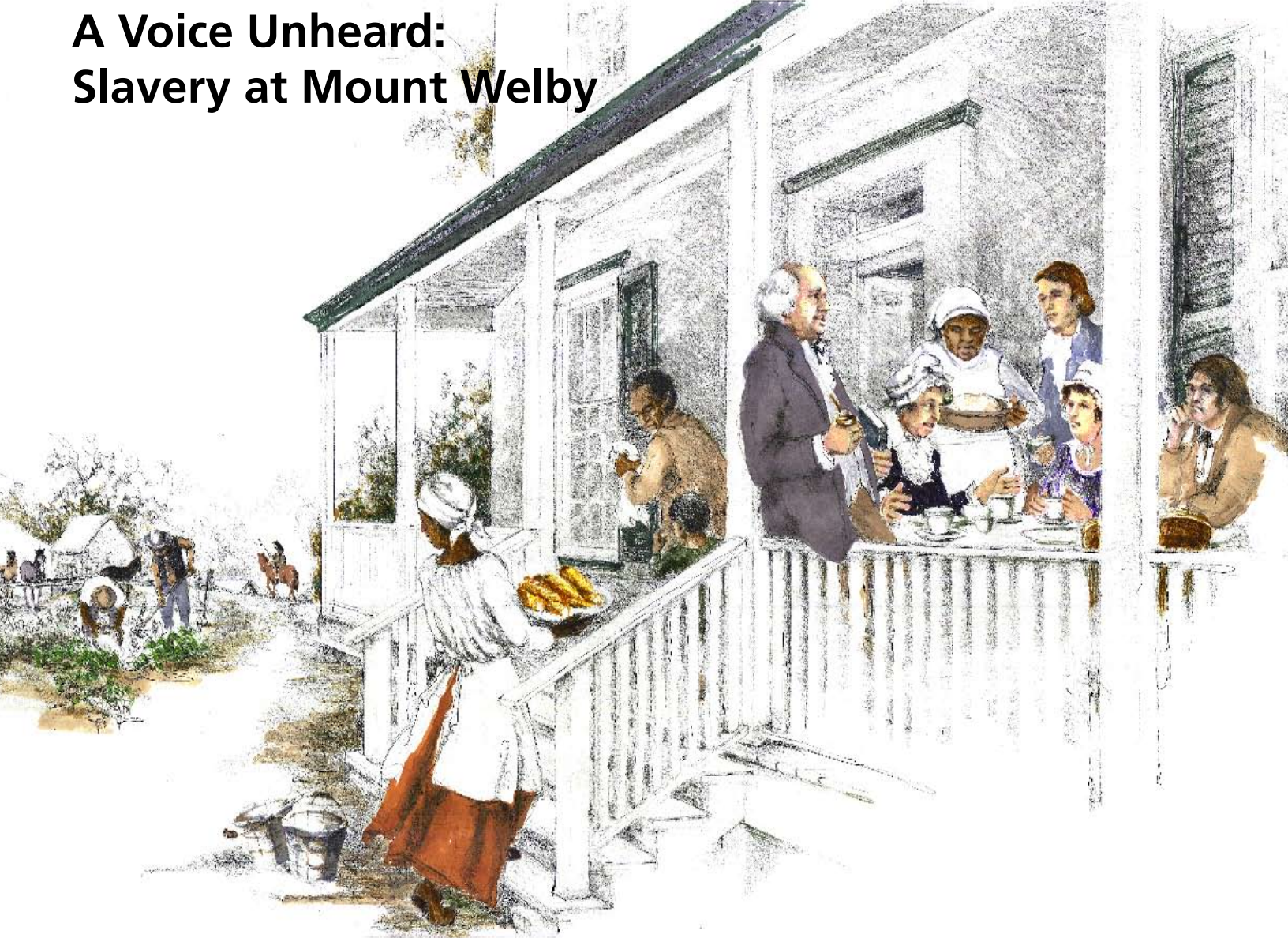




A Voice Unheard: Slavery at Mount Welby



Artist's conception of Life at Mount Welby. Billie Rush, 2002.

