

BLACK EDUCATION IN WILLIAMSBURG-JAMES CITY COUNTY

1619-1984

The Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools

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Philip D. Morgan

I know t'ings dat de wite folks wid all dar larnin' nebber fin's out . . . No honey! De good Lawd doan gib ebery'ting to his wite chilluns. He's gib 'em de wite skin, an' larnin', an' he's made em rich an' free. But de brack folks is his chilluns, too . . . de good Lawd gibs us eyes t' see t'ings dey doan see, an' he comes t' me, a poor brack slave woman, an' tells me be patient, 'cause dar's no wite nor brack in hebben. An' de time's comin' when he'll make his brack chilluns free in dis yere worl', an' gib 'em larnin', an' good homes, an' good times. Ah! honey, I knows, I knows!

"Aunty Aggy" - a Virginia slave in the 1840s¹

INTRODUCTION

Blacks were brought to Virginia in the second decade of the seventeenth century. 1619 is the date made famous in the textbooks, but it is highly likely that a few blacks were already in the colony before that date. In any case, there were only a handful of blacks in the area that would become James City County in the first couple of decades of settlement. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the county contained just over 100 blacks, one in twelve of its inhabitants. A generation

later, black numbers had risen to 300, about one in six of the county's residents (see Table 1).

It was not until the late seventeenth century that slaves began to be imported in large numbers direct from Africa. As a result, the number of blacks and their proportion of the county's inhabitants rose rapidly. By 1700, a majority of the county's labor force was black. About a generation later (c. 1730) there was a black majority in the county's total population. From the eve of the American Revolution to the Civil War, the county was virtually always two-thirds black and Williamsburg was about half black.

The county only reverted to a white majority at the turn of the twentieth century, although Williamsburg was predominantly white almost immediately after the Civil War. During the present century, the black presence, while increasing in absolute terms, has become a minority one. By 1980, just over a quarter of the county's residents and only one in ten of Williamsburg's residents were black (see Table 1).

While blacks today are a minority of the county's residents - albeit much its most numerically important one - it is worth emphasizing that blacks have constituted a majority presence for well over half of James City County's 350 years. From a strictly numerical perspective, then, James City County has been more black than white over the course of its three-and-a-half-century history. Quite obviously, then, the Afro-American population has contributed mightily to the county's development. It is this contribution that this essay seeks to explore.

DEFINITION OF EDUCATION

Education is not just what is taught but what is learned. This paper will, therefore, use a definition of education which distinguishes between the effort to transmit learning and the process by which learning actually occurs. From this perspective, education should be construed broadly, and taken to mean the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities which an individual or group, consciously or unconsciously, has internalized. It is the content of what is learned. Teaching, in this context, becomes the deliberate effort, successful or not, to educate. Employing this broad definition of its subject, this paper will range far beyond schools and teachers to the learning process itself.²

FORMAL EDUCATION

The Years of Slavery

It may seem ludicrous to speak of education under slavery. Surely slaveowners saw education as dangerous, as a way of allowing their bondmen to get ideas above their station? In some respects, this is true. Many planters undoubtedly believed that the more ignorant the black, the better the slave. Keep the slave on the plantation, cut off contact with other blacks and neighboring whites, never teach a slave to read and write, do not even encourage them to know their own age: such were the aims of many, probably most, slaveowners. One delegate to the Virginia House of Delegates articulated this goal rather well when he said:

We have as far as possible closed every avenue by which light may enter their [the slaves'] minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see the light our work would be completed.³

White opposition to black education was enshrined in law in the early nineteenth century. In 1805, Virginia passed a law imposing penalties on anyone who taught a black to read and write. This act also relieved craftsmen, responsible for a black apprentice, or guardians, responsible for a black orphan, from any obligation to teach reading, writing, or arithmetic to their black charges. Just over a decade later, anyone found guilty of teaching a black person became liable to a fine of \$3 or twenty lashes.⁴

