Unbound Freedom

- Word Study: From Slave to Enslaved
- LOC Research Resource: Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States.
- Post Book Review Reprint: “A Slave in the White House,’ by Elizabeth Dowling Taylor”
- Post Retropolis Reprint: “A Maryland attic hid a priceless trove of Black history. Historians and activists saved it from auction.”
- KidsPost Meet the Author: “Swamp is a haven from slavery in ‘Freewater’”
- Student Activity: True Grit and the Transformation from Slavery
- Post Retropolis Reprint: “Two families — one black, one white — share harrowing history. Then they met.”
From Shore to Freedom
With True Grit

The stories of those who were enslaved while having the common thread of denied freedom were also personal and distinctive. The skills they possessed, the education they achieved, the freedom they bought or grabbed through escape, the cruelty and odious circumstances they survived, and the success they achieved are their stories and legacy.

The Library of Congress map representing the distribution of the slave population was based on the 1860 census. It illustrates one more benefit of having a full census taken. Within those numbers are the people whose stories need to be found and told.

A Post older book review of *A Slave in the White House* introduces students to Paul Jennings who was enslaved by James and Dolley Madison. His freedom was purchased by Daniel Webster and he worked a free man in D.C.

Readers are taken to the shore in a KidsPost Meet the Author piece, “Swamp is a haven from slavery in ‘Freewater,’” and in The Post article, “A Maryland attic hid a priceless trove of Black history. Historians and activists saved it from auction.”

Word Study focuses on “slave,” its ancient origin and practice, and ends with the editorial decision to change The Post’s stylebook to reflect the connotations of “slave” and “slave master.” You and your students may reflect on that change and what Ann Friedman said about words: “I want people to be aware of their words. Aware of the words that people use around them and aware of the ones that they use themselves. Because they have a choice, stated Ann Friedman, founder and chief executive of Planet Word in a Post interview. “You can use your words to hurt others, to wound, or you can use them to heal and to create friendship and understanding and empathy.”

For more than three decades, Lisa Wu explored the vibrant coastal communities of the Delmarva peninsula with her students. Her passion for growing oysters both in the lab and on the dock led her to discover oyster merroir and a quest to add regional cooking to her culinary repertoire. She was introduced to the oyster king of NYC which inspired her to write our activity *True Grit and the Transformation from Slavery.*
From Slave to Enslaved


Good morning greetings to you in Croatian and Slovenian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and Slovak languages. These are all Indo-European languages spoken in most of eastern Europe, much of the Balkans, parts of central Europe and Russia. At the beginning of the 21st century Slavic languages were spoken by 315 million people. Most people who study words believe that “slave” originated with the Slav people who were often enslaved by others. The ancient Indo-European word *slauos* meant “people.” The Medieval Latin word *sclāvus* (c. 800 CE) means “slave.” This is the source also of Italian *schiavo*, French *esclave* and Spanish *esclavo*.

Other historians look to the Slavic words for “slave.” In Russian *rab*, in Serbo-Croatian *rob*, and Old Church Slavonic *rabu* — all are derived from Old Slavic *orbu* which has the idea of “things that change allegiance.” For the slave that allegiance would be from himself to his master. *Orbu* is also related to the word that means orphan. (Incidentally, this Slavic word is the root for “robot.”)

The word “slave” first appeared in English around 1290, spelled sclave. Slavery can broadly be defined as the ownership, buying and selling of human beings for the purpose of forced and unpaid labor. The history of enslaving another people can be seen in the terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slave labor</th>
<th>Slave master</th>
<th>Slave route</th>
<th>Slave states</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slave market</td>
<td>Slave owner</td>
<td>Slave ship</td>
<td>Slave trade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slavery is an ancient practice. It is found in the religious teachings of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths. For example, the Hebrew term for slave, *eved*, is a direct derivation from the Hebrew verb *la’avód* meaning “to work.” The slave in Jewish law is a worker or servant. “[T]he Latin term *servis*, interpreted as a ‘servant,’ used by the upper class of ancient Rome, describe[d] slaves as property giving up their rights and belonging to the respective master and lord,” according to Benjamin Veschi, etymology.net. “Servitude, on the other hand, is appreciated in the Latin *servitude*, which eventually, would be adopted to refer to people who perform domestic chores within a residence. Even in the religious sense it is combined to manifest the phrase ‘servant of God,’ to present an absolute devotion and dedication.”
Words have the power of their definition or denotation and their history of usage. A “grandfather clause” was used in seven Southern states between 1885 and 1910 to deny the right to vote to African Americans. Citizens, and their descendants, who had the right to vote before 1866 or 1867 were exempt from educational, property and tax requirements for voting. The Fifteenth Amendment was not passed until 1870. It guarantees “[t]he right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

Idioms such as “sold down the river” and something being “a cakewalk” have their origin in slavery. Slave traders, for example, used the Ohio River to the Mississippi River as their highway to sell enslaved people to plantation owners further south. According to Mississippi Encyclopedia, “Being ‘sold down the river’ — meaning the Mississippi River — was one of the worst threats slave owners in the Upper South and East could make to their slaves.”

