

SLAVERY IN MARYLAND

Slavery as we have come to know it was not established in the colony of Maryland at the time of its settlement in 1634. Even though there were some cases of slavery in the colony most Africans and ***mulattos***, people of mixed race, were treated as ***indentured servants*** who could work towards their freedom. When people around the world began to want more tobacco, more servants were needed to grow it. As a result Maryland passed a law in 1664 making blacks and their children slaves for life. Slaves were considered property, and they were bought and sold just as a house or land would be bought and sold, and they had very few, if any, rights.

Slavery in Prince George's County

Climate and soil conditions made Prince George's and other counties in southern Maryland good for growing tobacco. Demand for tobacco went up and down, but the county's slave population kept increasing during the years between 1600 and 1776, known as the ***Colonial Era***. By 1800 slaves made up 58% of the population of Prince George's County, and most of these slaves worked as field hands. Tobacco profits eventually went down, and in 1783 Maryland no longer allowed slaves from other areas into the state. Even so, slaves still represented more than 50% of the county's population.

There were several ***plantations*** in Prince George's County. George H. Calvert, Lord Baltimore, owned Goodwood and Riversdale plantations. His parents Benedict and Elisabeth Calvert owned Mt. Airy plantation in Rosaryville Maryland. There were other plantation owners in the county as well; Sarah Ogle Hilleary owned Three Sisters in Lanham; Thomas Spriggs Jr. owned Lake Arbor in Largo, and former Governor Oden Bowie owned Fairview in Collington. Acquiring slaves for these plantations was relatively easy since the slave marketplace was located in Upper Marlboro, which was in the county as well.

Plantation work was hard and any slave failing to do his work as told would likely be disciplined. Slaves were also separated from their families. This happened for several reasons. If a slave misbehaved or attempted to escape he might be sold to another plantation as a punishment and as a way to prevent further rebellion among other slaves. Sometimes a plantation owner would sell some of his slaves in order to raise money. Likewise, he might have more slaves than he needed to run his plantation so he would sell some of his slaves to other



landowners and merchants. Regardless of the reason, these separations caused heartache and cut the bonds of the African-American family.

For freed slaves, life off of the plantation was not easy. In Prince George's County Africans and mulattos were considered free if they were 1. born free; 2. *manumitted* – freed by the slave owner; 3. purchased by a free family member; or 4. freed by order of the law. These men and women had to carry proof that they were indeed free or risk being sold into slavery. In Prince George's County freedmen had to also prove they were employed and they had to get a license to sell goods that they produced or they would be jailed and/or sold into slavery. Freedmen from other areas could only visit for ten days. If a freedman left the state for more than thirty days without first telling the state, he was not allowed to return. The children of a freedman who married a slave were born slaves. If, on the other hand, a child was born to free parents, that child had to either work as soon as possible or be actively learning a trade, otherwise the child would be sent to the *Orphan's Court* where he would be put to work. All of these rules made freedmen less free than their fellow white Marylanders.

Many of these restrictions were placed on freedmen because the state and the county wanted to limit the number of blacks – free or enslaved – in Maryland. When people and countries started to buy less tobacco and other farm products, the demand for slaves went down while the demand for skilled workers went up. As a result slave owners and the government allowed skilled slaves to work off of the plantation. If a merchant or landowner needed the skills of a carpenter, ironworker, or other skilled worker, owners would send a qualified slave to do the work and then collect the slave's wages. Sometimes slaves were allowed to keep some or all of the wages they earned. When slaves became old or if they were unskilled, their owners and the government tried to send them to *Liberia* in West Africa.

Unlike skilled slaves, unskilled and older slaves were not considered valuable, and owners wanted to get rid of them. This was a very important issue in the mid 1860s because Maryland and the federal government were about to free the slaves. Maryland's government was afraid that there would be too many blacks in the state so it asked slave owners to make arrangements to send their freed slaves to Africa. *The Maryland Colonization Society* was established to assist in transporting blacks to Africa. Court clerks provided the names of freed slaves to the Society. If a freed slave chose not to travel to Africa he was expelled from the state.



Even though Prince George's County voted against *emancipation*, or freedom for the slaves, it still became Maryland law in 1864. The state then focused its attention on managing the thousands of freedmen living there.

At the end of the Civil War the United States entered the *Reconstruction* period. The goals of Reconstruction were to rebuild the nation and to protect newly freed slaves by helping them understand their rights and by providing them with necessities. After the *13th Amendment* freed all slaves in the United States in December of 1865, the federal government created the *Freedmen's Bureau* to help freed slaves adjust to their new lives. The Bureau helped to establish schools, settle contract disputes, and assist in moving freedmen to the north. With support from the Freedmen's Bureau other state organizations provided further assistance to freed slaves. *The Friends' Association in Aid of Freedmen* helped former slaves obtain food, clothing, and housing, while the *Maryland Union Commission* focused on transporting freedmen to the south. Despite all of these efforts, freedmen still had difficulties surviving as citizens of America. Intense prejudice made social, political, and economic progress hard to achieve.

