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## “In the Land of Bondage”

In 1727, at a time when the first white settlers began trickling into the Shenandoah Valley to establish permanent settlements, the first enslaved people came to the Valley—not to labor for an enslaver, but seeking freedom. This group of fifteen enslaved people fled their master east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and settled near Lexington, Virginia. For a time, they enjoyed freedom, built homes, and farmed the land. Unfortunately, they were discovered and returned to slavery. However, as slavery increased in numbers and importance in the ensuing decades, enslaved people no longer viewed the Shenandoah Valley as a refuge, but as place from which to escape.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is extremely “difficult to document” enslaved people in the colonial era in the Shenandoah Valley, as Warren Hofstra, one of the most preeminent scholars on settlement in the Shenandoah Valley noted in his groundbreaking study *The Planting of New Virginia*, evidence indicates the presence of a growing number of enslaved people living and laboring in the Valley decades prior to the American Revolution. Some of the first enslaved people sent to labor in the Shenandoah Valley came from Virginia’s Tidewater—the surplus labor of enslavers such as Robert “King” Carter and his heirs, who owned 60,000 acres in the lower Shenandoah Valley by the time of Carter’s death in 1732.<sup>2</sup> Records, such as a 1754 census of tithables for Frederick County, which at the time covered the area of the present-day Virginia counties of Frederick, Clarke, Shenandoah, and Warren and the West Virginia counties of Hardy, Hampshire, Berkeley, and Jefferson, reveals that among the approximately 9,380 inhabitants of Frederick, 680 were enslaved.<sup>3</sup> Slavery’s importance in the Valley increased during the American Revolution as a result of the Continental Army’s need for hemp.<sup>4</sup> In Rockbridge County, which at the time of the Revolutionary War was part of Augusta County, 600 enslaved people were counted among the county’s 3,700 inhabitants by war’s end.<sup>5</sup>

Table 1.1. Shenandoah Valley enslaved population, 1790–1860

Census Year	Enslaved Population	Percentage of total population enslaved
1790	10,715	16.7%
1800	14,493	18.7%
1810	18,611	23.7%
1820	23,105	25.9%
1830	25,745	26.1%
1840	24,495	25.5%
1850	27,402	24.4%
1860	24,779	20.4%

*Sources:* The figures in this table are derived from “Population of Virginia in 1790,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1790numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1800,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1800numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1810,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1810numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1820,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1820numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1830,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1830numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1840,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1840numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1850,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1850numbers.html>; “Population of Virginia in 1860,” accessed June 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1860numbers.html>.

By the time of the first census of the United States in 1790, enslaved people accounted for 16.7 percent of the Valley’s population—10,175 out of a total population of 85,502. Over the ensuing decades the Valley’s enslaved population steadily increased. By 1820 the number of slaves counted among the Shenandoah’s populace more than doubled, to 23,105. Enslaved people now accounted for 25.9 percent (23,105 out of 111,401) of the region’s total population. That percentage increased slightly during the following decade to 26.1 percent (25,745 out of 124,094). The steady growth prompted a reporter for the *Richmond Examiner* to state in 1845 that as the number of enslaved people swelled in the Valley the divide between eastern and western Virginia closed. “The Valley region and the East are now identified in interest, so far as slave property is concerned . . . Indeed, in the whole Valley, the slave population [is] greatly augmented,” the correspondent noted.<sup>6</sup>

By 1850 the Valley’s enslaved population reached 27,402; however, by 1860 the number dipped to 24,709. While that decline could be superficially in-

terpreted as a sign of slavery's decreasing importance in the region, it might also be attributed to heightened anxieties of slave insurrection in the wake of John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry in 1859, something examined in much greater detail in the next chapter. The only other time the Shenandoah Valley recorded a decline in its enslaved population was between 1830 and 1840. Over that time span the number of slaves decreased by 1,250. That decline could have been partially a result of intensified concerns in the wake of Nat Turner's Revolt in the summer of 1831.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, whether during the decades when slavery declined or during periods when the number of enslaved people increased overall, cases exist of enslavers selling their enslaved not because enslavers developed a spontaneous moral aversion to slavery, but because it proved economically necessary. For instance, in January 1858, Newtown merchant George W. Lemley sold three people whom he enslaved (Martha, an adult female and her two children, George and Jennie) to Joseph Long to avoid financial ruin.<sup>8</sup> Other enslavers manumitted slaves upon their death, among them Frederick County wagon-maker John Grove. In his will Grove ordered that his enslaved laborer Jesse Helms "shall be free at the decease of myself and wife and that one hundred dollars be paid to him out of my estate by my executors as soon as convenient."<sup>9</sup> While Grove's manumission might be superficially interpreted as a benevolent act, the fact that Helms's freedom would not come until both John Grove and his wife passed might also be construed as Grove's attempt to reduce Helms's risk of escape while enslaved. As historian T. Stephen Whitman concluded in his examination of manumission in Maryland, the act of manumission by will "may well have been motivated . . . by desire to forestall flight and secure further uninterrupted service."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fluctuations that occurred from 1790 to 1860, enslaved people accounted for approximately one-quarter of the Valley's population from 1820 until the Civil War's outbreak. Remarkably, despite that statistical evidence, the perspective that slavery never took hold in the Shenandoah Valley, nor proved an integral component to its economy, persists. In the early 2000s historian Ann Denkler, during research for *Sustaining Identity, Recapturing Heritage*, interviewed individuals from Page County whose families once enslaved individuals and discovered that people either denied that their ancestors did so, or "underplayed the institution in the county." Denkler regularly received the response from individuals to whom she spoke: "There just weren't many slaves here."<sup>11</sup>

