Writing Freedom into Narratives of Racial Injustice in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, I taught an upper-level special topics course on African-American slave narratives. Barely two weeks into the semester, my students suggested that the name of the class be changed, and after discussion and a vote, they decided on *Narratives of Freedom*. Their motivation for this particular moniker stemmed from their desire to focus not on the institution of slavery but on the freedom for which the writers yearned. This revised title also enhanced the subjects of race and freedom in the course; we included readings about the injustices of the current incarceration system in the United States and individual accounts of overcoming contemporary racial barriers and racism.

As we explored the more popular and "classic" narratives written by Frederick Douglass, Harriett Jacobs, and Solomon Northup, I began to shift my attention back to a short autobiography written by Bethany Veney, an enslaved woman who lived in the Shenandoah Valley area of Virginia in the early 1800s. I had also recently started to conduct new research on the highly lucrative, yet historically ignored antebellum slave trade in this region and began to see connections between her narrative and the facts of the trade. I also realized, however, that I was placing Veney's narrative in a subordinate position relative to other historical accounts as if her life story needed to "fit" into the chronology of enslavement.

Both this class and my participation in a 2015 Yale summer seminar on slavery led by preeminent historian, David Blight, convinced me that I needed to continue to deconstruct the myths of enslavement, tell a more complete story of enslavement, and center my work on those who were forced to experience enslavement firsthand—the ones who lived through it. To continue my research, I identified two individuals, Bethany Veney and John Quincy Adams, whose experiences were based directly in the Shenandoah Valley region, an area encompassing ten counties, and 200 miles south to north at the upper western section of Virginia (fig. 1). Two counties lie within the West Virginia border.[1] Following the slave narrative/narratives of freedom tradition, their accounts shed light on the

[1] The Shenandoah Valley counties that are the most northern are referred to as the Lower Valley, and the areas south as the Upper Valley. The naming is a bit misleading.

trials of horrors of everyday life under enslavement, including graphic details of punishments, a near sale on an auction block (Veney), and the selling of family members. But both stories also include dramatic episodes of resistance, and, ultimately, how each acquired freedom. I have also included narratives of freedom in the form of legal testimonies given by Emily and John Webb, an enslaved couple from Clarke County, Virginia, who had thirteen children and successfully fought for their own freedom in the 1840s. Their narratives yield new insights into valley enslavement and help prove an integral argument in this book—that stories from African Americans are not peripheral to the history of the valley but at its center.

Usually classified in the American canon as literary texts, narratives of freedom are also crucial historical expositions written to exorcise the demons of enslavement, to yearn for private reconciliation, to

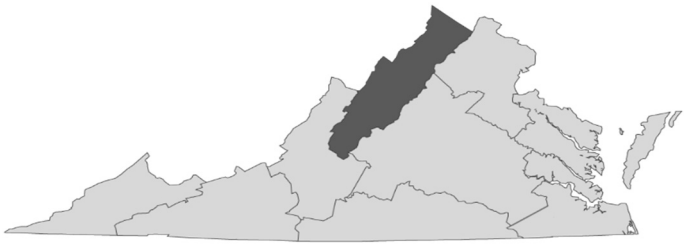

Fig. 0-1: Shenandoah Valley (highlighted) and the state of Virginia. Credit: Virginia Tourism Council

exert revenge against individuals and the slave society of America, or to serve as abolitionist tracts. [2] Whatever their motivations, enslaved individuals well understood their own relationships with bondage and asserted themselves on paper as self-conscious historians whose accounts can help us fill in historical gaps. I argue that Veney, Adams, and John and Emily Webb were insightful and courageous writers who helped forge a missing chapter in the history of slavery in the Shenandoah Valley, and their brave reflections serve to uncover hidden facts and elucidate the experience of enslavement in this area of the southern United States. Instead of creating a standard and chronological history of enslavement of the valley, however, I begin this important story with the words of the formerly-enslaved individuals themselves. Blight, in *A Slave No More,* credits the lesser-

[2] William L. Andrews, ed., *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Pearson, 1993).

known narrative authors, of whom Veney and Adams are a part, with "unedited and authentic ex-slave voices, remembering and recording the events that forged their liberation". [3] Further, Blight classifies slave narratives into two distinct periods: those written before the Civil War and those after. He argues that the writers in the antebellum years tended to describe the horrific details of enslavement as reportage fueling the abolitionist movement. Postbellum narratives, however, leaned toward racial uplift and hopeful futures in addition to providing historical details about enslavement. [4] In my study, Adams and Veney, who published their works in the post-emancipation period, cannot be filed neatly into Blight's categories; both writers provided emotional and detailed testimony on slavery's atrocities. Perhaps, then, classifying narratives of freedom is a tenuous exercise and an overly restrictive methodology of neatly compartmentalizing the experiences of the enslaved.

