An Integrated Curriculum of The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Ancestors and Descendants

- Post Reprint: “An old Virginia plantation, a new owner and a family legacy unveiled”
- Student Activity: One Family’s Ironic Purchase
- Student Research: Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots
- Student Research: Plan Your Family Story Search
- Post Project Video: Descendants: Episode 7 | An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery
- Post Reprint: “Tim Kaine wants to ‘change the trajectory’ of his ‘Byrd seat,’ long held by segregationists”
- Student Activity: Byrd and Kaine | Then and Now
Irony and Legacy

What a fine story by The Post’s Joe Heim that connects the past and present with irony on many levels. “An old Virginia plantation, a new owner and a family legacy unveiled” reveals one family’s story that represents the many stories buried in courthouse records, forbidden history lessons and hurtful memories.

Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots activity encourages teachers to lead students in a search for family history. Although it would help to have Henry Louis Gates Jr. and staff finding our roots, there are many more digitized resources, historic societies and books available to teach students research skills and to have success. Carol Porter, former Post employee and art editor of the curriculum guides, graciously shares her mother’s family’s search for its roots enslaved in Virginia, educated and providers for each generation. We learn of cohabitation registries, college journals, deeds and family documents, photographs and memories. Guidelines are provided in Plan Your Family Story Search.

We don’t leave behind members of Congress in this resource guide. Sen. Tim Kaine reflects on the “Byrd seat” he occupies on the Senate floor as he speaks for voting rights legislation. Once again irony, legacy and policy decisions entwine. Read and discuss “Tim Kaine wants to ‘change the trajectory’ of his ‘Byrd seat,’ long held by segregationists.” Teachers are provided with Byrd and Kaine | Then and Now activity to compare and contrast concepts and actions that are included in the article.

The Post has developed special projects. Descendants: Episode 7 | An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery is introduced. View the video and consider the irony and legacy of the man who wrote the law.
An old Virginia plantation, a new owner and a family legacy unveiled

A man who purchased a plantation home in the rural Virginia community he grew up in later learned its original owners had enslaved his ancestors.

BY JOE HEIM

• Originally Published January 22, 2022

GRETKA, Va. — There was so much Fredrick Miller didn’t know about the handsome house here on Riceville Road.

He grew up just a half-mile away and rode past it on his school bus every day. It was hard to miss. The home’s Gothic revival gables, six chimneys, diamond-paned windows and sweeping lawn were as distinctive a sight as was to be seen in this rural southern Virginia community. But Miller, 56, an Air Force veteran who now lives in California, didn’t give it much thought. He didn’t know it had once been a plantation or that 58 people had once been enslaved there. He never considered that its past had anything to do with him.

Two years ago, when his sister called to say the estate was for sale, he jumped on it. He’d been looking, pulled home to the place he left at 18. His roots were deep in this part of Pittsylvania County, and he wanted a place where his vast extended family, many of whom still live nearby, could gather.

The handsome house set on a rise had a name, it turned out. Sharswood. And Sharswood had a history. And its history had everything to do with Miller.
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lavery wasn’t something people talked much about in this part of Virginia when Miller was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. And other than a few brief mentions in school, it wasn’t taught much, either.

The only time he remembers the subject coming up was when Alex Haley’s miniseries, “Roots,” was broadcast in 1977.

“For a lot of us, that was our first experience with what really happened during slavery,” he said. “It just wasn’t discussed.”

Miller assumed his ancestors had been enslaved. But where and when and by whom were questions that were left unasked and unanswered.

“People didn’t want to talk about this stuff because it was too painful,” said Dexter Miller, 60, a cousin of Fredrick’s who lives in Java. “They would say, ‘This is grown folks’ business.’ And that’s how some of the history was lost.”

Another cousin, Marian Keyes, who taught first in segregated schools and later in integrated schools from 1959 to 1990, said that for a long time there was little teaching about slavery in Pittsylvania County.

“We weren’t really allowed to even talk about it back then,” said Keyes, who turns 90 this year and lives in Chatham. “We weren’t even allowed to do much about the Civil War and all of that kind of stuff, really.”

Even outside of school, when she was growing up, Keyes said, the subject of slavery was avoided.

“I just thought everything was normal,” she said, “because that was the way of life.”

But the unspoken history left a gulf.

It wasn’t until after Fredrick Miller bought Sharswood in May 2020 that its past started coming into focus. That’s when his sister, Karen Dixon-Rexroth and their cousins Sonya Womack-Miranda and Dexter Miller doubled down on researching their family history.

