

How did Shenandoah County get into the slavery business?

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Ownership of land sparked the early eighteenth century rush into the Shenandoah County area, including what is now Page and part of Warren counties. Lord Fairfax made large grants of 10,000, 20,000, and 50,000 acres to developers .¹ Land grants also attracted settlers, who often acquired 400 acres for themselves from Lord Fairfax. Large land holders, such as Jacob Stover at Massanutten, Jacob Funk at Tumbling Run near Strasburg, or Benjamin Allen, Riley Moore and William White in the area near and later called Allen's or Meem's Bottoms, could neither farm the land, gather the crops, nor process grain into flour without "hands" to work. Undoubtedly influenced by the large plantations to the east, these business-oriented, Shenandoah County land owners saw a labor force for increased production in the slavery business, here defined as the buying and selling of human beings for free human services. Miners saw the same potential for profit. The more productive the land, the more money and wealth the owners could acquire.

Although established as Dunmore in 1772, this Shenandoah County area had almost forty-two years of white settlements that had begun in the 1730s. An unknown number of African Americans lived in the early white settlements, but a 1775 Census of Dunmore County lists twenty-nine African Americans, twelve of whom were women. Evidence that African Americans were present at the beginning of the county appears in Court Minutes, which, on 24 November 1772, state that a Bill of Sale for slaves from Jacob Holeman to William Cathy and Rebecca, his wife, was acknowledged and ordered to be recorded. Court Minutes on 30 September 1773 mention Margaret Long, widow of Nicholas Long, "also set apart said Margaret her dower in the slaves and their increase...." According to Court Minutes on 28 September 1776, Jackson Allen was summoned to the next court because he had set some of his Negroes free and the county wished to sell them. Apparently the business of slavery for African American men and women, begun on Shenandoah County land when it was still named Dunmore County, continued until 1863.

Based on race, the business of slavery in Virginia considered the black person to be chattel, property, on which Virginia state taxes could be levied against the person holding the slave. The number of slaves is listed on census records beside the number of horses owned by a white citizen, and taxation was based initially upon these possessions. The 1783 census shows that 111 heads of households held 367 African Americans as chattel, but by the 1790 Virginia Tax List Census, seventy-seven individuals, including William Williams, a slave trader, and groups of from 2-6 persons, held 134 African Americans as slaves. This coming and going of slaves in the county was established through the buying and selling of human beings, the morality of which was questioned by many, including Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, before the First Continental Congress and the Revolution.

The presence of some free African Americans who were not slaves caused problems in the state. Various plans for colonization of free African Americans in Africa were proposed in the eighteenth century, but one directed by Quaker Paul Cuffee transported thirty-eight settlers to Sierra Leone. His arguments for colonization prepared the 1817 American Colonization Society to send free African Americans back to Africa instead of emancipating them.² Although the colonization idea received recognition in *The Woodstock Herald* on 28 January 1818, evidence of direct participation by free African Americans in Shenandoah County has not been located. In fact, some citizens of Shenandoah County did write a petition to the General Assembly on 3 January 1838, asking for a reversal of the Act of March 1835 to colonize the free black population in Africa.³ It appears that some people in Shenandoah County wanted the slaves to be emancipated instead. Abolition had a local leader in resident saddle maker George Rye of Edinburg and Woodstock.⁴ Even Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration of Independence, stating that all men are created equal, in ambivalence, would not emancipate the slaves who worked his personal businesses at Monticello or his farms. In essence, the African American people who worked for others, without rights or pay, were thought by the people who held them, under the laws of the Commonwealth, to be mortgage lifters, debt insurance or a cash crop, who could be profitably and quickly sold. The underlying reason that most white Americans

entered the slavery business was to acquire wealth, land and position quickly. These values gripped the new capitalistic culture in Virginia, revealing its dark side, that established a slaveholding class, a non-slaveholding class, a free African American class, and a slave class.

The laws of the Commonwealth allowed a slave to become a free person by emancipation and free birth. If emancipated, an African American received a surname in records kept in Court, and taxes were levied against his/her personal property or land. In the Shenandoah County Court Minutes a slave is identified by only a first name. In reality, African Americans slaves had surnames that were ignored by the slaveholders as a psychological technique of dehumanization and control.⁵

Birth was the way most African Americans became free. An African American child born of a free mother became free by birth. According to a 1765 law, the Churchwarden of Beckford Parish in 1774 was responsible for “binding out “bastard children, including free children of free African American women.⁶ By 1788 the Overseer of the Poor in Shenandoah County had assumed the responsibility . Free black children, identified in Court Minutes as ages two and a half to sixteen, were legally bound out to white families, a separation that effectively isolated black family members. The Court instructed the person who accepted a free African American child to teach him or her farming, sewing and/or spinning, weaving, sewing, knitting, cooking, or blacksmithing. The child remained with the family until the age of twenty-one if male and eighteen if female, and the family profited from the child’s labor. ⁷ Food, clothing and a place to sleep were provided by the white family.