Since investigating African-American history in the valley is a difficult task due to the dearth of sources and the racist ideology that presupposes people of color were not and are not meaningful to this area, the narratives help to fill in critical absences in the historical record. Veney's and Adams's narratives adhere to conventions and are thus part of an extensive African-American autobiographical literary tradition—their accounts shed light on the trials of everyday life of enslavement. Their written accounts are also extraordinary historical texts, not just literary ones. If we read and deconstruct these narratives through a critical lens, their value to understanding nineteenth century enslavement in the valley and in the nation increases exponentially. As the literary scholar William L. Andrews suggests, "…this genre deserves to be regarded as a phenomenon of literary significance in its own right, in addition to its import as a social document".[5] Certainly, Mary Prince, considered to be the creator of the first female slave autobiography in 1831, understood well her role as a historian and owner of the experiences of enslavement. She firmly states, "I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me".[6]

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[3] David W. Blight, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (Boston: Mariner Press, 2007), 11.
[4] Ibid., 12-13.
[5] Andrews, 2.
[6] Henry Louis Gates, ed. *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 23.

The narratives of the valley, like those that were published nationally and more widely known and read, describe in detail the system of racism that held them in bondage. This "system", however, cannot be described monolithically and to categorize enslavement as a simple product of racism is erroneous. Certainly, and as I will demonstrate, the experience of enslavement in the valley was distinctive and complex—I do hope to complicate our understanding of the "institution" by delving into the narratives.[7] I also examine how a multilayered racist ideology operated and was sustained at all levels of culture and society and obscured and nearly obliterated the lives of African Americans in historical discourses. One of my goals is not to single out Winchester, Virginia and the valley as particularly insidious southern regions as they relate to race and racism, but to investigate the webs and myriad discourses of racism this community formed and replicated. For a geographical area whose white writers, historians, and public history

Fig. 0-2: Contemporary Winchester, Virginia. Credit: SmugMug

practitioners continuously denied and still deny the importance of enslavement and the human agency of African Americans, its racist practices knew few bounds. What are considered the "standard" historical accounts of the region, then, reinforce a hegemonic white heritage. But by juxtaposing these myriad sources with narratives of freedom, my hope is to show that this

[7] "System" and "Institution" are placed in quotation marks because I believe these terms, which are often used to describe racism and slavery, are overused and impersonal. I have encouraged my students to use the term "experience" instead, and I use it throughout this book.

dense web should not shade the existence of African Americans in Winchester or anywhere else in the United States.

Perhaps quite as relentless as the tendentious written histories in the valley is the misinterpretation in these works that slaves were "servants" or "helpers" and the disturbing myths that "some [slaves] were treated better than others"—a dialogic phenomenon previously researched and also experienced by this author during her ethnographic work.[8] Of course, interpretive texts and public programming denying human agency to African Americans are not only relegated to the valley as this warping of historical fact is nationwide. But the valley is ensconced in the representation of the Civil War, which, at its core, was fought over enslavement. Wouldn't this region, then, be motivated to devote at least part of its public history mission to resources and educational programming on enslavement? Many southerners continue to adhere to the racist beliefs of a "Lost Cause" false reality and a "states' rights" reasoning for the cause of the Civil War, effectively silencing, with extreme force, the incorporation of the voices of African Americans. Consequently, there are only a few commemorative structures on the landscape in the valley that exhibit any element of the history of enslavement while monuments to Civil War white history—statues, battlefields, and reenactments—are extensive and dominant.

When enslavement is mentioned in the histories and public history sites it is repeatedly cast aside and not considered a factor in the establishment of this region because the numbers of enslaved individual in all years before the end of the Civil War were small. This overarching and biased view purports that since the numbers of enslaved individuals were insignificant in relation to the more southern Tidewater area of Virginia and states farther south, slavery was and is considered "not important" to the social, cultural, and political life of this region. Using sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, I have labeled this persistent phenomenon "the low in number" theory. According to Bourdieu, symbolic power operates to create and sustain the legitimation of particular belief systems; in the case of slavery in the valley, historical texts and discourses have created a false story of the non-presence of African Americans that, as it becomes more and more replicated, becomes more and more thought of as the truth.[9] My concept is similar to the "symbolic annihilation" theory created by historians Jennifer Eichstadt and Stephen Small, who performed

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[8] Ann Denkler, *Sustaining Identity, Recapturing Heritage: Exploring Issues of Public History, Tourism, and Race in a Southern Town* (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2007).

[9] David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 43.

fieldwork in American southern plantation museums that claimed to represent slavery.[10] Similar to my findings, they state, "Our argument is that what is present, combined with what is absent, is part of the discursive formation of the genteel (White) South."[11] In my study, a low population claim signifies that African Americans were absent while solidifying the presence of the white founders. This biased belief hovers over the physical and cultural landscapes and historical venues of the valley and is so well entrenched that neither locals nor tourists are directed toward questioning it. The "low in number" claim is, of course, a conspiratorial story that obfuscates the facts about slavery in favor of an all-encompassing white-centric narrative. If valley towns and cities believed they were far removed from the evils of large-scale enslavement, racist ideologies enveloped the area much as they did in the entire south.