While it is true that the numbers of enslaved people counted between

the first United States census in 1790 and 1860 are comparatively less than Virginia's Tidewater region, where enslaved individuals accounted for more than half of the total population, the fact that fewer enslaved people lived and labored in the Valley should not singularly discount its importance, enslaved peoples' sufferings, and their desire for freedom. Additionally, utilizing the decreases in the enslaved population between either 1830 and 1840 or 1850 and 1860 as an indicator of slavery's importance is simplistic, and does not fully capture slavery's significance. For example, in 1850 Augusta County's Rev. Francis McFarland enslaved four individuals who aided in operating his 135-acre farm, Rosemont. By 1852, for reasons not entirely clear, McFarland divested himself of his human property. However, although McFarland no longer enslaved people, he still relied on the labor of enslaved individuals and rented enslaved laborers—a practice that occurred in the Shenandoah Valley as early as the 1740s.<sup>12</sup>

Reconstructing rental practices is rather difficult, because, as historians J. Susanne Simmons and Nancy T. Sorrells noted in their groundbreaking essay on the hiring of enslaved laborers in Augusta County, agreements made between an enslaver and a renter "were private rather than public agreements, often written on scraps of paper."<sup>13</sup> Fortunately, some of those scraps exist. On December 28, 1850, Thornton McLeod, a resident of Newtown (present-day Stephens City), entered into an agreement with Joseph Long, a wealthy farmer and one of the community's largest enslavers, to rent a female slave, Ann, for one year. McLeod agreed to pay Long \$10.<sup>14</sup> Although scholarship indicates that hiring contracts such as the one between McLeod and Long proved typical in terms of duration—one year—some whites rented enslaved laborers for shorter stints during the most labor-intensive moments of the year. For wheat growers in the Shenandoah Valley, June and early July, harvest time, and late December to early January, when threshing occurred, proved popular hiring times for those who did not enter into annual agreements.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to variations in the duration of hiring agreements, the locales from which whites rented enslaved laborers varied. While Thornton McLeod rented from an enslaver in his community, other Valley residents rented from enslavers in other Valley counties. For example, Hamilton Gibson, a Frederick County wagon-maker, rented enslaved laborers from Eliza Page in neighboring Clarke County.<sup>16</sup> Others hired enslaved laborers from other parts of the Old Dominion.<sup>17</sup>

The fee renters paid also varied. While the female McLeod rented from Long commanded only \$10 annually, a hired male farm laborer could cost as

much as \$120 per year in the mid-1850s.<sup>18</sup> Enslaved laborers rented by owners of the Valley's many iron forges cost between \$80 and \$110 annually.<sup>19</sup> Female enslaved laborers commanded between \$60 and \$75 and young girls anywhere from \$20 to \$45 in the decade prior to the Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

Slave-hiring not only proved cost-effective for renters, but proved financially lucrative for enslavers too. Renting provided enslavers an opportunity to earn extra income from surplus enslaved laborers.<sup>21</sup> In January 1857, Winchester's Mary Greenhow Lee advertised that she had "for the present year, a smart active BOY between thirteen and fourteen years of age" available "for hire."<sup>22</sup> Although unclear if anyone ever rented the unnamed male, Lee could have earned as much as \$80.<sup>23</sup> For some enslavers, finding someone to hire their enslaved laborers proved critical to their financial security. Staunton's Dr. E. Berkeley noted in a letter to his brother Robert in early March 1850 that in addition to his medical practice, he depended upon the income he received from hiring out his enslaved.<sup>24</sup>

Because the hires of enslaved people proved critical to their annual income, enslavers took steps to ensure their enslaved laborers were properly cared for during the duration of the agreement. Owners demanded that enslaved laborers be properly fed, clothed, and cared for. When Newtown's Joseph Long entered into an agreement with Thornton McLeod he demanded that his enslaved woman Ann receive "sufficient diet, lodging and the usual clothing and . . . a new suit of strong winter clothes [and] blanket."<sup>25</sup> Some enslavers even attempted to break hiring contracts when they believed the person to whom they rented placed the enslaved laborer at risk. For instance, when E. M. Eskridge, an enslaver from east of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Fauquier County, learned that one of the enslaved laborers he rented to William Weaver's iron furnace in Rockbridge County had suffered a leg injury, he demanded the enslaved man not return to work until completely healthy.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps occurrences such as this one fueled statements from chroniclers such as Waddell, Wayland, and Davis that the Valley's enslaved population was "well treated."<sup>27</sup> While evidence corroborates that enslavers looked out for the health of their enslaved laborers, whether they rented them or utilized the labor themselves, the question should be asked: Why did white enslavers express that concern? While some enslavers, as historian Todd Savitt argued, might have done so for humanitarian reasons, protecting one's investment also motivated enslavers to demand laborers they rented be cared for properly.<sup>28</sup>