Some historic and emotional connotations are so ingrained in daily usage, we don’t think about it. Realtors advertise master bedrooms and bathrooms. In computer languages when one component controls another it had been called a master/slave process. Drupal and other programming languages have replaced the term to primary/replica. When someone is called “uppity,” the term is referring to acting above society’s expectations. It was used in Uncle Remus books and as a reason for lynchings. There is power in connotation. Such words are “squaw” and “redskin” debase Native Americans.

Language can have a positive or negative influence on who we are, and how we see other people. When the origin of an expression has taken on a new meaning, using this expression might seem innocuous, according to Kristen Syrett, an associate professor in linguistics at Rutgers University.

“But if there’s something about that expression that is reminiscent of a practice or culture that marginalized or oppressed people, then we’re presented with an opportunity to revisit that expression and its utility in our language,” she said. “Is its use doing more harm than good? That’s the question we’re faced with now.”

The Washington Post and many other news organizations and magazines have changed their usage policy. The most current entry in the Post Stylebook states:

**slave/enslaved person**

Last Updated: 07/14/2020 01:30:29 PM

Outside of quotations, enslaved person/people or similar phrases (such as enslaved Africans) are strongly preferred over slave(s). This follows recent practices and emphasizes that they were people. Similarly, enslavers is preferred to slave owners, slaveholders or masters (especially avoid that one). There may be some constructions (slave ship, slave trade, etc.) or tight headlines where the preferred terms may not work and the usage is acceptable.
Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States. Compiled from the census of 1860.
BOOK REVIEW

“A Slave in the White House,”
by Elizabeth Dowling Taylor

BY JONATHAN YARDLEY

• Originally Published January 13, 2012

For eight years, beginning with the inauguration of James Madison in March 1809, an African American slave named Paul Jennings lived and worked in the White House. When his service as footman there began he was about 10 years old — the exact date of his birth is unknown — and his responsibilities included “messenger, dining room servant, assistant to the coachman, and other duties” assigned by the doorkeeper. Jennings was described by one of Dolley Madison’s nieces as “a handsome mulatto boy, and a favorite page of Mrs. Madison’s.”

He came to the White House with the Madisons from Montpelier, the plantation in Virginia where he had been born sometime in 1799. His mother “was a Madison slave, the granddaughter of an Indian; his father was a white merchant named Benjamin or William Jennings,” though beyond that nothing seems to be known about his father’s role, if any, in his life apart from passing along his surname. The harsh rules of the slave-holding states being such as they were, Paul became the Madisons’ slave because his mother was their slave, one of approximately 100 at Montpelier. The only known image of Paul, a daguerrotype taken sometime after he obtained his freedom in 1847, shows “a handsome man with a certain Frederick Douglass-like fierceness” whose “face reveals all of his genetic heritage: Afro, Anglo, and American Indian.”

By any measure, the Paul Jennings who went to the White House was an exceptional boy. He had “managed to learn to read and write, rare for a slave during a period when it was common for free poor people to substitute a mark for a signature because they were unable to write their own names.” Elizabeth Dowling Taylor speculates that the “likely picture that emerges is of a young Paul absorbing language skills by ‘standing in’ on lessons offered to one or more boys of the Madison extended family. Listening in, secondhand learning: this is perhaps the first instance of Jennings taking advantage of his circumstances.”

Those circumstances were, of course, the household of one of the most prominent and influential Americans of the day, who in 1787 had played a central, indeed essential, role in the shaping of the U.S. Constitution. The Madisons were wealthy landowners and cultured people as well, and Jennings — whose mother was a house servant — seems to have been frequently in James Madison’s presence from a very early age. Taylor writes:

“His exposure to the visual and auditory ‘feast’ at Montpelier was a daily education. The light, the knowledge was shared with him, even if inadvertently. Thus enlightened and informed, he pondered on ways to secure his birthright, the gift Nature had bestowed. Yes, he sighed for freedom, but he did not choose life as a fugitive ... Instead, for the time being, Jennings fashioned a life of meaning while still enslaved. He learned to balance his divided loyalties carefully. He knew how to succeed within the system in which he was trapped. He was good at what he did, always the unobtrusive figure in the background, there to attend to his master’s needs, to anticipate his needs. Madison saw Jennings as trustworthy and capable, and he, in turn, had reason to take pride in his skills and usefulness. But Jennings was also good at gaming the system, judging
Washington in the summer was unbearable, while Montpelier was comparatively comfortable. There Jennings, “besides serving as the master’s valet, was the butler or houseman and held the responsibility of head servant.” He greeted visitors at the front door — one of them described him as “courteous, well-bred and well dressed” — and presided over the dining-room table and sideboard. He “set the standards for management of the household, and it was his responsibility to ensure that its enslaved members were fit for skilled service.”