Assessing the "degree" of racism in a particular context or geographical region lends itself to spurious conclusions—how is it possible to measure its presence, spread, and maintenance? In a recent study, a small academic team of political scientists and public policy professors introduced a methodology of "behavioral path dependence" to determine the extent of how and why racism was created and reinforced over the southern United States beginning in the enslavement period. They posit that their model reveals how "ideas, norms, and behaviors" pertaining to racist politics and cultural milieus, are "passed down…and interact with institution, reinforcing each other over time."[12] Certainly, tracing the perpetuation of racism is vital to grasping its hold on American people and society, but the researchers argue that they discovered, through data and quantitative analysis, that in areas that had a higher prevalence or higher number of enslaved individuals, racism, manifest through lynching, convict leasing, and voting disenfranchisement statistics and other forms of discrimination, was *worse.* In other words, racism, during enslavement and now in the twenty-first century, is more easily located in regions that comprised a larger number of bondspeople of color. They hypothesize

> …in looking at the U.S. South, we document that southern whites who live in areas where slaveholding was more prevalent are today more conservative, more cool to African Americans,

[10] Jennifer L. Eichstadt and Stephen Small, *Representing Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 10.
[11] Ibid., 105.
[12] Avadit Acharya, Matthew Blakwell, and Maya Sen, *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018),11.

> and more likely to oppose race-related policies that many feel could potentially help Blacks.[13]

While this data and assessment may be logical, the conclusion falls into the same ideological and racialized trap as the "low in number" theory. I too attempted to investigate and interrogate racist attitudes, practices, and the virulent vestiges that remain alive today in a distinct geographical region by rejecting any hierarchical thinking and calculating degrees of racism. I was also driven to examine and centralize African-American narratives, written with the goals of breaking the systems of oppression they fully witnessed and negotiated, and combatting the white power structure that established these systems and worked indiscriminately to hold it in place. Enslavement and racism seeped into every community and every city since settlement and the repercussions of these institutions are with us today, as the researchers suggest.

Over the last century, historians and literary scholars have questioned the "truthfulness" of narratives of freedom and labeled the writers themselves as unreliable. Even narrative expert, William Andrews, asserted that studying narratives as truthful accounts is fraught with challenges.[14] But John Blassingame, in his seminal, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, attests to the central role of the autobiographer in her/his stories. While often discredited by historians, narrative writers, Blassingame believes, were the closest to the action, as it were, and had every right to be keepers of the record:

> Many historians refuse to use these accounts because they have felt the fugitive, as the primary sufferer in the institution, was unable to give an objective account of bondage. This is obviously true. At the same time, most historians realize that few individuals are able to give completely objective accounts of things and persons with whom they were associated intimately. Inasmuch as all commentators were prejudiced in some way, slaves cannot be dismissed because of their biases.[15]

Arguing for credibility for the narrative writers, Blassingame and other cultural theorists correctly point out that *all* historical accounts are tendentious and subject to interrogation as reliable sources. The histories of white people, however, considered the *official* histories of towns and cities

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[13] Ibid., 14.
[14] William A. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
[15] John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 370.

all over the south and in the valley, have glossed over or falsified the experiences of enslavement and are viewed as sacred and truthful; they were written to glorify the white founding fathers and occasional mother who, by progenitor, are considered to be the only purveyors of history. These pervasive and often racist accounts in the valley propose that enslavement did not and does not matter in American history, and, worse, insist that enslavement was *innocuous* and comprised harmonious relationships in which "happy" and "appreciative" enslaved individuals enjoyed interacting with their masters. Early valley historian and descendant of a prominent family in Winchester, Thomas Cartmell, wrote of "The Negro" in his voluminous, *Shenandoah Valley Pioneers and Their Descendants* in 1909:

> "If left alone, they will work out their own destiny to their own satisfaction. No two races ever lived in such harmony as the White and Black races enjoyed in *ye olden times,* before the negro was taught by the fanatics that slavery was a yoke that must be removed, *and he must do his part"* [italics his].[16]

His referencing of a mythic past of racial compatibility only marred by "fanatics"—northern anti-slavery proponents—is a typical ingredient of the turn of the nineteenth century valley and American histories. Cartmell's version of the history of enslavement in the region also places racial uplift squarely on the shoulders of African Americans, assuaging whites from the responsibility for the marginalized social status of people of color. He also places his skewed version of Black history at the very end of his book in an appendix—the first five hundred pages are strictly devoted to a white-washed version of the valley past.