What neither Fredrick Miller nor his sister knew at the time was that the property they now own had once been a 2,000-acre plantation, whose owners before and during the Civil War were Charles Edwin Miller and Nathaniel Crenshaw Miller.

Fredrick Miller and so many members of his extended family were born and grew up in the shadow of Sharswood — and perhaps it was a clue to a deeper connection.

It wasn’t uncommon after emancipation for formerly enslaved people to take the last names of their enslavers. But establishing the link required more research.

His sister and cousins scoured genealogy sites and contacted Karice Luck-Brimmer, who works in community outreach with Virginia Humanities in Pittsylvania County and researches local African American genealogy. They pored over court and real estate records, examined census data and revisited family tales passed down over generations.

As the puzzle pieces connected, a clearer picture emerged. Sarah Miller, great-grandmother to Fredrick, Karen and Dexter, and great-great-grandmother to Sonya, died in 1949 at 81. From her death certificate, they learned that Sarah’s parents were Violet and David Miller.

The 1860 Census does not list enslaved people by name, only by gender and age. In the 1870 Census, however, Violet and David Miller lived just a short distance from Sharswood. Between the many documents that the descendants of Sarah Miller have obtained, the fragments of family oral history they’ve sewn together and the proximity of the family to the plantation, they are certain that Violet and David Miller were among those enslaved at Sharswood.

More clues continue to emerge. An entry in the Virginia Slave Births Index uncovered this month by Luck-Brimmer shows that a boy named Samuel was born to Violet in Pittsylvania County on May 9, 1864. N.C. Miller is listed as the enslaver. In the 1870 Census record for Violet and David Miller, Samuel, age 5, is listed as a member of the household. Sarah, his youngest sister, also is listed as a member of the household. She
would have been 2, although no age is given for her in the record.

The newly discovered document “hands-down places them on the plantation,” Womack-Miranda said after seeing the entry. “It can never be disputed.”

For Fredrick Miller, the 10.5-acre estate he’d purchased for $225,000 ended up not being just a future gathering spot for the family, but also its first traceable point in the United States — an astonishing revelation for him. It also left him thinking about family history and the absence of that history for many people like him.

“You’ve got to know where you come from,” he said in a phone interview from his California home. “You’ve got to know where you come from. It’s unfortunate that a lot of us don’t.”

In an undated photo of Sarah that family members have shared with one another, the mother of seven wears wire-rimmed glasses and faces the camera with a somber expression. When he looks at the photo of his great-grandmother, Fredrick Miller sees sadness in her face. But, he hopes, maybe this purchase has brought some redemption.

With Sharswood in his hands, her family is reclaiming its past.

“I just hope that somehow she’s looking down from heaven and finally cracking a beautiful smile,” he said.

On a recent mid-December day, the oaks and walnuts that tower nearby had shed all of their leaves. A dry spell had turned the winter grass browner still. But Sharswood still shone, with its bright white paint accented with black shutters and a green metal roof. Immaculate.

Designed by the famed New York architect Alexander Jackson Davis and built in the middle of the 19th century, Sharswood signaled success.

Even with the additions and paint jobs over the years, it’s not hard to envision how the house looked before the Civil War, when it was the hub of one of the largest tobacco plantations in Pittsylvania County. And it’s not hard to envision the enslaved men, women and children who toiled to harvest that tobacco and enrich the plantation’s owners.

Approximately 550,000 people in Virginia were enslaved at the outset of the Civil War — roughly a third of the commonwealth’s population — Virginia Museum of History & Culture figures show.

In Pittsylvania County, closer to half of the population was not free. Those enslaved at Sharswood in 1860 ranged in age from 1 to 72, according to Census figures. Thirty-five were 12 or older and considered adults on the census count. There were 23 children. Of the 58 total, 31 were female.

There were 12 houses for enslaved people on the plantation, determined Doug Sanford, a retired professor of historic preservation at the University of Maryland and retired archaeologist.

The newly discovered document is a small window into the plantation’s life. But not much more.

For many Black Americans, slavery is a brick wall that prevents them from finding out more about their past before emancipation. Census records before the Civil War rarely provided names of enslaved people. Some owners kept records that included first names and the prices they paid to buy an enslaved person or what they received for selling one, but personal details are scarce. Separations of families made the kinship trails even more difficult to follow.

Even when slavery ended, the details of the people subjected to it and of their daily lives were not easy to come by. After emancipation, there was a reluctance among those who had endured slavery to share their story with their children and grandchildren, said Leslie Harris, a professor and historian at Northwestern University who has written extensively about slavery in the United States.