The attempt to close down "every avenue by which light" might enter the slave's mind proved an impossible, not to say self-defeating, goal for slaveowners. They had, after all, to train their slaves to work diligently and efficiently; otherwise, their investments were going to waste. Moreover, all but the most unintelligent planter recognized it was in his interest to teach his slaves the values and attitudes of obedient and trustworthy servants. He might not do this in a wholly humanitarian way; the lash was the ultimate "teacher" of obedience. But persuasion, or perhaps indoctrination would be a better word, was also used. The slaves on the Virginia plantation of M. D. Conway's father, for instance, had their minds "systematically poisoned

toward the North; they were told that the North would kill or sell them to foreign lands." Slaves were taught to be respectful to whites; to address whites as Mr., Master, Mrs., or Miss; whereas, they in return were referred to as boy, girl, or, when older, as uncle and aunt; to think of white as superior and black as anything but beautiful.⁵ In these, and many other ways, black slaves were inculcated with a particular - you may prefer, perverted - educational message; but educational, it certainly was.

What slaves learned is, of course, another matter. One primary lesson learned by slaves was to stick together, to stand by the community. Consider, for instance, the reliance of black slaves upon their own root doctors. An African slave, identifiable by the ethnic markings on his temples, lived by the Chickahominy River in 1745. He served as a doctor to his neighboring blacks, probably offering them some of his native cures. In the nineteenth century, the older brother of Gabriel, a slave patient of Dr. A. D. Galt of Williamsburg observed to the doctor that his medicines were useless because Gabriel "had been tricked" and "must have a Negro Doctor."⁶ Even under slavery, then, blacks could minister to other blacks; and the community could, in a sense, stand alone. Similarly, slaves might take in runaways. Many an absentee slipped into Williamsburg and remained undetected, at least for a time, being supported by his fellow blacks.⁷

Another lesson learned by slaves - and this too was hardly intended by whites - was a sense of hostility to whites in general. Some slaves occasionally resorted to force to express

their opposition to the system whites had created. As early as 1709, a number of slaves, some of them undoubtedly Africans such as Angola Peter, Pamba his wife, and Bambara Peter, were arrested for allegedly fomenting a slave revolt in Surry and James City Counties, which was to have taken place on Easter Day. As the Governor reported it, two of the slaves were executed in the hope that "their fate will strike such a terror in the other Negroes, as will keep them from forming such designs for the future."⁸ Perhaps this had the desired effect, for so far as I know, this was the only insurrection mounted by slaves in the county.

However, this is not to say that whites could rest easy in their beds. Consider, for example, an incident that took place in 1793. Two slave women were at work ploughing in the fields of their Jamestown Island plantation. Their overseer came up and berated one of the women for leaving open a fence and allowing sheep to graze in the corn. She, in turn, was impertinent and the overseer struck her, upon which the two women turned on the overseer, beat him up, and left him dying.⁹ If two black women could kill a white overseer, imagine the tremor of fear that would run through the white population when they heard the news. Blacks had learned entirely the wrong message.

Many black slaves hardly internalized the inferiority that white society tried to impose. Black informants frequently boasted of the slaves' ability to outwit whites. H. C. Bruce recalled that as a slave in Virginia he used to hear of "many jokes played" on the white patrollers. Many of the folk stories

told by slaves were thinly disguised as ruses for outwitting whites. This sense of black one-upmanship comes across well in the reminiscences of Cornelia Carney, who was interviewed in Williamsburg in the 1930s when she was about 100 years old. She had been a slave on a plantation near town and remembered when her

Father got beat up so much dat arter while he run away an' lived in de woods. Used to slip back to de house Saddy nights . . . Never did ketch him, though old Marse search real sharp . . . Niggers was too smart fo' white folks to git ketched. White folks was sharp too, but not sharp enough to git by old Nat. Nat? I don't know who he was. Old folks used to say it all de time. De meanin' I git is dat de niggers could always outsmart de white folks.¹⁰

"Ole Nat" was, of course, a reference to Nat Turner, the leader of the 1831 slave revolt in Southampton County.

Even political knowledge could be evidenced by a slave. A remarkable individual example is the sophistication shown by a bondman named Bacchus. In June 1774, Bacchus, who was a thirty-year-old man and had formerly belonged to Dr. George Pitt of Williamsburg, ran away from his new master, Gabriel Jones, and made for town. According to Jones, Bacchus was:

a cunning, artful, sensible Fellow, and very capable of forging a Tale to impose on the Unwary, is well acquainted with the lower Parts of the Country, having constantly rode with me for some Years past, and has been used to waiting from his Infancy. He was seen a few Days before he went off with a Purse of Dollars, and had just before changed a five Pound Bill; most or all of which, I suppose he have robbed me off, which he might easily have done, I having trusted him much after what I thought had proved his Fidelity.

Bacchus was obviously no ordinary slave. But his master's predictions of his larger aims show him to have been politically astute. Jones forecast that Bacchus would "endeavour to pass for a Freeman by the name of John Christian." Perhaps Bacchus thought that Christian would be an appropriate surname because all Christians should be free. In any case, Jones also imagined that his newly named slave would then "attempt to get on board some Vessel bound for Great Britain, from the knowledge he has of the later Determination of Somerset's Case." This case was, of course, a famous legal decision handed down in England in 1772, which was thought to outlaw slavery in that country. The fact that this news had reached a humble slave in Virginia, some 3,000

miles away, and that he was acting upon it, speaks volumes to his political education and to his initiative and resolve.¹¹

Contrary to the ideals of the planter class, a small but significant minority of slaves learned to read and write. In the eighteenth century, a few town slaves, the odd artisan or privileged bondman were literate. Take, for instance, Peter, a thirty-year-old runaway from Williamsburg, who was said to be "an artful smooth talkative Fellow, can read and write, and may probably have a forged pass." Or consider a sawyer and clap-board carpenter named George who was able to "read very well." Or, finally, Harry, a runaway from Drummond's Neck in James City County on the eve of the American Revolution, who could "read and write," having spent many years in Scotland. He could even "speak Scotch and sing . . . Scotch songs."¹²

There is some evidence that some blacks were educated in Williamsburg as early as the 1740s, but whether these were occasional catechism classes, or more regular instruction is a complete mystery. In 1754, for instance, Elizabeth Wyatt billed the estate of William Dawson, Commissary resident in Williamsburg, £1.6 for schooling his Negro girl, "Jinny," one year. From 1760 to 1774, a school for blacks supported by the Associates of Dr. Bray was very definitely in existence in Williamsburg. While religious education was much to the fore, the black children were taught to read and write and were supposed to attend for a minimum of three years. Enrollment was about 30 in any one year. Most of the slave children who attended were between the years of 6 and 8. Well over 100 slave children, therefore, received some

form of education from this school in the late colonial period, though most of them received less than the minimum required training.¹³

By 1860, perhaps about five percent of the slaves in the county could read.¹⁴ Most were taught by the occasional well-disposed white, though others learned surreptitiously from other blacks. The occasional slave with these skills could put them to good effect. Susan Broaddus, a serving girl on a large Virginia plantation, used to stand behind the Mistress at the table and pass her whatever she wanted:

Ole Marsa would spell out real fas' anything he don't want me to know 'bout. One day Marsa was fit to be tied, he was in setch a bad mood. Was ravin' 'bout de crops, an' taxes, an' de triflin' niggers he got to feed. "Gonna sell 'em," he says, Den ole Missus ask which ones he gonna sell an' tell him quick to spell it. Den he spell out G-A-B-E and R-U-F-U-S. 'Course I stood dere without battin' an eye an' makin' believe I didn't even hear him, but I was packin' dem letters up in my haid all de time. An' soon's I finished dishes I rushed down to my father an' say 'em to him jus' like Marsa say 'em. Father say quiet-like: "Gabe and Rufus," an' tol' me to go on back to de house an' say I

ain't been out. De next day Gabe and Rufus was gone--dey had run away. Marsa nearly died, got to cussin' an' ravin' so he took sick. Missus went to town an' tol' de sheriff, but dey never could fin' dose two slaves.¹⁵

The discouragement faced by slaves who were keen to learn only strengthened their resolve. Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this community commitment became manifest during the Civil War. When supervising the first "contrabands" at Fort Monroe in 1861, some of whom must have been James City County slaves, Edward L. Pierce observed among them a widespread desire to learn to read.¹⁶

For one group of blacks under slavery - those who were free - the attempt to gain a rudimentary education was at least a possibility. Nor should we forget their numerical significance by the time of the Civil War. In 1800, there were but 150 free blacks in the county, representing just over five percent of the black community. By 1860, however, their number had jumped to over 1,000, almost a third of the black population (see Table 2). A number of these free blacks owned small amounts of land and possessed skills.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, this group saw the considerable advantages of an education and some of them surely saw to it that their children partook of those benefits.

As one example of the opportunities available to free blacks in James City County, take the case of William Ludwell

Lee's ex-slaves. In the late eighteenth century, William Ludwell Lee of Green Spring freed his slaves. He also provided an annual bequest of 500 bushels of corn to the College of William and Mary to support a free school in the center of the County on a 1,000 acre tract called Hot Water. Lee's former slaves were allowed to settle on this tract. Indeed, "comfortable houses" were to be built for them. They were also to receive free provisions for the first year of their freedom and their homes were free from rent for the first ten years. A privileged slave like Joe the blacksmith could keep his tools and the use of his shop rent-free during his lifetime. All the slaves under the age of eighteen were to be removed north of Virginia where they might "receive an education suited to their capacities at the expense of the estate." Since the provisions of the will became the subject of litigation between William and Mary and Lee's descendants, it is unclear how fully the bequest was fulfilled.¹⁸

The Years Beyond Slavery

Booker T. Washington, who was brought up a slave in Virginia, paints a vivid picture of the response of freedmen to their new-won and dearly-valued freedom:

Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt

to learn. As fast as any kind of teachers could be secured, not only were day-schools filled, but night-schools as well. The great ambition of the older people was try to learn to read the Bible before they died. With this end in view, men and women who were fifty and seventy-five years old, would be found in night-schools. Sunday-schools were formed soon after freedom, but the principal book studied in the Sunday-school was the spelling-book. Day-school, night-school, and Sunday-school were always crowded, and often many had to be turned away for want of room.¹⁹

The situation in James City County bears witness to Washington's description. A correspondent from the county in March 8, 1871, noted that "the free schools are in full blast in our county, and great excitement prevails among the colored race. Young and old, little and big, seem eager to obtain knowledge. The colored schools are brimful. In one school an assistant had to be called in to help teach, not only the young and single, but married Africans how to shoot. On the other hand the white schools are poorly attended and doubtless will not be a success this season."²⁰ A year later, there were five black schools (i.e., rooms in houses) in the county and one in Williamsburg. Twenty years later, there were ten schools in

the area serving the black community: eight in the county and two in the town (see Table 3). If one just counts structures, then, there were about as many black as white schools in the county. This is a testament to the freedmen's desire to gain an education.

What were these schools like? Most in the county were single or perhaps double-roomed frame buildings. In 1930, two of the white buildings were built of brick or stone whereas all the black buildings were of frame. By this date there were actually more black than white schools, a reflection of the smaller size of the black school and their proliferation in the 1920s. In the town of Williamsburg, a rented room was the first black school, and it began operations in 1871. Thirteen years later, a two-room frame building on Francis Street was also established as a black school. Presumably the rented room continued to be in use, because up to the turn of the century two black schools were listed in Williamsburg. In 1908, however, the Francis Street school moved to Nicholson Street, and the other school ceased to exist. The Nicholson Street School was housed in the Samaritan Odd Fellows Hall, a social club belonging to this benevolent society run by blacks. In 1924, James City County Training School, a single story brick building which boasted six classrooms and located at the corner of Nicholson and Botetourt Streets, was opened. It, in turn, was succeeded by Bruton Heights, a three building, seventeen classroom complex, which was opened in 1940.²¹

By 1890, there were also almost as many black as white teachers (ten black and eleven white). Indeed, perhaps it is further testimony to the value placed on education in the black community that a majority of black teachers in the late nineteenth century were men, not women, as was the case in the white community. Only in the early twentieth century did black teachers exhibit the same female preponderance found among white teachers (see Table 4). Although the number of teachers in the white and black communities were roughly equal, the same could not be said of their salaries. In the late nineteenth century, the disparities were not immense; but in the early twentieth century, black teachers earned about half the amount of their white counterparts (see Table 5).

School enrollment figures show blacks gradually pulling themselves up to an equality with whites. In the first two decades after the Civil War about a third of the eligible black population (those aged between five and twenty-one years of age) were enrolled in school. The comparable proportion for the white population was about a half. By 1890, 40 percent of the black population was enrolled in school, whereas the white proportion had risen to 53 percent. For the next two decades, the Jim Crow years, black enrollment figures actually declined, whereas white enrollments climbed. But in the 1920s, black enrollments jumped markedly, as various philanthropic organizations like the Jeanes Foundation, Slater Fund and, most notably, the Rosenwald Fund helped support black schools. During the 1920s, at least

two-thirds of the eligible populations in both communities were in school (see Table 6). The proportions continued to rise in tandem.

Of those children actually enrolled, black attendance was on a rough par with that of whites -- standing at about 60 to 70 percent for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is strong testimony to the enthusiasm for education displayed by a broad segment of the black population even under trying circumstances (see Table 7). From the 1930s onward black, like white, attendance has been in the 80 to 90 percent range.

These striking efforts at improvement should not, however, mask the severe disadvantages to which black educational efforts were subject. The cost of instruction of a black child may have improved against that of whites in the early twentieth century, but even by the 1930s about \$32 was spent on a white child, whereas only \$14 was expended on the black child. A related problem faced parents who lived in The Grove, a black settlement in the County that arose from the resettlement of many small black landholders who had been displaced first, by the establishment of the Naval Weapons Station during the First World War, and then by Camp Perry, in the Second World War. Because there was no school in the Grove, the black parents bought a bus and paid \$1.35 a month for their children to be taken to Williamsburg to attend the Training School. The County school board eventually provided transportation for the students. Illiteracy rates were much higher among the black community. In 1910, about 40 percent of the county and city blacks above age ten were

illiterate, whereas the comparable figure for whites was about four percent. By 1920, black illiteracy still stood at about 25 percent, whereas white illiteracy was only about one percent (see Table 8). And yet, this drop in illiteracy was also a remarkable achievement. When freedom first came, more than nine out of ten blacks had been illiterate; by the mid-twentieth century, nine out of ten blacks were literate. The proportions had been reversed in less than a century.²²

What kind of education did most James City County blacks get in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? It was certainly not the equal of the white children's education in many ways. First, for most black students, only six or seven years of education were available, unlike the twelve for many whites. Second, terms were short: under six months in the late nineteenth century, rising to around seven months in the second decade of the twentieth century. Moreover, black children were often needed to work on the land, so not all could attend school even during the regular term. Third, blacks did not even get a local high school until the 1920s; and even then it was only available to around eighty-five students by 1930. Fourth, when the secondary school was built, it emphasized technical education. It focused on agriculture and building skills for boys and sewing and homemaking for girls. Black children were not receiving a well-rounded education. Finally, the Training School only went up to the 11th grade, although certified high-school diplomas were awarded from 1926 onwards.²³

Bruton Heights marked major advances in other ways. It was the first school, black or white, in the state where students were offered electives in their high school curriculum. The range of black education expanded markedly: now an academic as well as technical education was feasible, as well as training in the arts, oratory, civic awareness and the like. Its school population stood at about 260 in 1950, and had expanded to 370 ten years later. Graduates from this school have proceeded to assume posts in the fields of neurosurgery, engineering, law, accountancy, and the like.²⁴

In 1966, integration was set in motion in James City County. Theoretically, blacks henceforth were to receive just the same education as whites. Since many rural blacks come from disadvantaged homes, and since many schools stream children by ability (and, therefore, often consign blacks to the least academically orientated classes), it seems highly probable that equal educational opportunities do not, in fact, exist. However, the irony is that, with integration, it is difficult to measure either educational performance or provision between blacks and whites.

EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

The Years of Slavery

It has already been pointed out that blacks at least got a form of job training under slavery. In fact, they received it rather early in life because many Virginia black slaves were put to work in the fields between the ages of ten and fourteen. Even

before then, most quarter children between the ages of six and ten were given miscellaneous chores around the plantation. Henry Johnson, who was raised "all over the state of Virginia," recalls that "when I was a little bit of a fellow, I used to pack water to twenty-five and thirty men in one field, den go back to de house and bring enough water for breakfast de next morning. When I got a little bigger, I had to take a hoe and dig weeds out of de crop."²⁵

But many James City County slaves learned much more than how to handle a hoe. Let us listen to some of the county's masters describing their runaway slaves as early as the eighteenth century, and we will soon discover highly skilled slaves. In 1767, a twenty-six year old slave named Bob ran away from a plantation near Williamsburg. He had only recently been recaptured, after passing three years as a free black in North Carolina. He was described as "an extraordinary sawer, a tolerable good carpenter and currier, pretends to make shoes, and is a very good sailor." He could also read and write. In 1783, a thirty year old runaway was equally well qualified: he could also "read very well, is a very good sawyer, and clapboard carpenter . . . and hires himself as a freeman to work on vessels." Other runaways from James City County include a carpenter and miller, a baker, a waiter from Green Spring plantation, and a foreman who was said to be "a sensible fellow" and "has no striking fault but an impudent tongue."²⁶ Undoubtedly, these men were atypical eighteenth-century black slaves, but

equally clearly many black men escaped the drudgery of field labor and made substantial contributions to the county economy.

Those county slaves who resided in Williamsburg made their own distinctive contribution to the urban economy. A large proportion of them were domestic servants -- cooks, waiters, general house servants. A smaller group of skilled and semi-skilled slaves were also readily apparent. There were slave barbers, blacksmiths, butchers, cabinetmakers, harnessmakers, and tailors. There was even an old black cooper named Harry who belonged to John Greenhow's store and whose special talent was to pick locks. According to his master, he "is seldom long in a place before he puts his ingenuity in practice." Or take forty-four year old Pheby who ran away in 1782, and who had "been seen frequently in Williamsburg, about the market, selling cakes, oysters, &c."²⁷

A close working proximity between an urban skilled slave and his master might bring with it unusual advantages. Listen to Abraham, a slave resident in Williamsburg in the late eighteenth century, as he describes his relationship to his merchant master, Thomas Bentley:

I was rather regarded as a Clerk and assistant than in the unfortunate character of a slave [and] was always entrusted with the care, account and disposition of his money, effects, and other property.

If such a claim seems far-fetched -- how could a black slave earn such privileges, you may well ask? -- then let us attend to a white friend of Abraham's master who corroborated the slave's story. He testified that Bentley had indeed placed "almost unlimited confidence in Abraham not only by retaining him as a store keeper on his own store, but committing Merchandise to his direction; and sending him with them for sale thro' the Country." Abraham gained his freedom because of this testimony and took the name Abraham Peyton Skipwith.²⁸

Obviously free blacks had greater opportunities to learn skills and enjoy property than was the case for slaves. We find, for instance, that in nearby counties to James City as early as the 1710s, free black children were being put to apprenticeships. The surviving indentures are identical with those for whites in their requirements of adequate training in the master's craft and instructions in reading and writing. Thus, Princess Anne County ordered that "David James a free negro be bound to Mr. James Isdell who is to teach him to read ye bible distinctly also ye Trade of a gun Smith." Similarly, Lancaster County bound Robert, the son of young Cuba, a free Negro woman, to Edward Carter "till he is twenty-one years of age, and the said Carter is to find him suitable maintenance in his services and to use him to be taught to read and write." The free black community continued to maintain these skills. A search of the 1850 and 1860 censuses reveals that most free blacks, not surprisingly, were laborers, but a few were watermen, blacksmiths,

mechanics, millers, and sailors. In 1860, a blacksmith named Alexander Dunlop owned property valued at over \$2,000 in Williamsburg.²⁹

Some free blacks managed to acquire land and become farmers. In fact, the free blacks of James City County increased their farm acreage five-fold between 1830 and 1860. This was one of the fastest rates of progress by free blacks in the state. In 1860, five free blacks in the county owned more than 100 acres. Edward R. Crawley, with 232 acres, owned the most. A number of other prominent free blacks, who owned only small amounts of land, which they must have farmed part-time, supplemented their income from other sources. For example, Solomon and Robert Greenhow were bricklayers, John Ashland a teamster.³⁰

The economic role of free blacks in an antebellum tidewater county is illuminated by the words of Archie Booker. Mr. Booker, a black man, had been born a slave near Charles City in 1847, and in the late 1930s, he was interviewed in Hampton about his experiences as a slave. He recalled that there had been a "free nigguh town," as he referred to it, near his old plantation (whether this was in James City County or neighboring Charles City is unclear). In any case, Booker continued:

My ol boss ustah hire some o' em to wuk at harves time. Den dey had stores, shops an ev'thing. Dey all wuk. Some wuz wheelwright an' some wuz blacksmiths. None o' dem live by stealin. Dey wuked an' made a hones living.