Birth or emancipation were the only legal way whereby a black person could become free in the Commonwealth. “Giving time” was a customary, though illegal way of emancipation by which the slaveholder avoided having to make a request to the legislature or county court to allow the enslaved person to remain in the state, according to Annette Gordon-Reed in The Hemingses of Monticello.⁸ The free African Americans, who had

learned how to perform special work through their indenture, were mostly able to seek employment and hire themselves to county residents who did not want to hold slaves. The emergence of a large free African American population early became a constant fear of the land owners and of the legislature of the Commonwealth, which passed more and more Black Laws as the years passed to control the free black population.

Free African Americans had and used surnames. In Shenandoah County, 1774-1830, free African American surnames appear among the 142 names of bound free children and include: Anderson, Blanham, Brown, Cook, Cyrus, Dugan, Forrer, Frank, Frazier, Goff, Johnson, Johnston, Lockwell, Pattison, Robertson, Robinson, Rolls, Seller, Sett, Smith, Wallage, and Weldon.⁹

One of the Black Laws stated that if emancipated, the African American had to leave the Commonwealth within one year after emancipation, unless he or she received permission by the court to remain in his county of residence.¹⁰ On 10 January 1837, Ben, former slave of Adam Dirting, wrote a petition to the General Assembly asking permission to remain in Virginia and included his certificate and deed of emancipation.¹¹ Court records show that sixty-three African American slaves were manumitted in Shenandoah County.¹²

An "1819 List of Free Black Men," by Daniel Bly in Shenandoah County Circuit Court papers, lists eighteen free African men: James Bird, Jerry Bowden, Ben Burriss, Willis Grieg, Jack Herbert, Davis Johnson, William Jones, Ed Lasker, Daniel Lett, Ephriam Lett, William Loller, Elias Lorny, John McKissey, Peter Mudd, Jesse Paine, Lani Pani, Joseph Robinson, and Robinson Sandpie.¹³ The 1819 date suggests that this list may have been compiled to ascertain eligibility for colonization in Africa by the American Colonization Society. This 1819 list of nineteen black men is quite different from the number given by the Historical Census Browser at The University of Virginia. In 1820, the Historical Census Browser shows 143 free African American males or 1.5% of the population. It enumerates 174 free black females, 1.8% of the population.¹⁴ This contrast

suggests that not all free African Americans in Shenandoah County were surveyed in the 1819 list. The 1810 U.S. Census shows 101 free blacks and the U.S. 1820 census shows 317 free persons of color living in the county. These numbers suggests also that free African American men and women remained in the county to work. The number of free African Americans tripled during this decade. The 1820 U.S. Census shows that males headed forty-one households with free African Americans only and that females headed twenty-one households with free African Americans only.¹⁵ Their names, recognizable as African American, indicate sixty-two heads of households.

Most of the 537 households with African Americans in 1820 show enslaved people, in number from 1- 47. The largest numbers of slaves, 47, 46, 39, 27, 24, identifiable by name of slaveholder, worked in the iron industry. Twenty plus or minus slaves often worked on large farming operations throughout the county, identifiable by name of the slaveholder, but as land grants were divided by wills among white sons and daughters, smaller numbers of slaves were needed to work the smaller farms.

Without question, slavery was a business in Shenandoah County. In a county that needed “hands,” young females were used in farm work and production of textiles. One expects young, strong males to predominate as they did in other age groups. But not here. The linchpin in the 1820 U.S. Census, the first to break down ages, shows an unexpected 43.7% female slaves to age 14, a figure never again so high:

43.7% female slaves to age 14 in contrast to 37.7% male slaves

26.9% female slaves ages 14-25 in contrast to 34% male slaves

18.5 % female slaves ages 24-44 in contrast to 20% male slaves¹⁶

These young African American girls, undoubtedly bought to become breeders, would increase the number of slaves and, consequently, the income of the slaveholder. Although the age groupings in the 1820 and 1830 censuses do not coincide, females exceeded males in the under 14 age group. At least 402 women were of childbearing ages in the 1820 U.S. Census. In the 1830 U.S. Census, females continued to exceed males under age 10 and at least 555 women were of childbearing age. Beyond understanding, female

African American children were bought and kept with the intention of their producing children who could be sold to slave dealers.¹⁷ Clearly, the female African American slaves were producing children who would be sold for profit. The 1830 U.S. Census reveals the peak decade of slaves, numbering 2,423, in Shenandoah County. Raising an African American child, having his/her help from the age of six, feeding and clothing him/her during early years and having a female ready to reproduce by age fourteen was cheaper to the slaveholder than having to buy a slave at a local auction or from a slave trader from Winchester, Alexandria or Richmond. The future children could then be sold for profit as prices increased yearly.