“The generation closer to these experiences clearly were dealing with a traumatic memory, and they didn’t want to rehearse that memory,” Harris said. “Toni Morrison has this line in her book ‘Beloved’ where she says ‘This is not a story to pass down.’ So, for that generation, they didn’t want to pass down that trauma.”

But for subsequent generations, Harris said, “It’s not that it’s not troubling to learn these histories, but our curiosity and our desire to understand is enough removed from that to have us ask different questions of the record.”

The dilapidated cabin behind the main house at Sharswood isn’t visible from the road. A humble structure with a central chimney dividing two rooms, it feels almost hidden. But Sarah Miller’s descendants have focused their attention on it.

What the family learned from ongoing research by Sanford and Pogue and by Jobie Hill, a preservation architect who started the Saving Slave Houses project in 2012, is that the cabin was built before 1800, probably as the main house on the property, and then was divided into a duplex before 1820. From then on, they said, it probably served as a kitchen and laundry for the main house and a living space for some who were enslaved at Sharswood.

Standing 50 feet from the 16-by-32-foot cabin in which her ancestors may have worked or lived, Womack-Miranda, 53, said the discovery of the connection has been life-altering.
“When I walk around here, I imagine my ancestors walking on the same ground, the same dirt,” she said. “As an African American, you feel like you have reached the point where you can say, ‘I’m connected to my ancestors, to my roots, to the very plantation where my ancestors were enslaved.’ It makes me feel whole as an African American.”

Karen Dixon-Rexroth says she, too, feels the presence of her ancestors all about the property.

But Dixon-Rexroth, 49, also has noticed the generational difference when it comes to discussing the history of the plantation. As she walked with her mother, Betty Miller-Dixon, across the backyard last month and toward the cabin, she sensed her mother’s reluctance.

“You don’t like to go there, do you, Mom?” she asked.

Miller-Dixon, 81, stopped and looked at the dwelling.

“You just wonder how they survived it,” said Dexter Miller, “I could feel my ancestors, and it almost brought tears to my eyes. I can picture them sitting around the fireplace, and I just imagine my ancestors walking here and how they may have felt inside that life has to be better than this,” Dixon-Rexroth said. “And now, all these years later, us having the property in our possession.”

In August, the Miller family held a huge two-day reunion on the grounds. More than 200 relatives came. Tents and chairs were set up in the yard. Tables overflowed with fried fish, grilled jerk chicken, banana pudding and corn pudding. A food truck served Italian ice. Children ran around or played in a moon bounce. There were board games, raffles, giveaways. A DJ set up on the front porch.

The Miller family reunions go back to at least 1965. Relatives told Fredrick Miller it was the best one they had attended. Miller said that when he looked at the crowd that had gathered that weekend, he was proud that his relatives were reconnecting, not just with one another, but also with their past. The small cabin behind the house was something everyone wanted to see.

“I just sat back and was able to observe the excitement of the people who showed up,” Miller said. “It was just such a good feeling to talk to them about that place, and that’s something we’d been lacking.”

He still thinks about if he had not bought Sharswood and how the past almost slipped through the family’s fingers.

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One Family’s Ironic Purchase

Paying for a college education, buying a car and purchasing a home are among the biggest expenses a person encounters. They often come with unexpected interests, friendships and experiences. Read and discuss “In buying a home, family discovers its painful past.” Answer on your own paper.

1. Why did Fredrick Miller purchase the estate on Riceville Road?

2. Annotate the second paragraph of Washington Post reporter Joe Heim’s article. After the short descriptor, give details:
   a. Youth of Miller:
   b. Description:
   c. Information not known:

3. The fourth paragraph could be considered the “nut graph.” It is the paragraph that lets the reader know what’s to come in the article and why you got the background and descriptions in the opening paragraphs.
   a. Why is “history” a key word?
   b. What do you expect to learn?

4. Why did Fredrick Miller and others in his generation not know much about slavery or their family’s enslaved past?

5. Summarize his cousins’ search for family genealogy after Miller purchased Sharswood.
   a. Include at least three places they looked for documents.
   b. In what way did the death certificate of Sarah Miller assist them?
   c. Were the 1860 Census and 1870 Census helpful?
   d. What did the cousins conclude?

6. The Miller cousins’ search is an example of being aware of new digitized documents. What new information helped them to confirm their connection to Sharswood?

7. After the description of a mid-December day and additional information about Sharswood, reporter Heim shifts away from the Miller family of today. He provides historic context for this family’s story.
   a. What was true of Virginia’s population in 1860?
   b. What does the 1860 Census reveal about the people living in Pittsylvania County?
   c. Heim includes reliable sources. What do Doug Sanford and Dennis Pogue add to the story?

