

Arlington House

The Robert E. Lee Memorial
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

“We have a claim on this Estate” Arlington from Slavery to Freedom



“We have a claim on this Estate”

This quote is an excerpt from the 1868 petition written by William Syphax to the U.S. Congress. He was seeking title to his family’s 17-acre tract of the Arlington Estate. The Syphaxes were slaves who had received this land and their emancipation in the 1820s. His statement exemplifies the plight of slaves whose work and contributions were rarely recognized or appreciated beyond the plantation boundaries, if at all. This claim eloquently voices the strength of ties to place where beloved family members loved, labored, and were buried.

From its earliest days, Arlington was home not only to the Custis and Lee families who occupied the mansion, but also to dozens of slaves who lived and labored on the estate. For nearly sixty years, Arlington functioned as a complex society made up of owners and slaves. On the surface, Arlington appeared as a harmonious community in which owner and slave often lived and worked side by side. Yet an invisible gulf separated the two, as slaves were the legal property of their owners. Slaves possessed no rights, could not enter into legally binding contracts, and could be permanently separated from their families at a moment’s notice. The contributions of the Arlington slaves have always been a vital component of the plantation’s history. They made the bricks used in the construction of Arlington House, tended crops, gardens, and livestock, and even functioned as guardians of their owners’ heritage. Yet the slave com-



Sally and Leonard Norris were among the first generation of Arlington slaves. In later years, their daughter, Selina, would play a crucial role at Arlington.

munity at Arlington possessed a history of its own. This exhibit casts new light on the experiences and memories of the slaves who called Arlington home.

Slavery and Emancipation at Arlington

In 1802, the first slaves to inhabit Arlington arrived at the estate with their owner, George Washington Parke Custis. The grandson of Martha Washington and adopted grandson of George Washington, Custis had grown up at Mount Vernon, as had many of his slaves. Upon Martha Washington’s death, Custis inherited her slaves and purchased others who belonged to his mother, Eleanor Custis Stuart. Nearly 200 slaves belonged to Custis, many of whom worked on his White House and Romancoke plantations on the Pamunkey River near Richmond, Virginia.

Among the first generation of Arlington slaves were Judah, Joe, Doll, Amy, Caesar, Daniel, Jim, Morris, and Peg, who were listed without surnames on an early property inventory. The slaves immediately set to work constructing log cabins for their own homes. Custis was land rich but cash poor. It is likely that slaves comprised the chief labor force to construct the main



Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis

house. However, missing records are silent on this important subject. Surviving Custis letters indicate that slaves also cleared land, built roads, and dug the foundations for the house. The Arlington household was noted for its gracious hospitality. This lifestyle was made possible by the slaves who worked in the main house at Arlington, as well as those who labored as field slaves on Custis' other plantations.

After her marriage to George Custis in 1804, Mary Fitzhugh Custis became the mistress of Arlington. A devout Episcopalian, Mrs. Custis wanted each of the slaves to receive a rudimentary education so that each could read the Bible. She taught the house and field slaves to read even though Virginia law prohibited the education of slaves by the 1840s. Under her direction, slaves built a chapel for their own place of worship. She persuaded her husband to free several women and children. Later in life, Mary Custis Lee (Mrs. Robert E. Lee) commented on the importance of her mother's convictions. "My mother devoted herself to the religious culture of the slaves. Her life was devoted to this work, with the hope of preparing them for freedom. Through her influence, my father left them all free five years from his death." Although Mrs. Custis was powerless to free her husband's slaves, she successfully worked within the traditional female sphere of religion to bring about change in the lives of the Arlington slaves.

The Custis family experimented with various methods of freeing their slaves. In 1817, they became supporters of the newly formed American Colonization Society. The ACS was founded to raise funds to establish colonies in Africa for emancipated slaves. Critics of the plan referred to it as "assisted deportation." The Custises and some of their slaves, who raised money through the sale of vegetables and flowers, contributed financially to the ACS. In 1854, emancipated Arlington slaves William and Rosabella

Rosabella Burke to Mary C. Lee, February 20, 1859

"...I am at the time, and nearly all times, in the enjoyment of most excellent health. My children are as fat as pigs....They are all going to school and seem to be learning quite fast. Little Martha does not go to day school but is very fond of going to Sunday school....In the morning I get up early to milk my cow, feed my chickens...."