The following chart shows that although Shenandoah County had the smallest population of four Valley counties, it held more slaves than Rockingham County during this 1830 decade only.

1830 Total Populations of Four Counties		Slave Population	
Frederick	26, 046	7, 420	28.49%
Shenandoah	19, 750	2, 423	12.27%
Rockingham	20, 683	2, 321	11.22%
Augusta	19, 926	4, 265	21.40% ¹⁸

The decade dates also reveal another picture of African Americans in Shenandoah County. In this chart free African Americans are included with slave population, which increases the number of African Americans living in Shenandoah County.

1830	slaves	12.26%	Free blacks	2.31%	Total African Americans	14.57%
1840		8.89%		2.28%		11.17%
1850		6.62%		2.12%		8.74%
1860		5.42%		2.27		7.69% ¹⁹

In 1860, with a total county population of 13,896, 753 slaves, and 316 free blacks, the African American population totaled 1,069, 7.7% on the eve of the Civil War. Not a large number in comparison with the rest of the Valley or Virginia, but the African American

people in Shenandoah County are the focus of this research: who they were, where they lived and what work they contributed to building the county.

John W. Wayland, a son of the Shenandoah County, believes the small number of slaves in Shenandoah can be attributed to the German background of many settlers in the county and to their religious denominations. He says: "The Germans as a rule were not extensive slaveholders" and were "opposed to slavery,"²⁰ possibly because of their European persecutions.²¹ Wayland also admits that many instances of slave holding Germans can be identified, although, he says, they never became strong advocates of slavery.²² How can one hold even one slave and not be a strong advocate of slavery? The German Mennonites and Dunkers expressed their opposition to slavery as did the Methodist and Baptists. Today we see that, though small in number among the population, the presence of African Americans did change the population mix of the county, and they changed business dealings among human beings. Wherever in Shenandoah County one lived before 1863, as a slaveholder or non-slaveholder, one would have seen African Americans living and working as another class, or being auctioned and sold.

At the right age and time of year, the young slave could be sold to a slave dealer, sent by Anthony Spengler's weekly wagons to Alexandria²³ or driven overland by foot, in shackles, to the Southern cotton fields.²³ The Shenandoah River may also have taken some slaves from the county. One has only to examine the census records from decade to decade to see that most slaveholders did not have slaves of the same sex ten years older in the next census, a revelation that some had been bought, some sold. Census records from 1772-1860 show that very few people in Shenandoah County continued to hold the same African Americans for a lifetime or even a number of years.²⁴ When slaveholders died, most of their wills directed their estates to auction African American slaves or divide them among the children and widow.

Depressions occurred and Court Minutes show that many slaveholders lost their

possessions, including their “chattel.” After 1834, when Cyrus McCormick invented the horse-drawn reaper, the horse, always highly valued for plowing and logging in Shenandoah County, became even more important to farmers. This new machine replaced many field “hands,” increased the yield, and lowered costs of producing wheat, the main crop of Shenandoah County during this period. In fact, by 1860, the census was reporting frequent rental of slaves, although this practice had occurred previously. The bottom line of the slavery business being profit, many small slaveholders changed to industrial operations as the Virginia economy was becoming the commercial and manufacturing center of the South. Like other Virginia counties in 1850, Shenandoah County feared insurrection and did not know what to do with the free African American population that had escalated.

In 1793 state law required the free Negro and mulatto population to be registered in a book at the County Court. Following a planned slave uprising in Richmond by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, one duty of the Commissioners of Revenue in 1801 was to annually return a complete list of all free Negroes within their districts with name, sex, place of abode and trade. The law held that a copy of the list should be fixed at the courthouse door. Court Minutes show that Harry Howard became the first free African American registered in Shenandoah County on 14 June 1803. Only the previously mentioned 1819 List of Free Black Men has been located. The Black Laws again multiplied after the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion in Southampton County, and they prohibited the education of slaves as well as their freedom of movement and assembly. Several lists of free African Americans were found in Shenandoah County Circuit Court papers by Daniel Bly. “A List of Free Negroes with in the District of James Allen, one of the Commissioners of Revenue for Shenandoah County for the Year 1835” names 315 free Negroes whose surnames, among others, include Allen, Brown, Bullett, Burner, Carpenter, Cully, Dagan, Fadeley, Ford, Gaskins, Grant, Green, Hackney, Henry, Holeman, Joy, Lee, Lett, Lucas, Mingo, Moore, Newman, Ozburn, Penaday, Robbinson, Ross, Spencer, Suekes, Thompson, Tusing, Wandser, and Weldon.²⁵ “A List of Free Negroes within the District of Daniel Sticklely, one of the Commissioners of Shenandoah County for the No. 2 for the Year 1835” names 119 with