De town didn' have no taxes. Marstuhns
o' de diffunt plantashuns give money to
keep de town going.³¹

Free blacks were obviously a useful group in an antebellum tide-water community where seasonal work was at a premium.

The Years After Slavery

Most freedmen knew but one occupation when emancipation came -- and they clung to it tenaciously. The prevailing aspiration among ex-slaves in James City County, like everywhere else in the South, was to own a farm. A surprising number achieved their goal. By 1910, there were about 180 black-owned farms in the county, only thirty-five fewer than the number of white-owned farms (see Table 9). At the same time, of course, the currents of economic change were moving in other directions. Black farmers were at a severe disadvantage because their farms were just too small to compete in the new economic climate (in 1920 the average black farm was 25 acres as compared to 191 acres for whites). Mechanization made many a small farmer go out of business and chased many a black farm laborer off the land. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the number of black-owned farms declined by about a third. In 1940, a third of the black male labor force was still engaged in agriculture; but a generation later, the proportion had dropped to a miniscule two percent (see Table 10).³²

Not every black aspired to be a farmer, especially since many a salve and free black had practised a trade before the

American Civil War. Not surprisingly, therefore, late nineteenth-century Williamsburg hosted a number of black businesses. The "Cheap Store" run by merchant Samuel J. Harris, who was also a shrewd real estate investor, was perhaps the most notable. But other black-run businesses included the Crump Restaurant, Theodore Harris's theatre, the Crutchfield barber shop and tea house, a blacksmithing shop, Skinner's Tavern and meat market. J. Andrew Jones, a Hampton Institute graduate, who lived in Williamsburg from the 1870s through 1956, became an important contractor in town.³³

Blacks have had to learn new jobs and skills in the twentieth century. Admittedly, most of these new occupations have been in the menial category, so that blacks have simply had to transfer from laboring jobs on the land to laboring jobs in restaurants, institutions, and the like. In fact, by 1980, almost half the black labor force of the County was employed in the service sector of the economy (see Table 11).

At the same time, however, there has been a modest but welcome expansion of opportunity. In the 1920s and 1930s, at the very height of segregation, a black carpenter and builder, Robert H. Braxton, built a number of houses (eventually, fifteen) in an area of Williamsburg that now bears his name. Braxton Court was black built, black bought and black owned. It housed people like Dr. Blaine Blayton, who received his M.D. from Howard University in 1932, and who came to Williamsburg in the early 1930s. He provided the black community with its first professionally-trained black doctor, though certainly not the first black doctor to

cater to blacks in the area.³⁴ Building upon the achievements of these early pioneers, a third of the county's black male labor force today can be found in managerial, professional, technical and craft employment. The corresponding figure for whites is around 75 percent, an indication of how much further blacks have to go, in spite of the immense strides made.

Blacks in the twentieth century have had to come to terms with a less acceptable aspect of freedom -- unemployment. In 1940, at the end of the depression years, ten percent of black men and 14 percent of black women were officially unemployed, with another 24 and 61 percent respectively being considered not part of the labor force. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, unemployment declined for both groups, although labor force participation for men also declined. By 1980, unemployment was again on the increase, with nine percent of black men and eight percent of black women officially unemployed. And while the encouraging growth in labor force participation by women continued, this has been offset by the harsh fact that in 1980, over 30 percent of black men were no longer part of the labor force. In all, fully 40 percent of black men and 46 percent of black women were without work (see Table 12).

The economic lessons blacks have had to learn once freedom came have not been easy ones. Equipped by slavery to live off the land, perhaps supplementing this activity with old-fashioned craft skills, blacks have had to adjust to a totally new economic picture. The service sector quickly replaced agriculture as the