A Difficult, Yet Undeniable, History



WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY





In 1826, Washington College, as Washington and Lee University was then called, inherited the estate of "Jockey" John Robinson, a wealthy trustee of the college. It included a 400-acre farm, livestock, a whiskey distillery — and 73 enslaved African-American women, children and men. Ten years later, after profiting from their labor, the college sold a majority of those people.

In 2016, the university installed a historical

marker on the east side of Robinson Hall to remember these individuals, and to recognize this episode in the history of slavery at Washington and Lee.

The inheritance of Robinson's estate gave a financial boost to the college, which in 1825 had only 65 students and a diminished bank account. The institution promptly

sold off his books, livestock, whiskey, distillery equipment and furniture for about \$4,500. Robinson did stipulate that the college could hire out the enslaved workers: "This right is to be exercised upon a sound discretion and in such manner as to give to the negroes who are allotted for hire the alternative of being sold to masters of their own choice." The college accordingly hired out 27 of the slaves for annual sums ranging from \$10 to \$120 per person; the income amounted to about \$1,000 a year.

Another of Robinson's stipulations called for the college to retain ownership of the enslaved people for "at least" 50 years. It could, however, sell "such others as may render themselves by crimes or by mutinous habits, unsafe or injurious in their connection with their fellows."

Robinson further wrote, "In any disposition which may be made of these slaves and also in their treatment, it is my earnest desire that the strictest regard be paid to their comfort and happiness as well as to the interests of the estate."

In 1836, still facing a dire financial situation, Washington College sold the real estate it had

inherited from Robinson. And, despite the 50-year interlude he had specified, it also sold most of the people, to Samuel S. Garland, of Lynchburg, Virginia, for \$20,674.91. Garland took them to work in the cotton fields of Mississippi.

Over the next 20 years, the college sold additional enslaved persons to local residents. As late

as 1857, records indicate, the college still owned three elderly, incapacitated people. By 1865, of course, at the end of the Civil War, it no longer owned any persons.

In 2007, for her honors thesis in the W&L Department of History, Emma Burris-Janssen wrote "An Inheritance of Slavery: The Tale of 'Jockey' John Robinson, His Slaves, and Washington College." Her work provides the most comprehensive look available to date at the circumstances under which the enslaved women, men and children became the property of Washington College, and how the college benefited by hiring them out.

As Burris-Janssen writes: "Their stories, even filtered through white accounts, are as diverse as



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26TH PRESIDENT OF WASHINGTON AND LEE.

AT THE DEDICATION OF THE MARKER IN 2016



they are difficult to uncover. The slaves owned by Washington College were men and women known to the historical record through their first names, prices, and relationships with white men."

A look at two lists, reproduced on the historical marker, illustrates Burris-Janssen's statement. In 1826, for example, a man named Gabriel was 31 years old and appraised at \$425. A girl named Caroline, 11, was deemed to be worth \$250. Eight years later, in 1834, Gabriel and Caroline — now valued at \$300 each — had created a family, with a 2-year-old son, Alexander, who was appraised at \$100. Further study of the two lists reveals marriages, deaths, births and ailments; it also shows professions, such as cooper, preacher, cook and shoemaker. As Burris-Janssen writes, "A great deal, however, happens in life when the record keepers are not looking."

"We must ask ourselves how this could ever have happened," said Kenneth P. Ruscio, the 26th president of W&L, at the dedication of the marker in 2016. "We wonder how reasonable people could have ever believed that it was acceptable to claim ownership of another human person. We wonder how the men who led this institution at the time not only tolerated slavery but used these enslaved men and women to help maintain and fund a college. We must confront the knowledge that our institution has a history connected with the injustice of slavery."

Ruscio concluded the dedication ceremony by saying: "We know that there are many other stories still to be told. So this is not a time to congratulate ourselves for recognizing this moment of our history. Instead, we must see this as part of an ongoing — and long-overdue — effort to tell the history of Washington and Lee courageously and completely, and to learn from it, and to always strive to make it a better institution, more just and truly respectful of all individuals."

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