

<https://www.wm.edu/sites/enslavedmemorial/slavery-at-wm/index.php>

Slavery at William & Mary

A Brief Overview

*"Slaves were as inseparable a part of the College as the old bricks of the College Building itself."*¹ Jennifer Oast Ph.D. '09

From its beginning, the success or failure of William & Mary relied on the labor of black people who worked tobacco fields in Virginia and Maryland. King William and Queen Mary specified in the charter that the institution was to be funded with,

the said revenue of a penny per pound, for every pound of tobacco aforesaid, with all its profits, advantages, and emoluments, to apply and lay out the same, for building and adorning the edifices and other necessaries for the said college,²

Enslaved blacks came to William & Mary through several channels. Some were purchased outright to serve the president and professors, some were given to the College, and still others belonged to members of the faculty, administration and to students. Several worked on the main campus, while others lived and worked on Nottoway Quarter, the college-owned tobacco plantation.

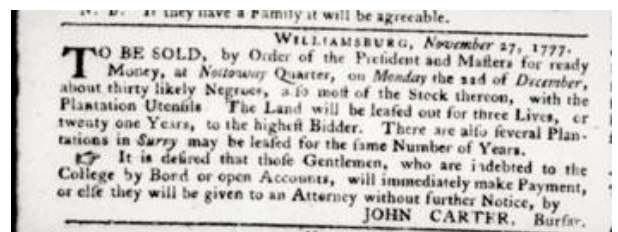
Historian Craig Steven Wilder asserts that during the colonial period, "a small army of slaves maintained the College of William and Mary."³ Unfortunately, missing records make it difficult to determine the exact size of this army, but research offers an idea about some of the people who labored at the school before the Revolution. Some of the individuals in this "army" entered the community one at a time. For example, in 1708, Francis Nicholson, the Governor of Virginia from 1698 - 1705, gave Price, an enslaved man valued at £30 to the College.⁴ In 1771, the College purchased an enslaved woman from the estate of Lord Botetourt.⁵ The largest known single purchase of enslaved people took place in 1718 when the institution purchased seventeen blacks to work at Nottoway Quarter.⁶ Little is known about these individuals—neither gender nor age—but sixteen years later Ben, an enslaved child born on the successful tobacco plantation, was baptized at the Bristol Parish Church in Prince George County.⁷

Another source of information about the enslaved people at the College is the baptism registry of Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg. Commissary William Dawson, the second president of the College, owned at least four enslaved people while he served the institution between 1743 and 1752, and all four—Judah, John, Beck or Buk, and Jack—were baptized.⁸ Between 1749 and 1768, the College had at least seventeen people baptized. The Bruton Parish records give insight into families enslaved at William & Mary. The records indicate that Peggy's son; Fanny, daughter of Sharlot; and Molly's son Tom Mask were all baptized in 1766. Sucky, daughter of Priscilla received the rite in 1768 as did Lucy, daughter of Charlot. Andrew, Molly, Antony, Frankey, Glasgow, Margaret, James, Andrew and Catherine were all baptized between 1747 and 1782, but their parentage is not provided.⁹

Some slaves came to campus with their young masters. Indeed, for a fee of £10, students could bring a body servant with them to take care of their personal needs. According to historian and former William & Mary president, Lyon G. Tyler, this was especially true of the wealthier students. In 1754, eight students, including Charles and Edward Carter, paid the fee and brought their servants.¹⁰ It is likely that these personal "servants," like those owned by the College, cleaned their masters' clothes and shoes, kept the fires going and ran errands.

From 1760 until 1774, the Associates of Thomas Bray operated a school for free and enslaved black children in Williamsburg. Benjamin Franklin, an Associate member, recommended the location because of what he considered William & Mary's "commitment to the religious education of local blacks."¹¹ During its 14-year tenure, the Bray School was under the charge of headmistress Anne Wager, who taught at least thirty children to read, enabling them to learn the Christian Bible and manners. The girls also learned to sew. Two of Wager's students, Fanny and Adam, were owned by William & Mary.¹² The school closed in 1774 when Wager died.