Burke arrived in Monrovia, Liberia, with their children. The circumstances of the emancipation of the Burke family are unknown. From Africa, the Burkes corresponded with Mary Custis Lee. The above excerpt from one of Rosabella's letters describes her family's experiences in their new home.

The death of George Custis in October, 1857, had a profound impact on the life of his slaves. The terms of his will created confusion and dissatisfaction among the slaves. Some of the slaves had expected to receive their freedom immediately upon Custis' death. Several ran away from Arlington and others refused to work.

In his will, Custis stipulated that his slaves were to be freed *after* his debts had been settled and each of his four granddaughters received \$10,000. This money was to be raised from the sale of crops grown on his estates. Custis specified a deadline of no longer than five years after his death for the emancipation of the slaves. As executor of his father-in-law's estate, Robert E. Lee was responsible for fulfilling the terms of the will.

Custis died \$10,000 in debt. Lee secured a two-year leave of absence from



Charles Syphax and his grandson, William B. Syphax (circa 1865)

the U.S. Army so that he could manage the three Custis properties. The Arlington slaves found Lee to be a more stringent taskmaster than Custis had been. Eleven slaves were "hired out" while others were sent to the Pamunkey River estates. This separation of families proved painful, and Custis had tried to avoid the practice during his lifetime. Lee's efforts to meet the terms of the will provoked much criticism in the abolitionist press. Charges of violating the Custis will prompted Lee to write in a letter to his son "Your Grandfather has left me an unpleasant legacy."

The Syphaxes were one of the most influential slave families at Arlington. Charles Syphax, the son of a free black, oversaw the dining room in the main house. Syphax held a position of au-

thority among the slave population. Around 1826, he married Maria Carter. Both had come to Arlington from Mount Vernon where they had worked as house slaves. At the time of her marriage, Maria Syphax received her freedom. The couple had ten children who lived as free persons on the estate. The Syphaxes lived on their own seventeen- acre plot within Arlington. This land had been a gift to Maria from Custis. Many Syphax descendants still live in Arlington County.



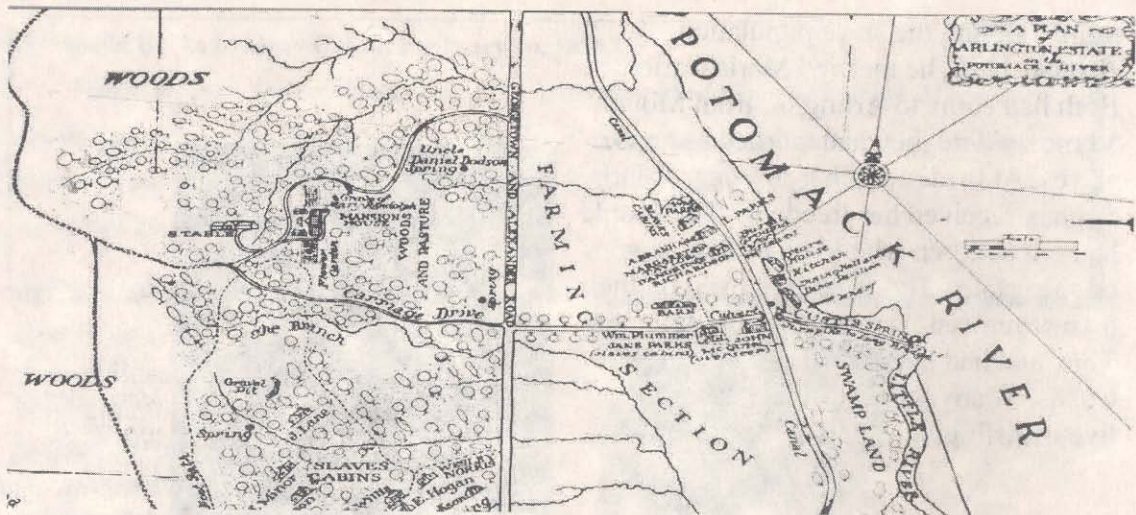
Maria Syphax was one of eleven free blacks living at Arlington in 1850.



William Syphax was a free black and the son of Charles and Maria Syphax. During his tenure as Chief Messenger of the Department of the Interior, Syphax kept an autograph album. It contains the signatures of Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. After the Civil War, Syphax was a tireless advocate for the desegregation of schools.



Mary Custis Lee drew this sketch of slave Lawrence Parks. Parks and three other slaves served as pallbearers for Mrs. Custis' funeral in 1853.



