Interns Add to Knowledge of Plantation Community

Over the summer, University of Virginia students Robert Parkinson and Elizabeth Arnebeck helped advance our understanding of the Monticello plantation and the lives and working conditions of its African-American residents.

Parkinson, a graduate student in UVa’s Corcoran Department of History, gathered information on the overseers – young and old, harsh and humane – who supervised the plantation laborers. Information about their ages, social status and property holdings, as well as their subsequent careers, illuminates the ways these men reflected Thomas Jefferson’s changing ideas of management and affected the welfare and productivity of the people under their control.

Arnebeck, an undergraduate history major, compiled references to individual slaves in Jefferson’s records, organized them by families, and created family trees, making a valuable addition to the biographical information in the forthcoming book, *Free Some Day: The African-American Families of Monticello*.

In addition, Arnebeck, aided by Ella Hoffman, an intern from Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., read through surviving copies of Charlottesville newspapers from the first issue in 1820 to the end of 1830. Their mission was to note every reference to slaves, not just items involving Jefferson and Monticello. Casting this wider net yielded some very interesting insights into family formation and disruption.

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It is interesting that it is the pursuit of freedom that brings individuals from this period into sharpest focus. When, as the law required, free people of color registered at the county courthouse, the clerk recorded their height, complexion and distinguishing marks. Four slaves freed by Jefferson in his will – John Hemings, Burwell Colbert, Madison Hemings and Eston Hemings – were described in this way. But advertisements for runaways provided even more detailed descriptions, often including personality traits and biographical information. Because they sought freedom by running away, eight people from the Monticello community have come back to life on reels of microfilm.

Other than the well-known advertisement Jefferson placed in the Virginia Gazette in 1769 for the runaway carpenter Sandy, all of the newspaper ads mentioned slaves who ran away from owners to whom they had been sold by Jefferson or the executors of his estate. All but one of the runaways were men.

Patsy Fossett, the 17-year-old daughter of blacksmith Joseph Fossett and his wife, Edith, Monticello’s head cook, was the female exception. She ran away in 1827, just a few months after being sold in the Monticello dispersal sale.

A prominent theme of the advertisements found in the newspapers is the effort to rejoin members of families fragmented by sale. James Gillette, brother of Israel Gillette Jefferson, who left his recollections of Monticello in 1873, ran away from the Richmond area in 1829. He, his parents and nine of his brothers and sisters had been sold to at least 10 different bidders at the Monticello auction sales in 1827 and 1829. James Gillette’s new owner surmised that “Jimmy” had run back to Albemarle County and was “lurking about some of the late Mr. Jefferson’s farms.”
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Another advertisement illustrates the harsh features of the institution of slavery and uncovers the fact that a man who was listed by himself in Jefferson's Farm Book actually had a family – a wife and children living on an adjoining plantation. Placed in the Charlottesville newspaper by merchant John Watson, the ad reveals that the father of a runaway named Phil was Monticello’s principal shoemaker, also named Phil (his surname is not known). Because of this advertisement, we now know that after the death of his first wife, Aggy, the elder Phil married a woman named Beck, who belonged to Jefferson’s neighbor Kemp Catlett. As with many “abroad” marriages, Phil, Beck and their children – the property of two different men – were doubly vulnerable to family separation.

Phil’s family did, in fact, experience separation, possibly after Phil’s death in his 60s in 1809. Sometime before 1822, Beck and her younger children were sold to William Galt, whose Fluvanna County property was more than 30 miles from Monticello, while her son Phil was sold to Watson, who lived in Milton, a now-vanished town surrounded by Jefferson’s landholdings. Watson provided a hitherto unknown family genealogy in his advertising effort to reclaim Phil, because he suspected the runaway would attempt to rejoin his mother and siblings and wanted to provide sufficient information to alert Fluvanna County residents.

The strategies used by enslaved people to protect their companions, whether kin or not, is apparent in Watson’s concluding assumption about the probable actions of Beck’s fellows in bondage: “I am solicitous that the overseers of Galts and their neighbors, keep a lookout, as its more than probable Galts’ people may convey him [Phil] from place to place by way of secreting him.”

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COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org

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