As slaveholders the Madisons were fairly typical of their time and place. Life for slaves in Northern Virginia was less onerous than for those in the Deep South — though it was still slavery — and Madison, who as a young man had briefly wished “to depend as little as possible . . . on the labour of slaves,” was “a garden-variety slaveholder” who “followed the basic patterns and norms for slaves’ living conditions and treatment that had long been established on Virginia plantations.” Like his great friend Thomas Jefferson, he knew that slavery was wrong and wished that it could be extirpated from the young republic, but he did nothing about it.

We know as much as we do about Jennings — and it isn’t all that much — from the testimony of people who encountered him at Montpelier and the White House and from “A Colored Man’s Reminiscences of James Madison,” a brief memoir he recounted to John Brooks Russell, a white man who had befriended him while both worked at the pension office in Washington during the Civil War. The reminiscence was first published as a magazine piece, then as a booklet. It “has been cited by scholars over the years and the text can be found on the Internet, [but] it is not widely known, and has never been published in a new edition since the 1865 original.” It is published now as an appendix to “A Slave in the White House.”

Taylor probably has made the most that could be made from the material available to her, but she has had to do a lot of stretching in order to turn Jennings’s story into a full-length book. Formerly director of education at Montpelier and director of interpretation at Monticello, she is well versed in the history and culture of late 18th-century and early 19th-century Virginia and thus is able to pad out “A Slave in the White House” with a great deal of information, some of it interesting and some of it not, about the Madisons and their far-flung connections. Despite the book’s title, only 30 of its 228 pages of text are actually devoted to the White House years, so readers should be aware that “A Slave in the White House” offers both more and less than its title promises.

Still, it is a useful and informative if slender book. Interestingly, though the Madisons made occasional noises about freeing some or all of their slaves, nothing came of it and indeed after her husband’s death Dolley Madison engineered a fire sale of slaves, some of whom found themselves shipped to the Deep South. By that time Jennings had won the admiration of Daniel Webster, who was perpetually short of funds but somehow found ways to help slaves purchase their freedom. One of these was Jennings, who by the end of his life in 1874 had been married three times (his first two wives died) and produced numerous children and grandchildren. In August 2009 about two dozen of his descendants gathered in the East Room of the White House to be photographed beneath the great full-length Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. Two centuries earlier that portrait had been rescued from the White House by Dolley Madison — and Paul Jennings. ■
A Maryland attic hid a priceless trove of Black history. Historians and activists saved it from auction.

Among the artifacts is an account of escape from enslavement that is among the oldest ever found.

The 200-year-old document was torn and wrinkled. It had stains here and there. And it was sitting on a plastic table in the storeroom of an auction house near the Chester River hamlet of Crumpton, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

Historian Adam Goodheart had seen it before, but only in a blurry website photo. Now, here it was in a simple framed box — a wanted poster for “A Negro Man named Amos” who had fled from his enslaver in Queen Anne’s County.

It was chilling. There, on cheap rag paper, was the story of American slavery. Amos was “a smart fellow,” about 20, who might be headed for his mother in Philadelphia. But in 1793 he was the property of one William Price, who wanted him caught.

The poster, or “broadside,” was one of hundreds of rare documents discovered earlier this year in the attic of an old house on the Eastern Shore and saved from the auction block by a group of Washington College historians and local Black activists.

And the reward poster turned out to be one of the oldest known, said Goodheart, director of the college’s Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience in Chestertown, Md., where the documents are now housed.

“These broadsides weren’t designed to be saved,” Goodheart said. “They were designed to be tacked up on the wall or passed out from hand to hand … and the vast majority of those were simply discarded or disappeared over the years.”

“When I really realized what it was and that it was genuine, and how [old] it was,” he said, “there really was kind of a … moment of, ‘Wow, I’m holding something really priceless in my hands.’”

“There really aren’t any documents like this known to exist from before 1791,” he said. “And ours is one of just a tiny handful anywhere that exists from the 1700s, perhaps fewer than 10.”

“The first time I picked it up, it felt incredibly chilling,” he said.

Amos had escaped on May 29, 1792.

The poster, which was updated in 1793, described him in detail. He was slender, about 5-foot-10 and had scars near both eyes. He was a wearing a shirt and trousers of coarse cloth, a “tolerable good” felt hat, and shoes with buckles.

If recaptured in Philadelphia, he “will
plead his freedom from living there,” the poster said. Slavery had technically been abolished in Pennsylvania in 1780. But Price no doubt knew there were plenty of catchers who might ignore such details.

“Whoever takes up said negro and brings him home … or confines him in any [jail] so that the owner may have him again” shall receive a reward of $30, plus “reasonable charges,” the poster said.

Other striking items emerged from the attic:

• A fragile, handwritten reward notice about a “small negro woman” named Binah who escaped with her 15-month-old daughter from their enslaver near Sudlersville in 1812. They were believed to have headed for Binah’s husband, Abe, who was enslaved across the river in Kent County.

• An 1800 document recording the purchase of an enslaved man, Cato Daws, by a free Black man named Congo Mango, to give him his freedom. Mango, or Mander, as he was later known, was a native of Africa who had been enslaved in Maryland.