This map shows the location of the slave cabins throughout the Arlington estate.

An Inventory of the Slaves, at Arlington belonging to the Estate of G. W. P. Custis, taken January 1st 1858.

No.	Name	No.	Name
1	Austen Bingham	17	Walter Norris
2	Louisa "	18	Mary "
3	Shelton "	19	Julia " child
4	Rebecca "	20	Norman Spay
5	Parks "	21	Selma " child
6	Edward "	22	Emma "
7	Henry "	23	Sarah "
8	Walter " Son	24	Henry "
9	Lynette "	25	Annice "
10	Louisa "	26	Aida "
11	Caroline Bingham	27	Selma " child
12	Sam her child		
13	Louisa " "	28	Julia Ann Chack
14	Baby " "	29	Katherine "
		30	Louis "
		31	Patsey "
		32	Catherine Beale
		33	Fanny "
		34	Mary Ann Beale
		35	Agnes Beale
		36	Charlotte Gray
		37	Julson Lancaster
		38	Shack Chack
		39	Michael Meredith
		40	Laurence Parks
		41	Patsey "

Shortly after George Custis died in 1857, an inventory of his personal property was conducted. Included among his Arlington possessions were the 63 slaves listed here.

Civil War and Freedom Come to Arlington Estate

The Civil War forever altered the Arlington landscape as well as the lives of those who lived there. On April 20, 1861, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the U.S. Army and shortly thereafter entered into Confederate military service. The rest of the Lee family abandoned Arlington in May of 1861. By the end of the month, Union troops had occupied the estate. The military occupation of Arlington signaled the end of an era. Soldiers built forts and roads on the estate, and felled much of the virgin timber. In 1864, Mrs. Lee lost her home for failing to comply with a wartime law that required property owners in “insurrectionary districts” to pay their real estate taxes in person.

On January 11, 1864, the Federal government purchased Arlington at a public auction for \$26,800. That same year, 200 acres of the estate were set aside for a cemetery for war dead. Yet for thousands of former slaves, these changes at Arlington seemed to foreshadow an era of new opportunity.

Selina and Thorton Gray lived in the south slave quarters behind Arlington House. Although the date is unknown Gray family descendants have stated that the two were married by an Episcopal clergyman in the same room of the house where Mary Custis wed Robert E. Lee in 1831.



Thorton Gray and Selina Norton Gray

While the church recognized the marriage, the union of slaves was not legally binding. As property, slaves could not enter into legally binding contracts. When Mrs. Lee left Arlington at the start of the war, she entrusted the care of the house and many of its furnishings to Selina. Some items left in the house were the “Washington treasures” which hailed from Mount Vernon. Having grown up at Arlington, Selina was well aware of the historical significance of the heirlooms. After Union forces occupied the house, they began to steal these cherished possessions.

Years later, Selina’s daughters recalled that their mother had confronted the soldiers and ordered them “never to touch any of Miss Mary’s things.” Despite her efforts, the thefts continued. Selina alerted General Irvin McDowell, commander of the Union troops, to the importance of the Washington heirlooms, and the remaining pieces were sent to the Patent Office for safekeeping. Selina had saved the Wash-



Freedman's Village, Arlington, Va.

This photograph of a prayer service was taken by Mathew Brady. Village residents could attend a Methodist or either of two Baptist churches. In 1863, the American Tract Society had established the first house of worship in the village. The spiritual development of the freemen was of paramount concern to many missionaries and religious societies

ington treasures for posterity. Later, in the 1920's, the Gray family's commitment to historic preservation would be carried on through Selina's daughters. They assisted the War Department with restoration plans for Arlington House by providing first-hand accounts about the condition of the house prior to the war. They also made available to the War Department several original furnishings from the house which had descended in their family.

In 1863, the Arlington estate became home to thousands of emancipated slaves who had fled to Washington for their safety and in search of work. Freedmen's

Village, a camp for former slaves, often called "contrabands," was established south of the mansion. At first, the village at Arlington was administered by the American Missionary Association and the Chief Quartermaster of the Department of Washington. In 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (known as the Freedmen's Bureau) to administer all such camps of former slaves. The ultimate authority for the village rested with the War Department.