8. Leslie Harris is another expert source.
   a. Summarize the perspective on slavery that Harris adds to the narrative.
   b. Would Miller cousin Marian Keyes agree with this point of view? Explain.

9. Readers are next taken to the “dilapidated cabin behind the main house.” Why do you think Heim included it in the story of the Miller purchase?

10. What is irony?

11. There are several examples of irony in this article. Give one example and explain why it is ironic.

12. The ending of Heim’s article is a book-end. Give details of how the opening and conclusion create this structure for a story.
Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots

Have you every wondered why your aunts say you look just like your grandfather? Or why your family has cousins living in Jamaica? Or why and how your great grandparents left Ukraine? The answers to these questions are part of a family history.

Begin by collecting your own memories and the memories of your parents, grandparents and other relatives. These personal stories may lead you to putting the story into the bigger picture. Your story and your family’s stories may be part of a larger theme: economic conditions, enslavement and indenture, migration, immigration, famine and war.

Keep reading to learn how to conduct a search for your family story.

Become a Story Collector

Members of your family have stories to tell. These may be their own stories or ones that they were told by family members. Take time to listen. Show respect and be patient. Just as you would do for any interview, plan questions. If the sharing of stories happens spontaneously at a family gathering, take notes if possible.

Some family members easily share stories. All you have to do is ask if their grandma told them a story about her family or what it was like when they were ten years old. You need to be ready with pencil and paper, a video camera or recorder. Ask permission to record the stories. If you don’t understand some of the story, don’t be afraid to ask for clarification after the story is told. Or if your grandma is telling about her brothers taking mangoes from an elderly aunt’s tree, after the story is told, ask about the aunt’s reaction as well as her name and her exact relation (Maternal or paternal? An aunt by blood or in name only? Who were her husband and children?)

Other family members need encouragement to share stories. Your sincerity and interest will make the person more receptive to telling a story. You might begin by having them tell a story about when they were younger or when they were your age. You might ask if there is a family album. Ask about the people pictured.

Have you wondered about family traditions or items you were not to touch? Perhaps, they hold stories. Here are some possibilities:

- Do you have a dish that is always served at Thanksgiving, religious observances or at family reunions? Perhaps, there is a story behind it. Maybe great grandma’s recipe for a special dessert has a story. Who knows why it is served only at this occasion?
- Is there an item of clothing in a closet that no one would dare give away because of a memory attached to it? Does your grandfather have a military uniform in the back of his closet? See if he is ready to tell you about his experience.
- In a drawer, is there a christening gown, a sari or ballet slippers? In the attic, is there a box with a wedding dress or old sports equipment? Why are they stored away?
- Look through family photo albums, slides or home movies. Do these remind someone of another time? Perhaps, the home movies show your mother being brought home from the hospital when she was a baby. Ask her to tell you about her earliest memory. Maybe there are pictures of a family vacation or a place you do not recognize. Are people pictured whom you do not know?

Remember, when you collect family stories you are becoming the storyteller for the next generation. It is important to be accurate. Be sure to record who told you the story and when.

Are there any documents that support the stories? If you cannot order official copies, you may wish to photocopy or photograph the ones that family members have. These personal documents would include diplomas, licenses and deeds.

After you have collected the personal stories, photographs and begun a family tree, do more formal research.

Place Family Stories Within the Big Picture

You may wish to expand the family story by giving it historic context. As a U.S. census is administered, you will hear about the importance of collecting this information for economic and political reasons. There are also personal reasons to be included in a census. Just as future generations will be able to delve into recent census records, you are able to research the past for answers to your questions. You may be able to trace family members that began with a mention that the tall woman in the old photograph is your great, great grandmother who lived somewhere in Oklahoma in the 1920s.

In addition to census records being available online, many historical societies, state and county registry data and public information are being digitized. If your ancestors were enslaved or indentured, you may have difficulty finding their names. They were most often considered property rather than human beings. Don’t give up. Still look. If not in census records, you may find an unexpected document such as a cohabitation register or manumission document.

Your family’s story may be part of a larger theme. Did your family immigrate to the United States? Has your family lived in the same state for generations or did your maternal grandfather come from Italy and your fraternal great grandmother from Ireland? Why did they personally leave their homeland? Was it to take advantage of an American education or to escape famine? Was it at a time when others from that country sought asylum? Did an uncle travel to the U.S. during summers to work?