• A handwritten receipt from Queen Anne’s County dated April 13, 1789, recording the sale of an enslaved girl named Bet. The receipt said that she was “about thirteen years of age.” Her purchaser had paid 40 pounds for her. Her previous “owner” reported that she had been duly “sold & delivered by me.”

• And a handwritten 1822 document listing a guardian’s expenditures and income for the care of a White girl, Mary Clannahan, who had inherited land and enslaved people from her grandfather.

Money had been spent on shoes, cloth, writing paper, an English “reader” and school tuition.

Income to Mary had been generated by the hiring out of her enslaved people: Henney, Sophy and a boy named Benjamin.

In all, there were about 2,000 pages of documents, at least 100 of them relating directly to Black history, Goodheart said. “We bought every manuscript in the auction,” he said.

Many were unveiled during a community event June 10 at Sumner Hall, a historic meeting house built by Black Civil War veterans in Chestertown in 1908.

As she examined the papers, Carolyn Brooks, a local historian with the Starr Center, marveled at the resilience the enslaved displayed. “God puts the right people in the right places for the right times,” she said.

Airlee Ringgold Johnson, a community historian with the Chesapeake Heartland African American humanities project, was with Goodheart when they first saw the documents in person in April. Her family has deep roots in the area. It was “inspiring,” she said. “It was coming to grips with your own history. Because it was right in our area. … This is our history. You can take ownership of it. We all have a story. We’re finally finding out, getting more information about our story.”

But the acquisition of the material by the college and Sumner Hall wasn’t a given.

The documents were discovered earlier this year in a 200-year-old Georgian house named Ripley in Queen Anne’s County before its demolition, Goodheart said.

It was not clear how the papers wound up at the house, nor why they were preserved, although many appeared to be business, official or legal records.

“These families were businesses,” he said. “It was all inextricably bound up — the land, the family, the business and the enslaved people. This was stuff they had to keep records of.”

After this article published, the owner of Ripley, Nancy Bordely Lane, reached out to say she was happy that the material had been saved. “I love it,” she said. “History should be acknowledged.”

She said the house dated back to 1803 and the property dated back to an old colonial grant in 1667. “Since 1667 it has not been out of the family,” she said in a telephone interview.

She said her late father told her that the farm once had 500 enslaved people.

She said she grew up in the house and “loved it.” But part of the foundation was crumbling. “I really didn’t have a choice, she said. “I couldn’t fix it.”

The documents were in a plastic trash bag that was found in the attic by a friend who was helping to clean out the house. He thought they might be of value. She said
she was unaware of the contents and did not know how they got there.

The documents were put online for auction by Dixon's Crumpton Auction, about 10 miles east of Chestertown. The auction house is a local institution in a huge barnlike building where everything from antiques to bear traps can be available.

The papers were delivered to the auction house piled in waxed seafood boxes, said John Chaski, an antique-manuscript expert who sorted them there.

The items were soon spotted by members of the African American community who were upset that they might be sold out of the area. They contacted Goodheart and asked for his help in keeping them local.

“We thought the documents would have gone who knows where,” said Doncella Wilson, a Sumner Hall board member who was among the first to hear of the auction. “Across the country, across the world, we don’t know where.”

In addition, it was galling to the Black community that their enslaved ancestors’

antiques to bear traps can be available.

The papers were delivered to the auction house piled in waxed seafood boxes, said John Chaski, an antique-manuscript expert who sorted them there.

The items were soon spotted by members of the African American community who were upset that they might be sold out of the area. They contacted Goodheart and asked for his help in keeping them local.

“We thought the documents would have history was being sold on the auction block, just as their ancestors had been sold.

“People still getting rich off us,” Brooks said.

Goodheart said that “the documents have a kind of a sacred power.”

He got permission to examine the papers at the auction house and asked the sellers for a price for the whole collection. They came back with an amount “in five figures” that he thought was reasonable, he said.

He then began the task of raising money. As he sought out donors, Black friends urged him to tap African American and White donors.

“Don’t just raise money from White people,” he said they told him. “Ask Black people to contribute. … This shouldn’t be about White people paying White people for Black history. Because if it is, we won’t really feel like it’s really ours.”

He said he turned to Black Washington College alumnus and trustee Norris Commodore and his wife, Terry, who gave a substantial portion of the price. The collection was named for them.

Goodheart said as soon as the collection is catalogued it will be available to researchers, and much of it can viewed online.

As for the formerly enslaved Amos, William Price continued to search for him.

In 1793, a year after the first wanted poster was issued, Price updated it. In handwritten additions, he increased the reward from $30 to $60. (The college has the 1793 version.)

And in 1794, two and a half years after Amos fled, the dogged Price placed an ad in a Philadelphia newspaper, repeating the offer of a $60 reward for his capture.

“As he has been gone for some length time,” Price noted that Amos had probably grown to 6 feet tall.

No further details have been found about Amos, Goodheart said.

“We don’t know if he lived and died the rest of his life as a free man,” he said. “But we do know that at least for a time he succeeded in gaining his freedom.”
Swamp is a haven from slavery in ‘Freewater’”

Amina Luqman-Dawson’s novel is set in the Great Dismal Swamp, which provided cover for people escaping plantations.

Amina Luqman-Dawson is the author of “Freewater,” a novel about a boy and his sister who escapes from a plantation to find a community of other formerly enslaved people in a nearby swamp.

BY MARY QUATTLEBAUM

• Originally Published February 2, 2022

“I felt I was entering a mysterious place,” said author Amina Luqman-Dawson. “The smell was mossy, earthy, and the trees were so tall, with leaves that cast shadows.”

Luqman-Dawson is describing the first time she set foot in the Great Dismal Swamp, the setting for her middle-grade novel, “Freewater.”

In the book, the swamp is a place of danger and safety. Fleeing a nearby plantation at night in the early 1800s, 12-year-old Homer and his younger sister, Ada, plunge into the murky marsh. They discover snakes, sinkholes — and a thriving community of...
Black people who, like themselves, have escaped slavery. Their village is called Freewater.

Though grateful to live in Freewater, Homer is determined to return to the plantation and free his mother. But doing so will surely endanger his new friends. The tension is high, and the pace is urgent as Homer tries to figure out what to do.

Swamp sanctuary

Americans are probably most familiar with the Underground Railroad and the history of enslaved people escaping to the North, Luqman-Dawson said by phone from her home in Arlington, Virginia. But much less is known about those who escaped into the forests and swamps in the South.

How did they survive? What kind of life did they create? These questions jump-started her book almost 20 years ago, Luqman-Dawson said. And they fueled her research, including her visit to the Great Dismal Swamp.

When the novel opens, the swamp covers “over two thousand square miles and stretch[es] from southern Virginia to northern North Carolina.” Today part of this land is protected as the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, with a main entrance in Suffolk, Virginia.

Luqman-Dawson sprinkles “nuggets of history” throughout her book. For example, archaeologists’ recent findings of pottery shards and parts of cabins helped her imagine the way of life in her fictional Freewater. She learned about the plants and wild animals eaten by real swamp dwellers. And she based the brave adult character, Suleman, on accounts of formerly enslaved people who raided plantations, taking tools, livestock and supplies to help them survive in the swamp area.

In researching the novel, “one of the biggest surprises,” said Luqman-Dawson, “was seeing the extent of Black resistance, not just in the United States but in other places [of African enslavement] like parts of Central and South America and the Caribbean, especially Jamaica.”

A “symphony of voices”

As a child — the second of four kids — in Lynwood, California, Luqman-Dawson took her mother’s suggestion to read Mildred Taylor’s “Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,” which received the Newbery Medal in 1977. It proved vital to her development as a writer.

“I’d hear the voices of those kids in my head,” she said.

She gives credit to that classic novel — and others by Taylor about the Logan family — for her desire to create a vivid “symphony of voices” in her book.

Readers hear frequently from Homer, but other short chapters focus on timid Billy; Nora, the plantation owner’s mute, lonely daughter; and fearless Sanzi, whose risk-taking often leads to trouble.

“I wanted readers to hear multiple perspectives and discover who and what they most connect with,” Luqman-Dawson said. “That’s how history can come alive.”
True Grit and the Transformation from Slavery

Scholars, archaeologists, historians as well as experts in the fields of historiography and preservation help us learn by researching property records, family histories and buried artifacts — the keys to unlocking the real stories about our relationships and history.

These records, that provide insight into history, have also inadvertently provided us with insight into the human spirit. For despite the brutality of slavery, we can be inspired by stories of the enslaved and how many persevered through situations that most people would find insurmountable. Their perseverance led not just to survival but to examples of enduring success.

Read through the following introductions to individuals with whom you may or may not be familiar.

1. Thomas Downing “The Oyster King of New York” was born around 1792 on the Eastern shore of Virginia to freed slaves. Making his way to Philadelphia then New York City, he began peddling oysters and eventually opened one of the most popular oyster restaurants in the city. He has been described as a man of fortune and entrepreneurial genius with stories written about him in the New York Post and a dish inspired by him served at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture restaurant.

2. Augustus Jackson Born in 1808 Jackson was brought into the White House in Washington, D.C., at the age of nine. He worked his way up to the esteemed position of chef, cooking for three presidents — James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson. But perhaps the sweet spot in his career was dessert. After leaving the White House, he opened a confectionary in Philadelphia selling candy. In his test kitchen of sorts, he used the chemistry of food to develop a new way of making ice cream still used today.

3. Grace Brooks Easton, Maryland’s first female African American landholder, Brooks was born a slave in 1740. After emancipating herself in 1788 she worked as a mid-wife eventually emancipating her children and buying land in her own name, an act that would later launch her community into the national spotlight as the oldest free African American neighborhood in the United States. In an obituary in 1810, Brooks was described as a woman of distinction — an unusual honor considering that women were rarely honored with obituaries, let alone an African American woman. She clearly had an impact on those around her.