Freedmen's Village was intended to be a place of temporary refuge in which the residents would receive Federal assistance,



This engraving of Freedmen's village appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1864. Although many contraband camps existed, readers were especially interested in the Arlington village because of its connection to General Lee.

learn trades by which they could support themselves, and attend school. After a brief period of employment in the village, residents were expected to seek jobs elsewhere to free up space for new arrivals. The freedmen worked as farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and seamstresses. Workers received \$10 monthly, half of which went to a general fund to maintain the village. A hospital, school, churches, and a home for the "indigent" provided for the residents' needs. The freedmen received a rudimentary education and religious instruction from numerous missionaries from several denominations.

Over the years, many freedmen, including some of the former Custis slaves, established permanent homes in Freedmen's Village. Few ex-slaves wanted to return to the plantations of their former owners to work as agricultural laborers. As time passed, tensions in the village escalated as the government increased rents and labor requirements. Over the years, Federal officials made several attempts to evict the residents and close the village. By the

1890s, the property was considered highly desirable for development. While the government, and many county residents, viewed the village as an outdated, expensive, temporary solution to a problem, it represented a cherished community to those who lived there. By 1900, public opinion had turned against Freedmen's Village once and for all, resulting in closure. Many of the former residents established new communities in the county not far from the Arlington estate, where their descendants still live today.



This sketch of the north slave quarters was probably drawn by Mary Lee, the eldest of the four Lee daughters, around 1855.

To Preserve and Protect for Future Generations

When the War Department began the restoration of Arlington House in 1925, the knowledge of former slaves proved an invaluable resource. Of particular assistance were Emma Gray Syphax and Sarah Gray Wilson, the daughters of Selina and Thorton Gray. Both were teenagers by the time of the Civil War and were well acquainted with the daily routine of the Lee household. In 1929, the women returned to Arlington at the request of the War Department architect in charge of the restoration. They provided detailed information on the use of the rooms, furniture arrangements, the wartime occupation, architectural features of the slave quarters, and biographical details about the individual slaves as well as members of the Lee family. "This was a great help, as there were no members of the Lee or Custis family who remembered Arlington House as it had been before the Civil War," the architect noted. Just as their mother had played an important role in preserving the nation's past in the midst of the Civil War, seventy years later the Gray family contin-

ued its commitment to preserving Arlington's history.

Jim Parks, son of Lawrence and Patsy Parks, was born a slave at Arlington around 1846 and continued to live on the property until his death in 1929. During the restoration of Arlington House, architects relied upon his knowledge of the antebellum architecture of the house and slave quarters. The details he provided about the kitchens, greenhouse, and slave quarters proved vital to their restoration by the War Department. "He had an unusually good memory of things connected with the place of bygone years," observed the architect.



Emma Gray Syphax



Sarah Gray Wilson

Washington, D. C. May 11th, 1865.

Sir,

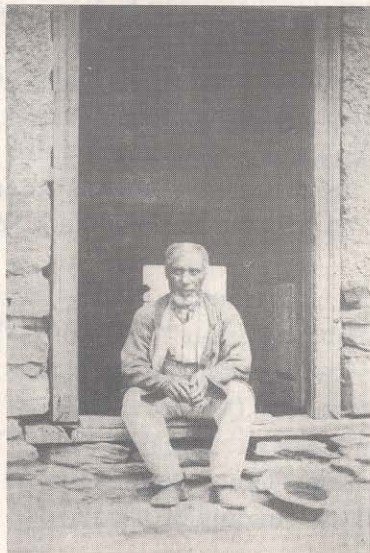
I have the honor to bring to your notice the following case: My Mother and Father - Charles and Maria Syphax have resided on the Arlington estate all their lives. In the year 1826, the late Mr. G. W. Custis procured my Mother and her children, and at his death my father became free by the terms of Mr. C's will. At the time my mother was freed, (1836) Mr. Custis gave to him for the use of himself and heirs, a small parcel of land - about ten acres - lying on the outer boundary of the Arlington tract, where my parents continue to reside. At his estate had recently been sold, according to law, and been bought by the Government. My parents have no written evidence of this gift of land made to them by Mr. Custis, but can establish, by parol evidence, the facts herein alleged.

What they now desire is, that in view of all the facts, they may be permitted to purchase from the Government the small parcel of ground in which they live, and to which they claim to be equitably entitled, at the rate at which the United States purchased the Arlington estate, and to receive a legal title for the same, so that, for the few remaining days of their earthly

William Syphax, one of the free-born blacks who had lived at Arlington, wrote a letter to Congress to establish his mother's claim to her property after the U.S. government purchased the Custis estate. Although the family had no official documentation to support their claim, Congress accepted Maria Syphax's thirty-year occupancy of her land as grounds for legal title.