included information. Family surnames with multiple members include, among others, Allensworth, Banks, Blanham, Burns, Cook, Ditcher, Gasker, Hubboard, Johnston, Jones, McKoy, Mitchell, Noye, and Robertson.²⁶

Also found wrongly shelved in the Library of Virginia by Daniel Bly were lists of free blacks for the year 1843. From Abraham Stickley's "List of Free Negroes with their ages within the Commissioners District No. 2 of Shenandoah County for the year 1843" appear, among the 110 named, family surnames of Allensworth, Ball, Banister, Burns, Griggs, Gumby, Henry, Hubbard, Johnston, Jones, Lee, Moore, Morris, Newman, Payne, Roberston, Smith, Spencer, Strother, Suckers, Tasco, Thompson, Wondsor, Wunders. In the other list for the same year, "A List of Free Negroes & Mulattoes remaining in the county of Shenandoah, the District of Jacob Noel, one of the Commissioners of the Revenue for the year 1843," appear, among others, 103 family surnames, including: Allen, Balls, Bird, Bullett, Burns, Craig, Ford, Harrison, Hubbert, Johnson, Lett, Mares, McGruder, Moon, Moore, Newman, Paine, Peck, Pointdexter, Robeson, Rolls, Smith, Thompson, Weldon, Wells, Wilson, and Wonser.²⁷

The "Register of Free Negroes," required: "free negroes or mulattos to be registered and numbered in a book kept by the town clerk, which shall specify age, name, color, status and by whom, and in what court emancipated."²⁸ Such a book has not been found in the Shenandoah County Court House, but the Minutes of the Shenandoah County Court show 402 African Americans registered, including names of nine African Americans who were emancipated. Unfortunately some names and numbers have not been located in the Court Minutes. The entries cover 1803-1854.²⁹

All free African Americans in Shenandoah County sought their own employment, worked for others and made their own way in life. The 1810 Census identifies 101 free African Americans working with white heads of households, a number that increased by decades.³⁰ A letter in the Shenandoah County Archives from Fortune Stepto to Master

William reveals much about one African American man.

Woodstock, Virginia April 1st, 1858

Master William

I understand that Jacob Sumer wrote to you to rent the lot and garden. I have cleaned up the lot and garden and have planted some peas and beans in it and if anyone rents the house they can have it. I hope you will not leve Jacob have it. He has his hogs and chickens at the stabel and the chickens will take anything out that we plant. If you say so I will make him move them as they will ruin all that we plant. I do not want him to have the garden as I have cleaned it up and he will go to the spring and let it run up in haus. I have also cleaned up the lot. Please let me know all about it by return mail. I want you to write to Isaac Haas as he will see us righted and tell him what must be done as he is kind to us and will do what is right.

Yours with respect,

Fortune Stepto³¹

“Master William” may be a polite address rather than an address to a slaveholder, because Fortune knows and trusts this man.³² Fortune Stepto is possibly free; he uses his surname. He can write and spells “haus” with the German spelling. One notes that he appeals for justice from Master William by using reasonable argument, courtesy, and business acuity.

Seasonal farm work and odd jobs in county towns called for “hands,” and those who did not approve of slavery often hired the free African Americans. Sometimes free African Americans also worked for slaveholders, as shown in the census records. Often the males had no work, while the women who washed, cleaned, cooked, and nursed rented an old house to provide shelter for family and boarders.³³

By 1850 more free African Americans were living in Strasburg, Woodstock and New Market. Free African Americans were walking to and from their employment and

some African American slaves were being sent to a store or from one place to another by the slaveholder. By law each slaveholder needed to provide the slave sent abroad with a pass to avoid arrest, resale or abuse by authorities. In the 1850s the Town of New Market passed two ordinances regarding African Americans slaves in town.

December 19, 1853: The trustees requested that slave holders in the vicinity give their slaves "suitable passes when they send them to town on business at night and on Sabbath days"³⁴

Two years later the Town of New Market made another ordinance regarding slaves who were hiring themselves out after January 1, the traditional day for the yearly hiring of slaves by slaveholders.