4. Lewis H. Latimer Born in 1848, Latimer was the son of fugitive slaves. Despite living and working during the era of Reconstruction, he became a self-taught electrical engineer, scientist, master draftsman, patent specialist, inventor and artist. He made important contributions to Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone and Thomas Edison’s lightbulb and his own patents included work with carbon filaments and a precursor to air conditioning, inventions that impact our modern day living. With just as many humanitarian projects under his belt, Lewis Latimer was often called on to speak. One speech delivered by this transformative thinker, The Practical Relation of Art to Science, could be considered the first public monograph on the fundamentals of STEAM education — emphasizing the connections between science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics.

5. Paul Jennings Born in slavery in 1799, Jennings was the subject of the 2012 book A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons. Selected to come to the White House at the age of ten years, he worked his way from footman to personal servant for President Madison and he authored the first White House memoir. Navigating the circles of power in Washington, including Jefferson, Lafayette and Daniel Webster, Jennings became a property-owner, freedom fighter, husband, and father.
True Grit | continued

Now do your research. Dig deeper to see what you can find related to the lives and times of these five individuals. See the sidebar for suggested beginning points. When you conduct your research consider the following questions.

1. In what ways did their environment at birth and later in life influence their lives?

2. What events were taking place in America?

3. What are the characteristics of their later lives that caused others to consider them successful? Is it finance, fame, influence on others? Help to their communities?

4. Compare what these individuals share in common that may have shaped them into the transformative characters they became. Did they have a formal education or were they self-taught? Was there a mentor, a parent, a friend or a sibling who provided them with a compass to their future? Did they experience a sudden insight, possess or develop a talent, and/or just have true grit that enabled them to persevere and follow their passion and achieve their goal?

5. What do you consider success? Perhaps there is no one definition.

Lives and Times to Remember

How Thomas Downing became the black Oyster King of New York

Chincoteague Character of the Day: Thomas Downing, the ‘Oyster King’ of NYC

African-American Museum Café Serves Up Black History With Every Forkful

A New York City Museum Shines a Spotlight on Inventor Lewis Latimer’s Legacy
https://savingplaces.org/stories/a-new-york-city-museum-shines-a-spotlight-lewis-latimer#.YgGo1urMKM8

Paul Jennings
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/jennings-paul-1799-1874/

The Paul Jennings Story
http://www.pauljennings.info/index.html

Augustus Jackson

Grace Brooks, Our Newest Hero
https://talbotspy.org/grace-brooks-our-newest-hero/

Grace Brooks
https://talbothistory.org/collections-research/black-history/grace-brooks/

Outside the Box: Buried History Unearthing a Forgotten Past on Maryland’s Eastern Shore
https://savingplaces.org/stories/outside-the-box-easton-maryland-the-hill#.YgGt4OrMKM8

The Oldest Black Community in the Whole Country May Be Right Here on the Eastern Shore
https://www.secretsoftheeasternshore.com/the-hill-neighborhood-in-easton/
Two families — one black, one white — shared a harrowing history. Then they met.

Slavery unexpectedly connected the Kings and the Beckers.

BY IAN SHAPIRA

- Originally Published October 23, 2019

The King family stepped carefully up the concrete steps, through the narrow doorway and into a two-story log cabin with a painful past. Inside, they examined every inch. The low ceiling. The peeling chestnut walls. Then, the second floor, a tiny space under a pitched cedar-shake roof, where sunlight slips through small windows onto uneven oak floorboards.

John B. King Jr., education secretary for President Barack Obama, climbed up the wobbly ladder for a depressing glance at the sleeping quarters. But he quickly came down and crossed his arms, wondering about the people who lived in this cramped space more than 150 years earlier: His enslaved ancestors. Lydia King. Charles King. Anne King. So many Kings once lived here, on this Maryland farm, still owned by direct descendants of the slaveholder, Thomas Griffith.

“My ancestors must have had full lives, families, relationships, and joy and sadness, but their experiences were so bound up with their exploitation,” said John, 44, president of the Education Trust, a nonprofit group devoted to closing achievement gaps. “My wife and our two girls are living a life my ancestors could not have imagined, because of their perseverance. Their daily resistance by living their lives made possible ours.”

For much of the past year, as the nation marks the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans’ arrival to the English colony of Virginia, the Kings have embarked on an anguished family history research project — and the most unlikely of friendships with the great-great-great-grandchildren of Thomas Griffith. The Kings have always suspected that the Kings before them were enslaved. But they didn’t learn the exact site of that subjugation until February: a 190-acre farm in Gaithersburg called Edgehill, just 25 miles from John’s home in Silver Spring.

Since then, John and several relatives have visited the farm, connecting with Griffith’s descendants, 50-year-old twin sisters, Frances Becker and Amanda Becker Mosko, who co-own the property. Both families have embraced the opportunity to learn about each other’s past with more clarity, despite layers of discomfort and awkwardness.

The King family’s overtures to the family that once enslaved their ancestors are highly unusual, according to Chris Haley, director of the Maryland State Archives’ slavery project. Descendants of the enslaved usually don’t connect with descendants of the enslaver unless they’ve
discovered a genealogical link.

“I don’t know of many people who reach out and are like, ‘You know what? My family used to work for your family. Hey, how are you doing?’” said Haley, who is the nephew of “Roots” author Alex Haley.