William & Mary's financial circumstances changed near the end of the eighteenth century. With the rise of revolutionary fervor, the College's income decreased. Royal grants ended, as did money from the Boyle Estate, which had funded the Brafferton Indian School.¹³ With the evaporation of these important sources of income, financial adjustments were necessary. In 1777, John Carter, the Bursar advertised "thirty likely Negroes" to be sold at Nottoway Quarter on Monday, December 22nd for "ready money."¹⁴ Five plantation workers—



Winkfield, Bob, Lemon, Adam and Pompey—were spared from the auction block and brought to campus where they cleaned and maintained the buildings.¹⁵ On December 25, 1779, the Board of Visitors removed the institution's responsibility for feeding its scholars. They agreed to hire a man to run the kitchen and garden, and that he was to be assisted by "Negroes accustomed to labour in the same"¹⁶ James Wilson was made steward, and he was assigned two men and a boy as his assistants. Wilson's compensation included "any benefit he can derive from the Garden after supplying the president and professors with vegetables, as steward and gardener of ye College."¹⁷ While some money was saved because of this adjustment, it was not enough and in September 1782, the decision was made that "so many of the Negroes not employed about the College be Sold to defray the Expense of repairing the Buildings."¹⁸

The College survived the Revolution, but never again owned as many slaves as it had before the war.¹⁹ It was cheaper to hire black people owned by others. The College would continue to own some of its laborers, but most of the people who labored at the school thereafter were leased and rented. In 1828, the administration resolved to hire Abram, Richard Holt's black man. Holt accepted \$160 per year with the proviso that Abram could be returned if he was "found not to answer our purpose."²⁰ At times it is apparent that W&M hired out enslaved people. A bursar's office list indicates that following the Revolution and before 1817, Lemon, James, Letty, Charlott, Betty, Molly, Mass, Lucy and two Gerrels were hired out.²¹

While the number of people owned by William & Mary decreased following the Revolution, the university and its faculty continued to play a key role in maintaining the peculiar institution. Thomas Roderick Dew, an alumnus turned professor by 1826, and by 1836, the school's thirteenth president, was recognized as one of the country's foremost experts on pro-slavery thought. Following Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, the Virginia General Assembly debated the question of what to do about slavery—abolish the institution and remove blacks, abolish the institution and allow blacks to remain in the Commonwealth or maintain the status quo. After 13 days, Virginia's governing body came to the conclusion that maintenance of the status quo was the only option.²² Dew followed the proceedings closely and in the aftermath wrote *Review of the Debates in the Legislature of 1831 and 1832*.²³ He presented an academic argument, using Christianity, economics, history, and the long held belief that blacks and whites could not live together, to support the Assembly's decision. Dew's work and that of other William & Mary professors spurred support of slavery and votes for secession that led to the Civil War.

This brief summary begins to suggest the contours of slavery and slaveholding at William & Mary. As of 2018, William & Mary was involved with slavery for more than half its history. Research about slave life is ongoing, as are investigations into the university's role during the Jim Crow years that followed the Civil War and Reconstruction.

¹ Jennifer Oast, *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680 – 1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 159.

² Royal Charter Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, William & Mary.

³ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press 2013), 136.

⁴ Mary Goodwin "William & Mary College Historical Notes" Colonial Williamsburg Research Department, n.d. Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 131.

⁵ Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 146. Lord Botetourt was the governor of Virginia 1768-1770.

⁶ *ibid.*, 131; Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*, 43.

⁷ *ibid.*, 145.

⁸ Bruton Parish Church (Williamsburg, Va.) Records, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, William & Mary.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*, 136.

¹¹ Terry Meyers, "Benjamin Franklin, the College of William & Mary, and the Williamsburg Bray School." *Anglican & Episcopal History*, vol. 79, no. 4 (December 2010): 368 – 393. For more information on the Bray Schools see Antonio T. Bly, "In Pursuit of Letters: A History of the Bray Schools for Enslaved Children in Colonial Virginia." *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2011): 429-59.

¹² *ibid.*, 384 (note 50).

¹³ Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 147. The Indian School, funded by the estate of Sir Robert Boyle, was established to Christianize and Anglicize Indian boys who, in theory, would return to their people and educate them in the ways of the English making them more amenable to the demands of the colonists.

¹⁴ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdue & Dixon, November 28, 1777.

¹⁵ College of William & Mary Faculty Minutes, Book One, page 280, pdf 6, page 31, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, William & Mary.

¹⁶ Mary Goodwin "William & Mary College Historical Notes" Colonial Williamsburg Research Department, n.d., 233.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 234a.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 252; Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 151.

¹⁹ Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 151.

²⁰ Mary Goodwin "William & Mary College Historical Notes" Colonial Williamsburg Research Department, n.d., 336.

²¹ List of Slaves owned by the College of William & Mary, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, William & Mary.

²² Erik S. Root, ed. *Sons of the Fathers: the Virginia Slavery Debates of 1831-1832* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

²³ Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew, *The Proslavery Argument; As Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States, containing the Several Essays, on the Subject of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co, 1853).