Place your family’s experience within the larger picture. Has your family lived in the same state for generations? Or is your family’s story part of a migration? Were your ancestors forced to leave their homeland? Did your family migrate from the South to the North? Did your family move in the Dust Bowl era?
Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots | continued

The Dodson Family | Farmville, Virginia

Carol Porter shares with you documents that helped her to begin to write her family’s story on her mother’s side — the Dodson Family. It gives examples of different sources that may help in piecing together the life story of a family.

Carol Porter knows her grandfather’s story from her mother’s memories of what she was told, photographs of her grandparents and documentation found in Southern Workman, a monthly journal of Hampton University. According to the Dictionary of Virginia, the Hampton school’s journal “published news and information about Hampton, its faculty and its graduates, as well as lectures, articles, book reviews and essays on topics in African American and American Indian history and education.” Hampton encouraged its graduates to write to tell them about their life after attending there.

Tell a Family Story

Collect Written Documents

**Factual**
- Birth certificates
- Diplomas and report cards
- Military service documents
- Marriage licenses
- Deeds to property
- Obituaries
- Passports
- Wills
- Death certificates

**Personal**
- Blogs and emails
- Diaries
- Letters
- Poems and songs
- Recipes

Collect Visual Artifacts

- Artwork
- Clothing
- Photographs
- Tombstone inscriptions
- Video
- Yearbooks

Do Research

- Family member interviews
- Biographies
- Census records
- Cohabitation registries
- History books
- Local libraries & museums
- Memoirs
- Newspaper online archives
- LOC Newspapers
- The National Archives
- Religious records
- State historical societies
Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots

DODSON FAMILY CEMETERY FACT SHEET
August, 2014

Set back about a half from the road, the cemetery is an almost otherworldly place—serene and separate from the hubbub of the modern world.

According to several records, Aaron Dodson was born in Prince Edward County, Virginia, USA, on 1820, 1825, 1826. Records vary because even with census records, most of the early information was oral or passed on from entries in family Bibles, etc. to the interviewer. Legibility of handwriting was also a factor when the information was later transcribed into typed form, which is why many of our ancestors have different spellings of their names and variations in birthdates.

On September 11, 1888, Aaron purchased 344 acres of land in Prince Edward County from C.M. Walker to be paid in four installments over four years. F.M. Dickinson was the trustee for the sale. The area is associated with several names—Pamplin, Darlington Heights, Spring Creek and Buffalo District.

The deed is recorded in the Clerk’s Office in the Court House in Farmville, Virginia in Book 38, page 143. No formal will was filed.

The deed leaves land to the following heirs:

Mary J. Dodson – 25 acres
Martha J. Dodson – 53 acres
Richard Dodson – 54 and ½ acres
Stanhope Dodson – 49 acres
Spencer Dodson – 50 acres
Margaret M. Walker – 44 acres
Bettie A. Watts – 66 acres
Mary A. Booker – 53 acres
William H. Dodson – 70 acres

The cemetery is on the half acre of land that was deeded to Richard Dodson. It is located in Darlington Heights in Prince Edward County, Virginia, Tract 35 in the Buffalo District.

Luther Gaines, grandson of William Dodson lives with a mile of the location.

The Dodson Family Cemetery Fact Sheet was compiled by Veleeder Goldman Flythe using a deed found in the Clerk’s Office in the Court House in Farmville, Virginia. Note she includes the book number and page reference to document the research.
If you know where your ancestor lived and may have been enslaved there, see if the Court House has cohabitation documentation. Carol’s family has a clear statement of the man who enslaved Aaron Dodson and his wife. According to the Library of Virginia, Virginia Memory website:

“Cohabitation registers are among the most important genealogical resources for African-Americans attempting to connect their family lines back through the oftentimes murky past to their enslaved ancestors. The registers date from 1866 and provide a snapshot in time for the individuals recorded therein and a wealth of information that may otherwise be impossible, or at least very difficult, to uncover.

“Prior to the close of the Civil War, Virginia law provided no legal recognition for slave marriages. On 27 February 1866, the General Assembly enacted a law that entitled formerly enslaved people who had married during slavery to all of the rights and privileges as if they had been duly married by law and declared all of their children legitimate, whether born before or after the passage of this act.

Additionally, the federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (commonly called the Freedmen’s Bureau) directed the assistant superintendents of the states to order the county clerks to make a registry of such persons cohabiting. These registers were either deposited with the local clerks of court or were retained in the Freedmen’s Bureau records, now found at the National Archives.”

After Carol had gathered together the documents and records found by her cousin, family photographs, her memories of conversations with her mother and older relatives, trips to Farmville and the family cemetery, she used her artistic ability to visually tell part of the story in an illustration of her great great grandmother Elizabeth, a slave; grandmother Mary, her mother Alma and herself. She has documents to support everything she states in her narrative.