The Kings, though, are no ordinary family.

One great-grandson of the oldest-known enslaved King was Lt. Col. Haldane King, who served in the famed Tuskegee Airmen, the first group of black combat pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps; an older brother, William “Dolly” King, was one of the country’s first black professional basketball players; another older brother, John B. King Sr., became New York City’s first black deputy superintendent of schools. Haldane King, the Tuskegee Airmen’s oldest child, was an Air Force captain who flew KC-135 refueling planes in the Vietnam War; his sister, Janis King Robinson, ran a rural North Carolina hospital. John B. King Sr.’s grandson, Keith Norris, is a renowned UCLA medical school professor and kidney expert. And then there is John B. King Sr.’s son, John B. King Jr., who became the nation’s second black secretary of education.

The Beckers feel a mix of pride and shame about their family’s past on the Montgomery County property, which their sixth great-grandfather purchased nearly 250 years ago, shortly before the Revolutionary War. The land was passed down to Thomas Griffith, who owned it for 42 years and relied on enslaved labor to run the property.

“We wanted to apologize but we really can’t apologize, because we didn’t do it,” said Amanda, who lives in Pennsylvania, where she helps run her husband’s cemetery restoration business. “I don’t know if an apology would even mean anything to [the Kings] because we really should be apologizing to their ancestors.”

“We were just born here,” said Frances, who lives at the farmhouse with her father and sells vintage auto parts. “Friends have asked us, ‘What do they want? Do they want money?’ ” Amanda said. “We said, ‘They just want us to be careful with their history.’ ”

And they want to be careful with their own history, too. Frances points to Griffith’s sons, who fought for the Confederacy.

“I still appreciate all the veterans in our family and consider Confederates as veterans, too,” she said. “I still have questions about Thomas,” who owned 15 people ranging in age from 9 to 50 before emancipation. “Why did he do it? I feel bad that he did it. I’d like to think positively that he didn’t hurt the slaves.”

The Kings have had to gently nudge the Beckers to refer to their ancestors as “enslaved people” rather than “slaves,” so that they are not defined by a dehumanizing label. They were also troubled by the old furniture and farm supplies stored in the log cabin. (The Beckers cleaned everything out after the Kings’ first visit.)

“But Amanda and Frances have been really eager to learn through this process,” John said. “Having taught high school social studies and having spent my life in education, I thought about how illustrative this experience is of our need to do a better job of teaching in this country about the history of African Americans and the institution of slavery.”

“The gift of this history”

John King was in his first year as education secretary when he got a call in 2016 from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore.
The historically black college said it had discovered that his paternal grandmother, Estelle King, graduated from the school’s predecessor in 1894, before becoming a nurse. Would he want to give a speech at the school? Sure, he said.

The call prompted a dive into his family’s past. Last year, he enlisted the help of Christine McKay, a retired archivist from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture who had once discovered Obama’s father’s letters, some of which he’d written from Kenya imploring universities in the United States for financial aid.

McKay wanted to know everything about the Kings. She started with John’s great-great-grandmother, Lydia King, who was born about 1822. She combed the records of the Freedman’s Bank — established after the Civil War for freed people — and found two of her accounts, suggesting she’d probably been enslaved. The records also listed the names of four of Lydia’s children: John, Sophia, Anne and Charles.

McKay consulted the Maryland State Archives, which keeps voluminous records chronicling the state’s history of slavery, which spanned from shortly after its Colonial founding in the 17th century to November 1864, when the state abolished it. (The Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, freed enslaved people only in seceded states, exempting border states such as Maryland, where there were more than 87,000 enslaved blacks in 1860.) In her search, McKay found a slave census.

The census verified that Lydia and her children had been enslaved. It also disclosed a much bigger revelation: the name of their owner, Thomas Griffith.

Quickly, McKay located the Griffith property in Gaithersburg. Then she learned the property was still in the same family. She even found huge ledgers at the Maryland State Archives full of yellowed paper showing the tax records of enslavers, listing names of the enslaved and their monetary values; the amount next to Lydia’s name, for instance, was $300 in 1853 and then, a couple of years later, $600.

She also came across an article by a local historian reporting that John’s enslaved great-great-aunt Anne King, then just 15, alerted authorities that Griffith had entertained a visit by a “nicely-dressed stranger.” Thanks to her tip, Griffith was arrested, charged and prosecuted in a military trial in Baltimore for “giving aid” to a “known rebel officer.” Griffith was described in the article as a “one-armed farmer.”

Finally, in February, McKay emailed all of her findings to John.

The historically black college said it had discovered that his paternal grandmother, Estelle King, graduated from the school’s predecessor in 1894, before becoming a nurse. Would he want to give a speech at the school? Sure, he said.

The call prompted a dive into his family’s past. Last year, he enlisted the help of Christine McKay, a retired archivist from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture who had once discovered Obama’s father’s letters, some of which he’d written from Kenya imploring universities in the United States for financial aid.