The mythologizing of American enslavement and the history of enslavement itself are intertwined since the very second the trade of human beings began, so too did the practices and discourses that served to legitimize the institution begin to take root. Over hundreds of years, as the experience of enslavement formed and deformed the American landscape and political, social, and cultural life, representations emerged and were replicated through the written word and in imagery. One of the most lasting artistic impressions of slavery in popular culture depicts plantation scenes with enslaved individuals in large fields of, usually, cotton, working under the eyes of white overseers surveilling their bondsmen and bondswomen from horses. Such settings, of course, existed, but they do not represent the totality of the history of enslavement, and, unfortunately, they serve to block

[16] Thomas Cartmell, *Shenandoah Valley Pioneers and Their Descendants*, (By author: 1909), 520.

our understanding of an exploitative system that survived not in static, one-dimensional realities, but in arbitrary, spontaneous, and fluid events in often more intimate settings. By embracing narratives of freedom, *first*, as it were, we can much more fully come to intellectual and sociological terms with the complex reality of enslavement and those who were forced to experience it.

This book is neither a complete story of enslavement nor does it attempt to resolutely define how racism operates and has operated in the Shenandoah Valley region. Although I utilize a semi-chronological approach in privileging and centering the narratives in the center of my research, my goal is to reveal and hypothesize on the experiences of the enslaved, to uncover the early nineteenth-century forced migration of Blacks in the valley, to interrogate how valley enslavement was similar and unlike other areas in the south, to explore the presence and absence of historic sites associated with enslavement, and to uncover how racism, as expressed in assorted discourses and public history sites serves to shield, even today, the history of slavery in this area of Virginia. Moreover, the narratives, which epistemologically frame this book, cannot tell us every detail about enslavement—this was not the intention of the writers. These narratives constitute a combined count of about 100 pages, so a comprehensive story gleaned from the works would not be possible. But embracing the authors, Veney, Adams, and the Webbs as both narrative writers *and* detail-driven historians, brings the narrative genre into a novel light. Their works supported the abolitionist cause and promoted racial uplift within a traditional literary format and stand as self-empowering, nation-changing tracts. More succinctly, the narratives were not simply reflections of the violence of enslavement used to promote the white-centric polemics of the anti-slavery movement; the authors had their own motivations for engaging in the intrepid act of autobiography. Although, as historian Cynthia Hamilton claims, "…all narratives pander to the abolitionist polemics of victimization," they also reflect self-preservation and autonomy.[17]

My other goal in this work is not to simply mine the narratives for facts but to engage them with a methodology that the writers deserve and one that provides insight into their lives and the lives of other enslaved individuals. Further, and critically, as a white privileged reader and researcher working from the vantage point of the first quarter of the twenty-

[17] Cynthia S. Hamilton, "Revisions, Rememories, and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative," *Journal of American Studies*, no. 3 (1996): 429-445.

first century, I can neither claim nor is it my intention to claim that I can fully recapture the voices and experiences of African Americans, free and enslaved, who built and settled the valley. As scholar and theorist Saidiya Hartman suggests about examining histories of the marginalized, "…there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents."[18] My best attempts will fall short but reconstituting the historical record to at least begin to better incorporate the stories of people of color as truthfully and humbly as possible is the goal of this study.

In chapter one, I investigate the history of enslavement in the valley, which begins with enslaved individuals brought to the region by German, Scots-Irish, and Swiss settlers from Pennsylvania in the early eighteenth century. The creation of the settlement of Opequon, one of the first communities established in the lower valley in Frederick County, is a story of courage, perseverance, and colonial politics, and although the number of settlers and enslaved was small (one hundred settlers), the impact of *both* whites and Blacks in settling the valley was monumental and calculated. Africans and African Americans, even at this early phase of the development of the region, resisted enslavement and sought independence sometimes in surreptitious spaces on this rural landscape. The white colonists and the government of the colony were well aware of the presence and threat of these escaped slave or "maroon" communities. Rather than being an effect of the first settlements in the region, these outlying locations of Black empowerment determined the physical and racial boundaries and policies of the earliest years of European hegemony in Virginia, and those who escaped and survived on the margins of the new white settlements elicited great fear and consternation. Africans and African Americans who took enormous personal risks to live free lives found themselves on the wrong side of the law and were confronted with force. Their desire for freedom and opportunity, however, matched the white population's motivations for these same promises, integrating an African and African-American story into the historical record of the valley.

Written accounts of the first century and a half of white settlement, moreover, created a false and monolithic identity of the first Scots-Irish and German settlers as "hard-working" Anglo Saxons who were morally averse to enslavement because of their particular "Teutonic" temperament. Enslaved individuals were, nonetheless, part of the initial construction of the landscape and its regional identity, building homes, businesses, and the Great Valley Road (now Route 11). They also worked in iron furnaces, one

[18] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

of the most lucrative trades in the area. In this chapter I also introduce the "low in number" theory to argue that these foundational narratives and public history sites in the valley have neglected to include the histories of enslaved individuals or free black communities. Instead, the interpretive emphasis lies squarely on the shoulders of the tough and courageous white settlers, and the backcountry frontier is constructed as a rugged and challenging place surveyed by none other than a young George Washington.