The family of my mother, Alma Dodson Porter, originated in Prince Edward County, Virginia. The earliest known patriarch was Aaron Dodson, her grandfather, who was born in 1820 in the town of Farmville, the county seat.

As with many African Americans, Aaron Dodson was born into slavery. He was owned by D.F. Wornock. Research by cousin Veleeder Goldman Flythe, great granddaughter of William Dodson, found that on “September 11, 1888, Aaron purchased 344 acres in Prince Edward County from C.M. Walker to be paid in four installments over four years.” Aaron in turn passed on land to his children.

Aaron married Mary J. Dodson from Charlotte County, Virginia. Alma’s father, Stanhope Flournoy Dodson, born 1863, was one of the recipients of this parcel of land. Stanhope, my grandfather, and his two brothers, Richard and William, attended Hampton Institute in Virginia. Because of their early higher education, they were able to work the land as tobacco farmers, and they also were small business owners with a retail store in their community. In addition Stanhope taught school in Farmville. …

Profits from the store and cash crop sales enabled them to successfully thrive and care for their families. Since public education was practically nonexistent beyond the 6th grade, his children moved north or enrolled in the military for better opportunities.

The south was extremely segregated. …

This has been my ancestral background of which I am very proud of their survival. They have provided me and my brothers and cousins the opportunity for a much better life. I am eternally grateful.

— Carol D. Porter, Artist and Graphic Designer
Use a Variety of Resources

In Virginia, students have another online resource. After receiving a grant in 2001 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and years of consulting with similar ventures, fund-raising, and infrastructure- and partnership-building, Virginia Humanities published its first entries late in 2008. In 2012, the project partnered with the Library of Virginia to become the digital EV, publisher of the Library’s ongoing, multivolume Dictionary of Virginia Biography, a trusted resource on Virginia history.

Washington, D.C., students visit the D.C. History Center, 801 K Street NW, or online to see what the Kiplinger Research Library offers.

Many local, state and university libraries have history collections or archives. In Baltimore, the Maryland Center for History and Culture, founded in 1844, collection reflects the state’s diverse heritage, and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum is thematically organized to explore local African-American heritage. Local museums include Banneker-Douglass Museum, Historic London Town & Gardens, Boonsborough Museum of History and Historic St. Mary’s City.

The Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society website has links to local chapters in the states and D.C. Check there for resources.

The Freedmen’s Bureau Records can be accessed through the National Museum of African American History & Culture website at https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/freedmens-bureau-records. In person visit the Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center. A virtual session may be made by contacting familyhistorycenter@si.edu.

John Wesley Cromwell
(1846–1927)

SUMMARY

John Wesley Cromwell was an educator, lawyer, and journalist. Born enslaved in Portsmouth, he became free after his mother, who was manumitted in 1849, purchased and freed his father and siblings. The family settled in Philadelphia, where Cromwell attended the Institute for Colored Youth, a Quaker school. He taught at several schools between 1865 and 1871, some of which were located in Portsmouth and Norfolk County. Cromwell acquired his law degree at Howard University and likely was the first African American attorney to argue before the Interstate Commerce Commission. He also published and edited the People’s Advocate, a weekly newspaper, from 1876 to 1884; established a series of intellectual associations, such as the Negro American Society and the Bethel Literary and Historical Association; and helped found the American Negro Academy. He resumed his career in education in 1899. Cromwell was a strong advocate for industrial and agricultural education, but later came to believe that African American leaders should also seek political solutions to racial problems. He died at his Washington, D.C., residence in 1927.

To see what information may be available in Encyclopedia Virginia, we at random selected John Wesley Cromwell. A summary provides a quick look at his life. This is followed by stages of his life: Early Years, Teaching Career, Lawyer and Journalist, Organizer and Educator, and Major Works.

https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/cromwell-john-wesley-1846-1927/
Plan Your Family Story Search

1. Whose story will you tell?  _______________________________________________________________

2. What do you know about this family member before beginning your search?

3. Who will you interview? Why each person?
   a.
   b.
   c.

4. Make a list of ten questions to begin your talk with each interviewee.
   (Write them on another sheet of paper or on the back of this page.)