“I give and bequeath to my son John Henry DeButts all my slaves, stock...”

Excerpt from the will of Mary DeButts, 1828 Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives.

A Voice Unheard

One of the many tragedies of slavery in America continues to be the scarcity of information that has survived about the lives of African Americans during this time. Very few enslaved people had the opportunity to write down their stories in their own words or hand down their keepsakes to future generations. The newspapers, letters, and records of slaveholders tell part of the story, but only from the slaveholders' point of view.

There are no firsthand accounts of what life was like for those who lived in bondage on the Mount Welby plantation. What we do know about their life has been pieced together from documents written about or by the DeButts family or by using data collected from other Southern Maryland plantations and slave owning farms. We are still waiting for their voices to be heard as the struggle over slavery's memory continues.

Slavery and Opportunity

Despite their English abolitionist heritage, the family’s choice to own slaves was filled with contradictions; it seems their desire to prosper in their new home won out and African Americans named George, Edward, Hamilton, Patsy, and Matilda, among others, lived in bondage on this land.

Most able-bodied enslaved people—men, women, and older children—worked in the fields. One or two enslaved women on this farm probably worked as cooks or servants with Mary DeButts in the main house.

The DeButts family records reveal the odd mixture of concern and indifference. In his will, John Henry DeButts tried to ensure that an enslaved woman named Rachel and most of her children would remain together in Maryland. But he added that Margaret, Rachel’s oldest child, was to be kept “for the use of my children,” who moved to Virginia.

Mary DeButts’ will is simpler and perhaps for that reason even more chilling. She gave her property to her son John Henry: land, livestock, linens, furniture, silver, books, and people.

1 copper boiler	3 00
1 Bunch of corn valued at 1/3 Barren	30 00
1 Corn Sheller	1 00
2 Hacks of wheat with straw	33 00
valued at 40 Bushels @ 80	
1 Iron brand Keg	1 00
1 Cart with 1/2 trap stumps	10 00
27 sheep & 12 Lamb	27 00
5 demifolus @ 50. 225	3 25
2 sheep shears	1 00
1 Negro Slave named George	300 00
	<u>3224 08 1/2</u>

1 Walnut Table 100 x 6 1/2	5 58
@ 3. 258	
Edward \$350. Hamilton 2 1/2 years	500 00
Minta \$150. Mary & three children	600 00
Rachel & two children	300 00
Patsy & Matilda	350 00
Julia 62.50. Eliza & Ruby 250	312 50
1 Iron St	2 00
1 ditto smaller size & hooks	1 25
1 ditto ditto	00 50
1 Clewps and Griddle	1 50
1 frying pan & Gridiron	" 75
4 flat Iron 75. 2 Tea Kettles 75	" 25
1 Stewing Kettle	1 50
2 Kitcher Sables	1 00
1 Bin safe	" 50
	<u>3 00</u>

Triumph of the Human Spirit

Even in bondage, African Americans preserved whatever they could of their African culture. One of the enslaved women at Mount Welby was name Minta, a common name in parts of West Africa. African descendants who converted to Christianity added elements of African music to traditional Protestant hymns. To an enslaved African American, a religious song about a journey to freedom had a powerful, personal meaning.

African instruments, such as the banjo, and ancient games, such as mancala—an ancestor of backgammon—survived in the United States. Across the Chesapeake, archeologists have unearthed clues about the lives of enslaved African Americans—from broken clay pipes and small religious objects to beads and other tokens. The soil of Mount Welby may still hold traces of the lives of African Americans who lived there.

In the marketplace of the 1800s, after the land itself, enslaved people were by far the most valuable property here. This is illustrated in the document above. The value of John Henry DeButts’ personal property was \$3224.08. His sixteen enslaved workers accounted for \$2512.20—more than three quarters or the total.

Exerpt from the property list of John Henry DeButts, 1832. Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives.