstinacy, or Idleness, says he, Take a Negro, strip him, tie him fast to a post; take then a sharp Curry-Comb, & curry him severely til he is well scrap'd; & call a Boy with some dry Hay, and make the Boy rub him down for several Minutes, then salt him, & unlose him. He will attend to his Business, (said the inhuman Infidel) afterwards!—But savage Cruelty does not exceed His next diabolical Invention—To get a Secret from a Negro, says he, take the following Method—Lay upon your Floor a large thick plank, having a peg about eighteen Inches long, of hard wood, & very Sharp, on the upper end, fixed fast in the plank—then strip the Negro, tie the Cord to a staple in the Ceiling, so as that his foot may just rest on the sharpened Peg, then turn him briskly round, and you would laugh (said our informer) at the Dexterity of the Negro, while he was releiving his Feet on the sharpen'd Peg!—I need say nothing of these seeing there is a righteous God, who will take vengeance on such Inventions!

Another view of the local harshness of slavery can be glimpsed in an advertisement John Wesley cited from a London newspaper early in 1774 about an enslaved man seeking to escape bondage; taken from the “Williamsburgh gazette,” the ad, in the Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon, April 29, 1773). specified that “the said fellow is outlawed, and I will give ten pounds reward for his head severed from his body, or forty shillings if brought alive.”

And in 1865, Laura S. Havilland visited Williamsburg and recounted an episode at Yorktown:

One woman in giving a sketch of slave life, said a young girl went to a night meeting contrary to orders, and for so doing was stripped naked and whipped in the presence of the other slaves, the master himself plying the lash. While she cried for mercy her master replied,

"I'll give you mercy."

"Good Lord do come and help me."

"Yes, I'll help you" (and kept plying the lash).

"Do, Lord, come now; if you ha'n't time send Jesus."

"Yes, I'm your Jesus," retorted the inhuman persecutor, and he continued to ply the lash until thirty strokes were well laid on.

In Williamsburg, Havilland saw the "old slave pens" (yet to be discovered by Colonial Williamsburg). And among several accounts of the newly-freed Blacks at Kingsmill, she recounted visiting what appears to be the still extant kitchen there: In the "loft" lived two aged sisters of 75 and 80, whose youngest brother, about 60, was insane. His sisters said about 20 years earlier he had "lost his mind." His wife and children were all sold from him down the river, and he grieved so long over it, he lost his mind, and never came right since. She heard too at Kingsmill a story of "many cruel over-seers, that would take the life of a slave, to get their names up as 'boss overseers.'" When she intimated that she heard of such overseers themselves being murdered by those they oversaw, "one old man dropped his head, then looking up said, in a hesitating manner, 'I's knowed that in my time, but massar keep it mighty still, an' say de overseer runned away, an' he git one right soon agin.'"

A Quaker teacher at a local Freedmen's Bureau school at Fort Magruder, Margaret Newbold Thorpe, reported the antipathy of most locals to educating former slaves and drew attention to the KKK. One old man had been taught to read by a white lady, though his master would "whip them all to pieces" if he had found out

Thorpe confirmed that the conditions at Kingsmill had been harsh. She mentions the “scarred backs” of the area’s former slaves, the black families “torn apart and beaten because they wept,” and daughters “sold to a fate infinitely worse than death.”

We have the testimony too of Eliza Baker, born into slavery in 1843 in Williamsburg, who recalled the city’s flogging post with an iron cage nearby to hold the enslaved before and after trials. She recounted too the treatment of the enslaved and the threat of being sold: “some [Whites] treated ’em right tough, and some right good. They made you do what they wanted you to do, and if you didn’t do what they wanted you to, they put you in their pocket.” She explained, “That means the n----- trader would get you.” She recalled the slave auctions: “From the block on the Court House Green. I have heard many a crying-out on the block.” The auctioneer, Moses Harrell, “would cry them out. ‘Here they go!’ he would cry. Hardly any parents would stand by to see their children sold.” A slave found with a book could be whipped. If out after 9:00 p.m.: thirty-nine lashes. (Harrell, by the way, is honored in the Governor’s Land with streets, Harpers Mill and Moses Harper Roads, named after him, though in a corrupted form).



Gravestone of Eliza Baker, Cedar Grove Cemetery, Williamsburg.

The enslaved in Virginia had long protested the injustice laid on them. One had written the Bishop of London in 1723 to ask that England's rulers "Releese us out of this Cruell Bondegg." And long before Nat Tyler, Blacks resisted—and paid the cost.

James Blair noted one planned rebellion whose leaders foolishly thought Christians could not enslave fellow Christians:

by patrouling, and whipping all that were found abroad at unseasonable hours, they quickly broke all this design, and in one County, where they had been discovered to talk of a general cutting off of their Masters, there were four of the Ringleaders hanged. So now all is very quiet.

And one of the men enslaved by the College had the audacity to assert his equality with Whites to a member of the faculty, Samuel Henley. Henley asked why if Adam and Eve were White, the enslaved man was Black—the enslaved man shot back that all he knew was that if you pricked him, his blood flowed as red as any White's.

It is no wonder then that local Blacks right up into the 1940's celebrated Emancipation Day, January 1, with parades and festivities. One account, from 1897, captured the special joy of the elderly who had actually experienced enslavement and then freedom: "a great crowd [of Williamsburg's African-Americans] followed the procession, inspired by the sweet strains of martial music. Several aged brothers and sisters were so full of patriotism and music [that] every now and then they would heel and toe a little (two step) the church notwithstanding."

Terry Meyers is Chancellor Professor of English, Emeritus, at the College. Much of the material here is drawn from his essays on William and Mary and slavery. Versions of this essay appeared in The Tatler, the residents magazine at Williamsburg Landing (November, December 2021 and January 2022) and the Virginia Gazette (April 16, 23, 30, 2022); it is reprinted here with permission.

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