5. What factual written documents are available?

6. What personal written documents have you found?

7. Tell about the visual artifacts you have located.

8. What leads do you plan to follow to learn more about your family member?

9. What resources will you use to do further research or to document information?

10. What new information or insight into your family member have you gained?
Lost Lineage: The quest to identify black Americans’ roots”

BY NICOLE ELLIS

For many Americans, blended ancestry is an integral part of their identity. The mosaic of hyphenated heritages preserves cultural connections beyond the United States, lineages that build pride and a sense of belonging. But for Americans descended from enslaved Africans, the roots of their ancestry are often a mystery. Family trees go dark after five or six generations, a reminder that 150 years ago, Black people weren’t considered people.

Genealogists refer to this as “the brick wall,” an obstruction in African American lineage that dates to 1870 when the federal Census began recording African descendants — 250 years after they were first hauled in chains to what would become the United States.

Before then, their lives existed on paper only as another person’s property. To penetrate the brick wall, Black Americans frequently must rely on the names of their ancestors’ owners.

“You can find them through [their owners’] tax records, estate records, slave schedules and wills,” said Mary Elliott, the “Slavery and Freedom” curator for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Even after abolition, the Black experience has fallen victim to campaigns that obscure the darkest parts of the American story, diminishing African Americans’ connections to their pasts and warping the collective memory of the nation’s history.

But in recent years, Black Americans have pursued new efforts to uncover their stories. From exploring sunken vessels of the Middle Passage to reconstructing museum exhibits that chronicle slavery, African Americans are breaking down the barriers that separate them from their ancestors and reconnecting with a lineage once lost.

Episodes in this Washington Post series are found at “DESCENDANTS.” View Episode 7 and the laws codified by Thomas Cobb, a lawyer, enslaver and Confederate Congressman.

Episode 7
An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery
Ahmaud Arbery’s death was one of multiple flash points in the last few years that have made people question whether or not the foundation of America’s justice system is equality or racism. Georgia’s citizen’s arrest law has historically been used to reinforce the racial hierarchy they were created to uphold by providing cover for Whites who were oppressing Blacks. They were written in 1861 by Thomas Cobb, a lawyer, slave owner, Confederate Congressman, and co-founder of University of Georgia’s law school who wrote the book of record on why Black people should be enslaved.
An irony struck Sen. Tim Kaine as he argued for his voting rights bill on the Senate floor Wednesday.

Here he was, in a seat once held by infamous segregationist Harry F. Byrd Sr., who had used the filibuster to oppose voting rights legislation, and now Kaine (D-Va.) was advocating changing the filibuster to pass voting rights legislation. Meanwhile, he noted, he couldn’t find a Republican ally on the bill — including his friend Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.), who held a seat once occupied by Lyndon B. Johnson, who championed the Civil Rights Act and signed it as president.

“I inhabit a seat that for years was called the ‘Byrd seat’ in the Senate, inhabited for 50 years by Harry Byrd Sr. and Harry Byrd Jr., who were known for their virulent efforts to deprive African Americans of civil rights, including frequent extended filibusters on this floor against voting rights,” he told Senate colleagues.

In an interview Wednesday night, Kaine said that legacy “weighed heavily” on him over the past year as he helped lead the charge on voting rights — a push that culminated late Wednesday in yet another Republican filibuster that blocked the legislation, plus a failed vote to change the filibuster rules, with Sens. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) joining Republicans to oppose it. Kaine had advocated returning to the “talking filibuster,” as opposed to the current 60-vote threshold required to end debate.

“I wanted to change the trajectory of the seat that I sit in,” Kaine told The Washington Post. “Not just by being one vote. But I was happy to be asked to play a role in this even though I’m not on any of the relevant committees … because this seat has a history to it, and history matters to Virginia.”

The voting rights legislation pushed by Democrats would restore provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and create new federal standards for election laws to expand voting access. Democrats have said those standards are intended to counteract restrictive laws passed in Republican-led states in the wake of former president Donald Trump’s false claims of voter fraud.

Republicans, in turn, labeled the legislation federal overreach and a Democratic power grab. Kaine countered that after Virginia passed new laws that
expanded voting access, the state elected a Republican governor in November.

Kaine had invoked the Byrd name several times while appealing to Senate colleagues to support voting rights legislation. Harry F. Byrd Sr., the leader of the “Byrd organization” that steered Virginia politics for decades, served as governor in the late 1920s and was known for his strict fiscal discipline. He entered the U.S. Senate in 1933, where he remained for more than 30 years and opposed civil rights.

Following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Byrd became the chief architect of the “Massive Resistance” to school integration and pushed schools to close rather than comply with the law. He was among the Southern Democrats to sign the “Southern Manifesto” against civil rights. And for years, he participated in their strategic filibusters intended to torpedo voting and civil rights legislation, at times using his position as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee to hold tax legislation hostage as the Kennedy and Johnson administrations pursued civil rights, said Adam Jentleson, author of “Kill Switch: The Rise of the Modern Senate and Crippling of American Democracy.”

