The first African Americans in the Monocacy region were most likely slaves who had escaped from plantations in the eastern part of Maryland. So many sought refuge in the backwoods that as early as 1725, the state offered rewards for the capture of runaway slaves west of the Monocacy River. As the region developed, planters brought enslaved laborers with them. In the first census of 1790, slaves accounted for almost 12% of the total population in Frederick County.

Slavery, however, was less a part of the agricultural economy in the mid-Maryland region than in the eastern part of the state. Farmers in the Monocacy region, many of whom were German migrants from Pennsylvania, practiced a diversified agriculture based primarily on wheat production rather than the more labor-intensive tobacco production of eastern Maryland.

Slavery reached a peak in Frederick County in 1820, with almost 7,000 enslaved people counted in the census. But thereafter the number of enslaved declined and the percentage of free African Americans increased. By 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, almost 5,000 free African Americans lived in the county compared to about 3,200 enslaved African Americans.

During the Civil War, African Americans in Frederick County reacted to the crisis in a variety of ways. Some stayed where they were and weathered the war as best they could. Others fled. Many of the remaining enslaved, took advantage of the opportunity and left the region forever. War, ironically, presented African Americans with new opportunities for earning money. Many profited by selling bread, garden items, and other food to the troops of soldiers passing through the county. A few found jobs with the Union Army, mostly as teamsters, cooks, and blacksmiths. Still others joined the army when African American enlistment was allowed in 1862. At least four hundred African Americans from Frederick County joined the Union Army during the final two years of the war.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, most of the farmers and plantation owners on the land that became the Monocacy National Battlefield owned enslaved laborers. James Marshall, the successful Scottish merchant and entrepreneur who built the stately, circa-1780 brick house known today as Thomas House, owned 16 enslaved laborers in 1800. When he died in 1803, he left most of his slave labor to his son. By Marshall’s slaves is known to have been freed: for her “faithful & good services,” an enslaved woman named “Mulatto Jane” was given “a good Bed and bed Cloaths also Twenty pounds money and a Suit of new clothes.”

Christian Keffer Thomas, who purchased the Thomas Farm in 1860, was a slaveowner as well. Several historic documents make reference to enslaved labor at the farm, and a letter written on December 6, 1862 by Peter Vredenburg of the 14th New Jersey Regiment recalls a “musical party at the Thomas’...toward midnight the darkies...came in and after partaking of a supper squared themselves for dancing...It was real plantation.”

The remaining Monocacy farmers, John Best, John Worthington, and Daniel Baker, also owned enslaved laborers prior to and during the Civil War. Read more below about the enslaved people who toiled on a plantation at the site of today’s Best Farm.

In 1793, a French planter family, the Vincendières, came to Frederick County after escaping a slave revolt in their native Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti). They established a 748-acre plantation called L’Hermitage, and from 1794 until 1827, when they sold the property, they were among the largest slave holders in the county.

Extensive historical and archeological research has shed some light on what life was like for the enslaved people at L’Hermitage. Archeologists uncovered the remains of six house foundations and other features, which formed a “village” that housed up to ninety enslaved individuals who worked at the plantation.

Each house was likely constructed of log and had fenced gardens or animal pens to the rear, as well as a communal outdoor kitchen. Artifacts excavated at the site provide some clues about the daily lives of the enslaved people, including what they ate and what kinds of tools and other objects they used.

Historic documents indicate that the Vincendières treated their slaves with extreme brutality. An eyewitness account written in 1796 gave the following description:

One can see on the house farm instruments of torture, stocks, wooden horses, whips, etc. Two or three Negroes fixed in stocks, wooden horses, whips, etc. Two or three Negroes crippled with torture have brought legal action... The Vincendières have with rage, beat the Negroes, complain and fight with each other.

In 1796, the Vincendières family sold L’Hermitage to a New Jersey planter named Peter Vredenburg. Vredenburg, who had escaped from Haiti, had lived on a small cocoa plantation in Guadeloupe. His story is described in a poem that begins: "Tiger, my name is Vredenburg..." Some of the artifacts excavated at the slave village site include (from left to right), oyster shell, a blue glass bead, ceramic, coins, and a pendant.

Enslaved Labor at Monocacy

The Monocacy National Battlefield, Maryland

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

African American Experiences at Monocacy

L’Hermitage

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Resisting a Cruel Institution and Pursuing Freedom

Whenever slavery existed, there were efforts on the part of the enslaved people to escape this brutal and dehumanizing system. Some enslaved individuals in the Maryland region ran away, while others attempted to gain their freedom through the court system. During the Civil War, some individuals gained liberty by joining the Union Army.

Information about those who sought freedom in the Civil War can be found in a variety of ways. When enslaved people escaped, their owners often posted advertisements for their return in local newspapers. These advertisements often provide physical descriptions and other personal details. Legal documents such as court proceedings and wills also provide insight into treatment of slaves as well as changing opinions on the institution of slavery in Maryland. Slaveholders occasionally voluntarily granted enslaved individuals freedom, either as a provision of the slaveholder’s will, or through legal manumission.

Following the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved individuals in the ten states then in rebel hands only in the ten states then in rebel hands. The Proclamation freed enslaved individuals in the Monocacy region run away, while others made their way into Baltimore where Caroline worked as a washerwoman. Her son Augustus was freed in 1857 by Lincoln’s nephew, Enos Louis Lowe. Augustus also lived in Baltimore and made his living as a washer until his death in 1879.

Caroline’s other son, Cornelius, was freed in the early 1850s and in 1857 enlisted in the United States Navy at Norfolk, Virginia. During the Civil War, he served on the U.S.S. Minnesota and dehumanizing institution. Some enslaved people to escape this brutal system were as well qualified as most others,” Glessner wrote.

In 1863, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton authorized the establishment of recruiting stations for U.S. Colored Troops (USCT); one such recruitment station was established at Monocacy Junction. Burgee signed an oath of loyalty to the Constitution and the Government of the United States and dehumanizing institution. Some enslaved people to escape this brutal system were as well qualified as most others,” Glessner wrote.

African American Experiences at Monocacy

A U.S. Colored Troops Recruiting Station at Monocacy

Company F, 4th United States Colored Infantry, All from Louisiana

By December 13, 1865, a Frederick County shareholder named Grafton Burgee enlisted his slave Samuel Adams at Monocacy Junction. Burgee signed an oath of loyalty to the Constitution and the Government of the United States as well as a Deed of Manumission and Release of Service for Samuel Adams on October 15, 1864.

Upon his enlistment, Samuel Adams took the name William S. Adams. He was a Private in Company D of the 9th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry and saw action at Petersburg, Virginia in July 1864. His service record indicates that he mustered out at Brownsville, Texas on January 15, 1867.

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Slaveholders in Maryland were allowed to enlist slaves in the USCT, and were entitled to “compensation for the service of labor of said slave, not to exceed the sum of $100.” In order to be compensated, however, a valid “deed of manumission and release” had to be filed, and any slave so enlisting shall be forever thereafter free.”

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