In chapter two, I examine the experience of enslavement in the valley region by elevating the two narratives of freedom written by John Quincy Adams and Bethany Veney and use their stories as guidebooks to tell a more complete story of enslavement in this area. Adams and Veney lived in a world of exploitation and racism, no different from any area of the south that held humans in bondage, but their stories are invaluable resources in uncovering the complex world of antebellum valley history, including exposing a devastating trade of human beings and their own personal experiences in this trade. They also offer great insight into the ways in which slaves resisted bondage. Adams describes, for example, the subterfuge and power grab his brother used to learn how to read from his master's son. Veney recalls her religious conversion (as a result, most likely, of the Second Great Awakening) and her master's revulsion to her newfound devotion to God. Veney's and Adams's accounts also expose the bemusing and complicated relationships under enslavement, further exploring the personal side to the impersonal "institution." Veney, after gaining her freedom and moving north, decides, curiously, to visit Page County and her former masters after the Civil War. They welcomed her, and one of them, quite shockingly, visited her in her new home state of Connecticut. This episode breaks apart a monolithic view enslavement, but also leaves the reader, perhaps, with more questions than answers.

Chapter three explores how Winchester and Frederick County comprise, in large part, landscapes of enslavement. As I looked more deeply into the trade of human beings and enslavement more generally through the narratives of freedom and other sources, I located historic sites primarily in the lower valley that mark African-American history; most of these sites are not recognized and include spaces where African Americans were forced to occupy. In Winchester, buildings that housed enslaved individuals who were waiting to be transported farther south on the "Slave Trail of Tears", a name given to the forced migration of African Americans by historian Edward Ball, remain unnoticed and unmarked on prominent streets in the

historic district of the city.[19] The Taylor Hotel, a grand early nineteenth-century building was built by white and Black laborers, some of whom were enslaved, and it also housed transactions between sellers and buyers of enslaved individuals in its lower parlor area. As guests in the early 1800s drank spirits, smoked cigars, and discussed the politics of the day, enslaved individuals sat or stood in hotel spaces in great fear. I contend that the neglect of public history sites that reflect the Black experience also reveals the lasting impact of racism and enslavement and the hegemonic status of the Civil War as trumping all of the history of the valley. Extant structures, including taverns and inns, also doubled as holding "pens" for the trade of human flesh, and yet not one of these buildings is officially recognized as a historical site.

During a tour of City Hall in Manhattan, New York in fall 2018, I listened to the historian and founder of the activist group "Black Gotham", Kamau Ware, tell the participants to simply look around their immediate landscape to find Black history. This site, and its busy and beautiful park contain no monuments to the history of African Americans, and inside City Hall itself, predictably, all the official portraits of political figures show no Black faces. That lower Manhattan was home to one of the largest slave markets in early American history and was the site of numerous and deadly slave revolts is nowhere to be seen. According to Ware, however, if we begin to ask ourselves who built the city and with informed imaginations reconfigure the spaces to be spaces that were occupied by African Americans, then we can start to learn about the history of the marginalized. New perceptions with the sensitivity to racial diversity and racial exclusion are needed not just in Manhattan and in the Shenandoah Valley, but in all landscapes in the United States.

In chapter four, I investigate the antebellum and Civil War experiences of enslavement and the extensive networks of racism that pervaded the valley, while focusing on Winchester and Frederick County. In keeping with the central thesis of this book—to privilege the narratives of freedom over other historical discourses—I begin the chapter with Adams's recollection of how his family achieved freedom. As a climate of hope pervaded African-American communities, Adams's father approached a Union officer to ask if he and his family could obtain a pass for the north. His wish was granted, and the family settled in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Most individuals and families of color, however, were not so lucky—they

[19] Edward Ball, "'Slavery's Trail of Tears': Retracing American's Forgotten Migration—The Journey of a Million African-Americans From the Tobacco South to the Deep South," *Smithsonian*, (2015): 58-82.

were caught within the actual fighting, the political hostilities and expectations of a war that was fought, literally, on the city streets and front lawns of peoples' homes.

The years before the Civil War also witnessed ideological conflict as both the devastating Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 were indelibly connected to Winchester and Frederick County. The 1850 act, written by James Murray Mason, a senator and attorney from Winchester, became one of the most inhumane government documents in American history and Mason even bragged about it.[20] Thus, while the valley and its citizens were choosing sides as the country splintered, African Americans, both enslaved and free, were calculating their opportunities for gaining freedom.

A closer investigation of Brown's raid, which added fuel to the sparks that became the conflagration of the American Civil War, reveals the story of John Copeland, a free African-American man from Oberlin, Ohio, who joined with Brown, was put to death for his involvement, and whose body tragically ended up in Winchester Medical College. Copeland's parents desperately wanted to have their son returned to them and enlisted the assistance of an attorney and friend, James Monroe. Monroe offers a narrative of his own, detailing his struggles to locate and retrieve Copeland. Ultimately, and unfortunately, his journey, which included tense and racist interactions with prominent citizens of Winchester and medical students, ends unhappily, and his story illustrates the exploitation and dissection of Black bodies, both free and enslaved in the valley.