McKay wanted to know everything about the Kings. She started with John’s great-great-grandmother, Lydia King, who was born about 1822. She combed the records of the Freedman’s Bank — established after the Civil War for freed people — and found two of her accounts, suggesting she’d probably been enslaved. The records also listed the names of four of Lydia’s children: John, Sophia, Anne and Charles.

McKay consulted the Maryland State Archives, which keeps voluminous records chronicling the state’s history of slavery, which spanned from shortly after its Colonial founding in the 17th century to November 1864, when the state abolished it. (The Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, freed enslaved people only in seceded states, exempting border states such as Maryland, where there were more than 87,000 enslaved blacks in 1860.) In her search, McKay found a slave census.

The census verified that Lydia and her children had been enslaved. It also disclosed a much bigger revelation: the name of their owner, Thomas Griffith.

Quickly, McKay located the Griffith property in Gaithersburg. Then she learned the property was still in the same family. She even found huge ledgers at the Maryland State Archives full of yellowed paper showing the tax records of enslavers, listing names of the enslaved and their monetary values; the amount next to Lydia’s name, for instance, was $300 in 1853 and then, a couple of years later, $600.

She also came across an article by a local historian reporting that John’s enslaved great-great-aunt Anne King, then just 15, alerted authorities that Griffith had entertained a visit by a “nicely-dressed stranger.” Thanks to her tip, Griffith was arrested, charged and prosecuted in a military trial in Baltimore for “giving aid” to a “known rebel officer.” Griffith was described in the article as a “one-armed farmer.”

Finally, in February, McKay emailed all of her findings to John.

‘We don’t wait for permission’

When Janis King Robinson, the retired hospital executive in North Carolina, got her cousin John’s email, she knew she had to see the farm in Maryland as soon as possible.

“My name is Janis King Robinson,” she told Frances. “I’m really sorry to interrupt your day, but we’ve been recently informed that our ancestors were enslaved here.”

Frances was floored — and anxious. She never expected to meet the descendants of the people who lived in the log cabin.

“Well,” Frances told her visitor, “come on in.”

As they toured the property, Frances kept
referring to Janis’s ancestors as “slaves,” the piece of land where the enslaved were buried as “the slave cemetery,” and the log cabin where the enslaved slept as “the slave quarters.” Janis told her, “It’s important to say they were ‘enslaved.’”

“I’m a work in progress,” Frances told her. “She was as warm and inviting as a human could be,” Janis recalled later. “My visit there was profoundly spiritual. I was doing exactly as I was supposed to.”

‘They lived a good life’

Last month, John, his wife, Melissa Steel King, and their two daughters walked slowly behind the Beckers’ farmhouse. They were on their way to the grave of the man who’d enslaved their ancestors.

When they reached the gravesite, John paused and read the inscription on Griffith’s headstone: “In Memory of Thomas Griffith. Born 15th of Sept. 1803, Died 28th of Jan. 1870.” Engraved above his name was a weeping willow.

“The weeping willow means they lived a good life,” Amanda told the Kings.

John said nothing.

Frances said she hoped Griffith treated his enslaved people well.

“Since the slave quarters are so close to the main house, we are thinking they were interdependent on each other and they would have known each other well,” Frances said. “I am putting a 21st-century positive spin on this, but I hope that my ancestors were decent enough people.”

John thought about the bravery of his great-great-aunt Anne, who told authorities that Griffith was consorting with Confederates on his property.

“The family’s participation in the Confederacy,” he said later, “is so telling about their desire to defend the institution of slavery.”

The Beckers led the Kings to a forested area by the family swimming pool. They stood along a path and gazed at a patch of land. This, the Beckers told them, is where the enslaved Kings are probably buried in unmarked graves. Oak and walnut trees dotted the area, which was smothered below with brush, poison ivy and wild rose hips.

Growing up, Amanda told the Kings, she’d play by herself along the path and hold tea parties. When she and her sister got older, they’d venture into the bushy area and look for headstones.

“Nobody ever stumbled on a headstone?” Melissa asked.

She tapped her neck with her finger over and over, while John rubbed his chin.

The Beckers said they’d been told that their grandfather Vestus Wilcox, a lieutenant commander in the Navy, tossed the missing headstones over a hill somewhere. But they didn’t know for sure. The Kings asked, is it possible to conduct a search? Amanda said she and her husband were exploring the possibility of purchasing radar equipment.

“It’ll be detective work,” Frances said. “We can find it.”

Before the Kings left, Amanda fetched something from the house. It was a copy of a slave census Frances had found, listing the names and ages of the enslaved Kings.

Standing by the log cabin, John’s oldest daughter, Amina, 15, grabbed the paper and everyone huddled around her. She and her sister, Mireya, 13, were now scanning the names. The youngest Kings were looking at the names of the oldest-known Kings, all enslaved.

Amina stopped at two of the names: King, Anne F 15; King, William M 13.

“Look,” Amina said to her sister. “They were the same age as us.”

The log cabin that housed the Kings’ enslaved ancestors, a smokehouse and the original farmhouse are still on the Becker property in upper Montgomery County.