“What he did was he made the Senate the epicenter of Massive Resistance, and what was significant about the Southern Manifesto, which laid the groundwork for Massive Resistance to civil rights, is it had the authority of the Senate attached to it. And that gave it enormous clout,” said Jentleson, former deputy chief of staff to late Senate majority leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.).

In 1949, Byrd exalted in “one of the most notable victories in our history” when Southern Democrats managed to raise the bar even higher to clear a filibuster, requiring a full two-thirds majority to cut off debate, according to the book “Delaying the Dream: Southern Senators and the Fight Against Civil Rights, 1938-1965,” by Keith M. Finley. The rule change paved the way for the infamous marathon filibusters against civil rights by Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) and the other notoriously segregationist Byrd — Sen. Robert Byrd (no relation), a West Virginia Democrat.

But by the mid-1960s, as Southern Democrats’ power began to wane, Harry Byrd appeared almost resigned to the inevitable; he even relented on Johnson’s tax bill, Jentleson said. When asked by a Newsweek reporter whether he would participate in the filibuster against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Byrd said he would “do his part,” then added: “But you know we can’t stop this bill. We can’t deny the Negroes a basic constitutional right to vote,” according to Finley’s book.

Kaine said Wednesday that the difference between Harry Byrd Sr. and Robert Byrd is that Robert Byrd, a former Klansman, later apologized for his years-long crusade against civil rights, whereas Harry Byrd never did.

“When he was pushing the Southern Manifesto, when he was pushing Massive Resistance, when he was pushing schools to close rather than integrate, when he was filibustering these bills, he did it without apology,” Kaine said.

Harry Byrd Sr. retired from the Senate in 1965 and died in 1966. His son Harry Byrd Jr. — who had been a staunch supporter of his father’s Massive Resistance campaign and carried it out in the Virginia state Senate — held his U.S. Senate seat until 1983. Kaine, who had gotten to know Byrd Jr. in the last years of his life, attended his funeral in 2013.

In the ensuing years, the Harry Byrd name came down from sites across Virginia, including on a middle school and a highway honoring Byrd Sr. and a Shenandoah University business school honoring Byrd Jr. A statue of Byrd Sr. was removed from the Virginia Capitol grounds last year.

On Wednesday, despite the failure of the voting legislation and the filibuster rule change, Kaine said he was not done trying to change the trajectory of his seat on voting rights.

“The history of voting rights in particular demonstrates that a failed vote is often the foundation of the next success,” Kaine said. “This is not one and done. ... I have to let the emotions of today recollect in tranquility for a day or two before I’m sure I know what the next steps are, but I know all 50 of my colleagues are saying there are definitely next steps.”
Byrd and Kaine | Then and Now

Post reporter Meagan Flynn interviews Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) the night he had argued on the Senate floor for a proposed voting rights bill. Read and discuss “Tim Kaine wants to ‘change the trajectory’ of his ‘Byrd seat,’ long held by segregationists” that covers both the present and the past.

1. Review the definitions of the following terms found in the article.

   - Advocate
   - Ally
   - Counteract
   - Integration
   - Irony
   - Legacy
   - Notorious
   - Segregationist
   - Staunch
   - Virulent

2. The second paragraph of the article uses the rhetorical device of contrast to explain the irony that Kaine sees in his seat in the Senate. Select one of the examples and explain the irony.

3. Read the third and fourth paragraphs and the last two paragraphs of the article. What is Kaine’s attitude and perspective on the legislative process and the voting rights bill?

4. The content of this article might be read as a comparison/contrast of THEN and NOW. Positions are stated and they are implied. Select one of the pairs. Carefully read the parts of the article where the concepts, legislation and actions are discussed. Do some research to learn more — you are to be the expert on your chosen topic.

   THEN  Filibuster use in the “Byrd era”
   NOW  Fillibuster use in the current Congress

   THEN  1965 Voting Rights Act
   NOW  2021-22 Proposed voting rights legislation

   THEN  Power of members of Congress
   NOW  Power of governors

   THEN  Massive Resistance related to schools
   NOW  Parental voice in school decisions

5. After 2013, the “Harry Byrd name came down from sites across Virginia, including on a middle school and a highway honoring Byrd Sr. and a Shenandoah University business school honoring Byrd Jr. A statue honoring Byrd Sr. was removed from the Virginia Capitol grounds [in 2021].”

   Who do you think we should honor? What guidelines should exist to determine whether a statue, a building name or highway designation be removed?