December 29, 1855: The trustees resolved that "whereas the citizens of New Market and vicinity having been very much annoyed for the last several years by Negro hirelings being permitted to go at large and hire themselves, keeping house," etc., they will begin to enforce the laws "against all Negroes so offending" after January 1.³⁵

This ordinance aimed toward slaveholders appears to concern short term employment by the slaves, permitted by the slaveholders, as a means to relieve the slaveholders of the responsibilities of food, clothing and supervision. By 1855 the presence in towns of many African Americans, free and slave, was frightening the townspeople who always feared assembly and insurrection beneath the complaint of "annoyance."

Passed by the General Assembly in 1848, one Black Law forbid slaves from hiring themselves out for fear of theft, free trading and going at large in the community, a repeated variation of the laws passed in 1769, 1782, 1792, and 1801. The slaveholder was held responsible for the actions and conduct of his slaves; his slave could be sold and he fined \$20. to \$50., if found guilty of negligence. The New Market ordinance aimed to enforce this law in order to prevent the assembly of African Americans in New Market, but two years later, African Americans were congregating on the streets not only on Sunday but also on weekdays. In January 1857 Kate Cline, daughter of Rev. J. P. Cline and a student at the New Market Seminary, wrote to her cousin Naason Painter: "Yesterday (Tuesday) there

was a great many persons in town. It was lined with Negros.”³⁶ On a winter Tuesday, these African Americans were probably free people rather than slaves who would have had tasks to perform. This situation suggests that the population of free African Americans had exploded in towns, in spite of the numbers having actually decreased slightly in the census records. Although no occurrence of uprisings in Shenandoah County has been found before the Civil War, the slaveholders may have lost control of the slavery business. Surely some slaveholders were trusting their people to go, come and hire themselves out. Possibly African Americans were being treated with more liberty as free men and women in Shenandoah County, but the threat of sale by the New Market Town Ordinance verifies that the last suggestion had not happened.

Thus Shenandoah County entered the slavery business one slave and one Black Law at a time. Money being made and lost affected the slaves directly; loss motivated the sale of slaves, action that destroyed the African American families, dispersing father, mother and children. Get rich quick schemes have come and gone, but the slavery business, one of these, corrupted those involved, led to a Civil War and left a shameful residue in history that neither African Americans nor white citizens in Shenandoah County will ever forget.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County* (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1980) 7-9.
2. “The African-American Mosaic,” The Library of Congress Exhibition 1.
3. Library of Virginia Reel 181 Box 231 Folder 2.
4. See “George Rye and the Abolitionist Movement in Shenandoah County,” Book #III.
5. Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 79.
6. June Purcell Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia*. Comp. Karen Hughes White & Joan

- Peters. (Lovettsville, VA: Willow Bend Books, 1996) 27.
7. See Book #I and #III for names.
 8. 657.
 9. Compiled from Daniel Bly, Records of Indentures and Guardianships in Shenandoah County, Virginia, 1772-1831.
 10. Guild 72, 117.
 11. Library of Virginia microfilm Reel 181 B230 F81.
 12. See Book #III for "Emancipation/Manumission in Shenandoah County" for names of emancipated people of color.
 13. Book # I.
 14. (2004). Historical Census Browser. Retrieved from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center:
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.
 15. Book #I.
 16. Books #I, #II, #III furnish census results, statistics and comparisons with Frederick, Rockingham and Augusta counties.
 17. Henkel-Renalds Connection with Ancestral Scripts and Collections. Comp. Mildred Renalds Wittig. (Harrisonburg: Custom Printing, 2007) 142.
 18. (2004). Historical Census Browser. Retrieved from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center:
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 19. (2004). Historical Census Browser. Retrieved from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center:
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.
 20. Wayland 35.
 21. John W. Wayland, German Element of the SV of VA 1907 179-80.
 22. Wayland, German Element 180.
 23. Henkel-Renalds Connection with Ancestral Scripts and Collections 142.
 24. Book #i, #II, #III.
 25. Book #II.

26. See complete list of the names in Book # II.
27. Book #II.
28. Guild 95.
29. Book #III for names.
30. Books #i, #II, # III, for 1820-1860 census entries.
31. Shenandoah County Archives Collection 36 Reel #2 1298-1299.
32. Book #III for "One African American Man's Appeal for Justice."
33. Book #I, #II, #III.
34. "Trustee/Council Minutes of the Town of New Market," 10.
35. The Government of the Town of New Market: A Brief Synopsis 1796-1996, 10.
36. Kate Cline, letter to Naason Painter, January 1857.