

The Enslaved Children of George Mason

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- What were the experiences of the enslaved children of Gunston Hall?
- How was the life of George Mason's first wife, Ann Eilbeck Mason, shaped by the enslaved people of properties on which she resided?
- How were enslaved people of Mason's Gunston Hall viewed by law-makers and -enforcers?
- What household tasks did George Mason, his two wives and their children assign to enslaved peoples, and how did these tasks shape the experiences of African Americans bonded to Gunston Hall who also developed their own relationships with the Mason family?
- How did the diet of the enslaved people of Gunston Hall determine their health, wellness, and life outcomes?

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to uncover the lives of enslaved individuals owned by George Mason, creator of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, and his close family.

"THAT all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

-Virginia Declaration of Rights (1)

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the first three weeks of the project, we participated in reading-intensive seminars; below we list some of the books that we studied closely.

- *George Mason, Forgotten Founder* by Jeff Broadwater
- *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* by Philip D. Morgan
- *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* by Erica Armstrong Dunbar
- *Among His Slaves: George Mason's Struggle With Slavery* by Terry K. Dunn
- *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* by Anthony E. Kaye
- *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Everyday South* by Stephanie M. H. Camp

EVIDENCE

We used primary source documents from Gunston Hall, the Fairfax County Courthouse, the Library of Congress, and online digitized records to create narratives about the enslaved community at Gunston Hall. We also went to George Washington's home at Mount Vernon where we gathered information to guide our research about George Mason.



The Old Plantation
Photo Courtesy of the Folk Center in Williamsburg

CONCLUSION

In contrast to founding fathers like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, many of George Mason's papers have not survived the test of time. The primary evidence we consulted revealed that George Mason perceived enslaved people as (chattel) property. His public denunciation of slavery as a "slow Poison, which is daily Contaminating the Minds & Morals of [white] People," related to white colonists, not to enslaved African Americans of Gunston Hall whom he never freed. (2) We also learned that the enslaved children working for our university's namesake experienced the double yoke of oppression. They occupied a particularly precarious position in colonial Virginia for they had to respond to the everyday demands of both their dehumanizing owners and their dehumanized family.



George Mason's home at Gunston Hall.
Taken by Elizabeth Perez-Garcia

FURTHER DISCUSSION

We would like our project to initiate discussions about the use of slave labor by institutions of higher education in the United States. George Mason University (GMU) became an independent institution in 1972. Two decades prior it was founded as a branch of the University of Virginia, which was established by the American president Thomas Jefferson; he deployed enslaved laborers to build the halls and classrooms of this well-respected school. Although bondsmen and bondswomen did not serve GMU, as they did other nearby institutions such the College of William and Mary and Georgetown University, it is still troubling that the namesake of our university has--on campus and beyond--a little-known slave-owning past. Has this central fact of George Mason's colonial and American life been overlooked in the christening of our school? That question has truly inspired our summer research and spurred further interest in researching the history of GMU as an institutional child of the era of segregation in Virginia. Finally, we envision a campus memorial highlighting the labor, culture and aspirations of enslaved people who enabled George Mason, the historical Patriot, to become the celebrated father of the Bill of Rights.

Visit our website at
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