Jim Parks



Some of the former Custis slaves continued to live at Arlington after the war's end. The identity of this former slave is not known. Cemetery officials referred to him as "Uncle Joe." He and the other slaves received their freedom in December, 1862, in accordance with Custis' will. From the Fredericksburg battlefield, Lee had issued a deed of emancipation listing each of the Custis slaves. "They are entitled to their Freedom, and I wish to give it to them," he declared.



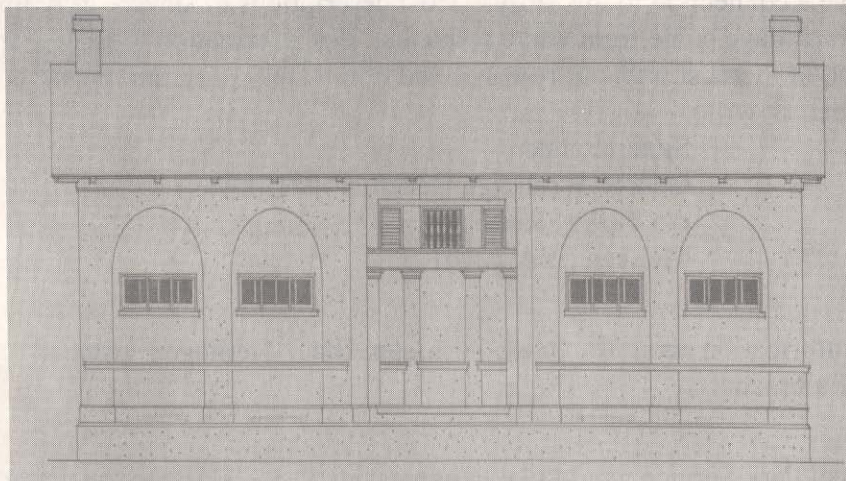
Alexander Gardner took this photograph of Union troops at Arlington House in 1864

“...To The Condition In Which It Existed Immediately Prior to The Civil War. . .”

The United States Congress authorized the restoration of Arlington House on March 4, 1925. The legislation provided that the house and its environs should be restored. Due to the site's location within Arlington National Cemetery, the War Department was given responsibility for the restoration. In 1933, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt reorganized Federal agencies, Arlington House became a National Park Service site.

Since the earliest days of National Park Service administration, plans have called for the restoration of the main house, two surviving slave quarters, and grounds. Federal funding provides for the stabilization and preservation of all historic structures. However, key research studies, plans, and restoration projects are incomplete. Public and private organizations have partnered with the National Park Service to further restoration projects at Arlington House.

Arlington County, Virginia, and Arlington National Cemetery take their names from the historic 19th century “Arlington Estate.” Recently, the Arlington Bicentennial Commission, the Arlington Historical Society, and the board of the future Black Heritage Museum of Arlington secured a \$150,000 Save America's Treasures Grant to begin restoration of the slave quarters in honor of Arlington County's 2001 bicentennial celebration. The Save America's Treasures Grant requires that \$150,000 must be matched from the private sector. How will this funding be used?



Drawing of south elevation of the slave quarters, circa 1930s

Research:

\$175,000 to complete a Historic Structures Report. That will lead to the accurate restoration of the two surviving slave quarters. Later, when this study is completed, additional funding will be sought to complete the restoration.

Repairs and Improvements:

\$75,000 to complete facility repairs and improvements without damaging important structural elements that may affect future restoration.

Research continues on the Arlington slave community. Do you, family members, or friends have a connection to this story? Most descriptions of slavery at Arlington and Freedmen's Village come from white residents. For information regarding the restoration project, or to assist with our research and oral history program, please contact a staff member, or write:

Superintendent
George Washington Memorial Parkway,
c/o Turkey Run Park,
McLean, VA 22101.

For more information about the future Arlington Black Heritage Museum, please take a brochure.

The National Park Service would like to express its appreciation to the many individuals and organizations who have assisted with the research and development of this exhibit and brochure, including:

The Arlington County, Virginia, Bicentennial Commission
The Arlington Historical Society
The Board of the future Black Heritage Museum of Arlington
George Washington University, Center for Public History
Howard University
Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy



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Cover Illustration:

Benson Lossing drew this image of Arlington House in 1855.