In Frederick County, fifteen miles south of Winchester situated on the Valley Pike, which figures prominently as the road that led thousands of enslaved individuals farther south, a public history site exists that *does* embrace the landscape of enslavement. Belle Grove, completed in 1826, was owned by Isaac Hite, the brother-in-law of James Madison, the fourth president of the United States. It lies on 100 acres and integrates the stories of some its 275 enslaved individuals. Hite, in keeping with other prominent Virginia white men in valley history, built a working community on the backs of his enslaved workers forcing them to learn ironworking and many other lucrative skills, which, in turn, facilitated Hite's extensive national and international trade operations. Fortunately, he left behind recollections of his philosophies on enslavement, reflecting his understanding of race through an Enlightenment lens. By focusing on his narratives, especially

[20] Kenneth W. Keller, "The Wheat Trade on the Potomac, 1800-1860", in Kenneth Koons and Warren Hofstra, ed., *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900,* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 28.

those that include mention of his Black "workers" and serve to elucidate his views on enslavement and his own maintenance of white patriarchal power, I hoped to uncover both a closer and more nuanced look into the lives of some of the enslaved men, women, and children who were unable to leave written narratives behind. They deserve, however, to share the historical, ideological, and racialized space of this particular landscape of enslavement since they built, maintained, and lived on it, ensuring the elevated social position of Hite and his family and his hegemonic legacy in the valley.

My conclusion, which precedes an appendix that includes the testimonies of Emily and John Webb, brings together the themes of the chapters to restate the importance of delving into African-American history in the Shenandoah Valley through the experiences, firstly, of African Americans themselves. For centuries in the valley and around the United States, African Americans have been purposefully neglected in the historical record and on commemorative landscapes. What can be revealed when researching the Shenandoah Valley is a history of BOTH African Americans and whites, an insidious slave trade, and a legacy of racism that is difficult to define, but, is nonetheless, omnipresent. Bethany Veney, John Quincy Adams, Emily Webb, and John Webb are just a few of the enslaved individuals who were able to tell their stories in print, but I believe their rich, detailed, and remarkable accounts, like all narratives of freedom that went untold, were meant to serve the universal function of providing a history that should never be considered peripheral to American history, but should, instead, be central.

CHAPTER ONE

"THEY STOOD UPON THEIR BLOOD": CONSTRUCTIONS OF HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN SETTLEMENT AND RESISTANCE

John Quincy Adams, a well-educated and brave enslaved individual from Frederick County, Virginia, must have spent long, anxiety-filled hours and sleepless nights mulling over leaving his plantation before he and part of his family escaped bondage from their master in 1863. Like thousands before and after him, Adams left familiar sights for an unknown northern location. He settled in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and became a prominent citizen devoted to establishing civil rights for African Americans in his community. His brief, yet eloquent account reveals hope for a better future, cynicism for a society that holds to beliefs of equality but is entrenched in a vicious slave system, and a thorough knowledge of America's founding documents; he includes a recitation of the Constitution showing his erudition but also his patriotism. Adams also takes time to mention the stunning physical beauty of the valley landscape, a description he shares with myriad occupants of this mountainous and bucolic landscape over the centuries. He writes, "A word for Winchester. It is one of the handsomest towns I ever saw, and is not surpassed by any in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, or any of the western states. Winchester is situated in the beautiful Shenandoah valley where so many battles were fought during the great rebellion."[1] What belies his praise for the scenery, however, is ultimately a story that takes the reader away from stunning vistas into the depravity of enslavement and his eventual trek to freedom.

When I began researching African-American history of the valley region of Virginia, colleagues would sometimes ask me "Why are you

[1] John Quincy Adams, *Narrative of the Life of John Quincy Adams, When in Slavery, and Now as a Freeman* (Harrisburg, PA: Sieg Printer and Stationer, 1872), 23-24 https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/adams/summary.html.

writing about Appalachia when there has already been a lot of research on it?" The valley of Virginia is geographically, economically, and culturally quite distinct from the Appalachian region, but it is still a part of what sociologist Wilma Dunaway names the "Mountain South," lying two hundred miles across the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains.[2] The valley is also labeled the "backcountry", a term employed in the eighteenth century, synonymous with the term, *frontier*.[3] This region was among the first in the New World to host European explorers who scanned the land for riches and expansionistic possibilities, and the conquest of this mountainous area served to create a boundary and a natural protective fort to contain imperial powers, American Indians, and most notably for this study, African Americans. The valley counties drew immigrants principally from Pennsylvania and eastern Virginia who were hungry for land and, for some, who hoped for religious freedom.

The Shenandoah Valley, as an unknown yet breathtaking wilderness to European explorers and settlers, looms large in the works of the region's historians. Like most stories of settlement in North America, and, later, settlement in the Midwest and Western United States, these accounts perpetuate the myth of naïve yet hardworking white settlers forging a uniquely "American" identity into an unforgiving territory. Although these myths and the historiography surrounding them (most notably by Frederick Jackson Turner) have been primarily debunked, the image of courageous Virginia backcountry pioneers is the culturally digestible norm. Studying the settlements in this area as well as the other colonies on the eastern seaboard requires a perspective drawn not from broad generalizations about immigration and migration, but from stridently political and imperialistic motivations grounded in the hegemonic tendencies of European expansionism. In other words, settlement by whites and the enslaved, both those who were owned and living under direct bondage and those who escaped to create maroon communities, was as much about English anxieties about the hazards of a burgeoning overseas empire as it was about a desire for Black freedom. As a region that did not yield the early colonial cash crop of tobacco that proved profitable in the Tidewater and more southern areas of Virginia, the Blue Ridge Mountains served as a barrier to French encroachment that marked the initial purpose of the new communities along the western border of the colonies.

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[2] Wilma Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2003), 1.

[3] See https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Backcountry_Frontier_of_Colonial_Virginia for an excellent synopsis of the roots of settlement of this region.

The natural beauty of the valley today and its miles of hiking trails and parks continue to mask much of its cultural and social history, with most of its public history sites focused on the Civil War and the conflict's battles and battlefields. While the war of southern rebellion was and is very significant to the history of this area and, of course, to the rest of the nation, its hegemony covers up the stories of other historical periods and marginalized individuals. The valley itself, comprising Augusta, Frederick, Page, Rockbridge, Rockingham, Shenandoah, Warren, and Clarke in Virginia, and Jefferson and Berkeley counties in West Virginia, constitutes a distinctive cultural region, but the boundaries are nebulous and most geographic delineations are often arbitrary. Sticking within the prescribed lines of the counties for this research was impossible, but impossible in a constructive means. I determined that historical actors crossed lines and created a fluidity between valley counties and those just beyond the region. For example, Rappahannock County, just east of Page County, is not considered within the valley, but Bethany Veney found herself in the county seat of Little Washington when her first husband, Jerry, was taken to the small city's jail. Here is where she said her last goodbye to him since he was then transported to a lower south destination, indicating that the "action" transcends the geography. Thus, while I attempt to stay within the intellectual confines of the valley, I include discussion of bordering counties. Looking at the counties with Anglo-Saxon and Germanic heritage is critical as well since I attempt to show how this heritage was and is instrumental in creating pasts that reflect an anti-slave holding tradition. As I will demonstrate, this mythologized tradition is a key component of white identity and historical power in the valley. While the counties have diverse industries, religious traditions, and populations, they, nonetheless were characterized as grain-producing. And, importantly, all the counties were inhabited by enslaved individuals and free people of color.[4]

In this chapter, I explore the earliest history of African Americans in the valley in an attempt to fill in the long-standing absence of their lives in myriad discourses. Enslaved individuals were among the region's first settlers: they worked on farms, in plantation homes, in large-scale industry such as iron works, and in the shops and taverns of the towns that grew from the initial rural settlement. It is difficult to determine, especially in the earliest years of European conquest of the new world, who these individuals were, how they lived, and what they felt since white historians of this period celebrate the Germanic and Scotch-Irish roots of the first settlers and the false belief that these immigrants embodied an aversion to owning enslaved

[4] Koons and Hofstra, 27.

individuals. Thus, the histories, both past and present of the valley engage in *symbolic power* by normalizing the so-named unimportance of enslavement to the region's economic, social, and cultural history. Further, describing enslavement as a one-dimensional aggregate, in this case, "only a small number", not only demeans the enslaved individuals themselves but creates an invisibility that was reproduced over the centuries and which served and serves to perpetuate racism. In a nutshell, then, this chapter is my modest attempt to deconstruct the term "slavery" and argue that its definition lies not in statistics but in the acceptance that a single life of a slave is meaningful to that individual and to the American historical record. I also interrogate the inaccurate and biased historiography of the "founding" white families of the Shenandoah Valley and their efforts to obliterate the presence of Black lives.

The first section of this chapter centers on the formation of maroon communities established in the Blue Ridge Mountains of the valley beginning in the late seventeenth century to argue that these "settlements" reveal much about the foundation of the country and the desires for freedom on the part of Africans and African Americans. That enslaved individuals found their way to the Blue Ridge from areas in valley counties and nearly two hundred miles from the eastern shore of Virginia speaks volumes about their determination to escape bondage, their ability to overcome the communication challenges to arrange such journeys when multiple African languages were spoken, and the personal, political, and cultural fears these sites of resistance evoked on the part of English leaders. Unfortunately, the scholarship on these physical sites is limited, and, since they were meant to remain in secret, locating them and their occupants is very difficult. We can conclude, however, that many other areas not only in the original colonies but in countless spaces all over the United States became havens for runaway people of color. Finding them is not as crucial as determining why they were sought after, especially considering the punishments for runaway enslaved individuals.

The second part of this chapter is devoted to painting a picture of the lived experience of enslaved individuals in the Shenandoah Valley, some of the first settlers of this region. Although removed from historical texts, the various actors—the enslaved who traveled into the valley, the escaped slaves who settled in maroon communities, and, later, those who populated farms of all sizes and small cities within the counties—were all pioneers. And, again, the well-documented settlement of the valley, compiled by white male historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allows us glimpses into the institution of enslavement, but the accounts are overwhelmingly romanticized and, often, defensive; their goal was to

seemingly annihilate the presence of people of color and to create mythological southern pasts of loving relationships between slaves and their masters. Nonetheless, as the first people of color settled in the valley, so too did institutionalized racism through government policies and in the histories told through the centuries. Both the seventeenth-century runaways who strove for freedom and communities of their own and the early eighteenth-century enslaved Africans and African Americans who traveled with the first Europeans into the rolling hills of the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains may have offered divergent views of their experiences, but their quests for a life not lived in bondage would have been similar. For the seventeenth-century escapees in particular, how did they manage to even navigate the hundreds of miles of fields and woods to find sustenance? Was it because of the pull of homesickness for Africa in addition to courage to live free? For the enslaved who helped to settle both the upper and lower regions of the valley, would their narratives shine a light on what life was like living and working on small and large farms or in valley towns?

In the early eighteenth century, the backcountry was a location of uncertainty and violence for all of its historical actors including colonial authorities like governors Alexander Spotswood and William Gooch, white settlers from Pennsylvania and Delaware, American Indians, the enslaved brought into the valley, and the people of color who sought freedom under cover of the Blue Ridge. The story of the enslaved here is embedded directly into the patterns of settlement—not simply a marginalized part of it. Like John Quincy Adams and Bethany Veney, the enslaved individuals who preceded them formed the fabric of community life as exploited laborers and cautious pilgrims of maroon settlements who disrupted an already tumultuous imperial adventure. Already ensconced in dynamic yet frayed relationships with American Indians over trade and land, the English were forced to also confront the "threats" from early American Black inhabitants who wished, in their own right, to create settlements of freedom of their own. Just as white settlers took advantage of kin and community networks in the old and new worlds to immigrate and migrate into the valley to pursue their dreams of land acquisition, economic opportunity, and, often, religious freedom, so too did enslaved individuals who, through surreptitious networks, learn of a region hundreds of miles from where they were exploited that could house them and offer them a refuge from chains. Unlike white settlers who found themselves in the valley since it resembled the familiar landscapes of western Europe, the Black immigrants found themselves in a completely foreign landscape. Certainly, and tragically, images of their homelands were not to be replicated in the new world land of bondage.

Today the subject of enslavement, the stories of thousands of African-American lives lived and lost in the valley, as well as the few narratives of freedom are also subsumed in favor of interpretations of the Civil War and a tourism industry devoted to the many parks and areas of leisure, stemming in large part from the Shenandoah National Park, a federally-owned site established by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. Millions of visitors drive, hike, fish, camp, and sightsee only two hours from Washington, D.C. to indulge in the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the park and throughout the counties that comprise the valley. While the conservation and natural history is interpreted here with great detail, the cultural history often takes a back seat to ambitions of maintaining wilderness. In the case of the park in particular, the removal of so-called "mountain people" in the 1930 sparked disturbing controversy over a president's and nation's Depression-era rehabilitative ideologies and the right of eminent domain. Unknown to most visitors as well was the infiltration of racism into the natural beauty of the landscape—the park was also mired in battles over racial segregation.

As I began to research enslavement and the hegemonic narratives that serve to repress its history, I realized that to utilize the term *slavery* repeatedly without fully interrogating its multidimensionality was a travesty to Africans and African Americans who were forced into this "institution". I do not believe historians and other writers on the subject necessarily possess the intent to objectify the experience of enslavement; nonetheless, the term is used to encompass an enormous range of geographical difference, political struggle, and personal experiences. As Bourdieu asserts, "Even the seemingly most neutral or ivory-tower cultural practices are…embedded in systems of social as well as intellectual distinctions."[5] Corralling the dense networks of enslavement into a single term may seem necessary and harmless, but it can serve to deny the human forces that both sustained and resisted enslavement. For example, in a study on the economic history of the development of the valley, historian Robert Mitchell writes, "As an institution [slavery] was unimportant even in the lower valley until the 1760s".[6] When perceived through the lens of an overarching system in this region, *slavery,* as a set of commodity and commercial exchanges, as a signifier of the conditions of a particular labor force, can be construed as an insignificant factor in determining these objective economic outcomes. This more business-side, objective view is also, in itself, is a replication of the emotional distance contained in the records left behind by the masters, the

[5] Swartz, 119.
[6] Robert Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), 128.