



Fauquier County History Matters

The Newsletter of the Fauquier Historical Society
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A Bold Stroke for Freedom

On Christmas Eve night, 1855, a group of four enslaved men and women from Loudoun and Fauquier Counties quietly hitched horses to their enslavers' carriage and set out on the path north. These men and women were Frank Wanzer, Anne Wood, Barnaby Grigby, and Mary Elizabeth Grigby. On the way they were joined by two enslaved men from Fauquier on horseback. Frigid winds and mounds of snow impeded the group's journey, and after two days they had only reached Columbia, Maryland. Hungry, exhausted but determined, they were traveling along the Cheat River in Maryland when six white men stopped them and demanded to see their papers. Realizing that their only options were to submit or fight, the runaways, men and women, pulled weapons from concealment and pointed them at the white men, who in turn drew their own rifles.



A tense few moments ensued, as each side weighed the determination of the other. One of the white men directed the muzzle of his rifle toward one of the black women, stating he would shoot if they did not stand down. According to William Still (a formerly enslaved abolitionist) in an account of this event, Anne Wood shouted at him "Shoot! shoot!! shoot!!!...with a double-barreled pistol in one hand and a long dirk knife in the other, utterly unterrified and fully ready for a death struggle."

Seeing the unwavering decision of the enslaved party to fight or die rather than be recaptured and realizing the likelihood of their own death if they continued the attempt to capture them, the white men stepped to the side and the enslaved fugitives sprang down

the road away from them. The two men from Fauquier were separated briefly from the party during this escape, and one man was shot in the back by the white men and brought to the jail in Warrenton for his enslaver, Charles Simpson, to retrieve.

The rest of the freedom seekers made it to Philadelphia safely, and then eventually to Canada and freedom. Despite his near-death experience in Maryland and his secured freedom in Canada, Frank returned to Virginia to deliver from slavery his sister, brother-in-law, and friend.

Although Anne, Barnaby, Frank, and Mary Elizabeth reached freedom, countless other freedom seekers made the same difficult and dangerous attempt and were thwarted. The infrastructure of Virginia, from the legal system to public policy, was designed to keep enslaved men and women in bondage and prevent their escape.

Difficult Choices

The life of an enslaved man, woman, or child was defined by a lack of choice: their labor, their homes, and their futures were determined for them by an entity who valued the wealth their bodies could produce over their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When options did present themselves, such as the opportunity to run away and seek freedom in a free state, it was often a difficult choice. Faced with hundreds of miles of wilderness, hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the possibility of recapture by any white person who found them on the road, plus the physical, mental, and emotional punishment that could result from recapture, many enslaved people declined this option. Yet thousands still chose to seek freedom, taking the enormous risks that came with it and boldly facing them in the name of freedom. As we researched fugitive slave advertisements, enslaved narratives, and newspaper articles, we found story after story of freedom seekers facing difficult choices and overwhelming odds and resorting to often desperate resistance.



In many cases throughout the south, the decision by an enslaved person to risk escape was a reaction triggered by an imminent crisis such as the threat of sale, the death of an enslaver, or the possibility of being rented to another enslaver. In all these cases the enslaved person could be taken from their family and community forever or for long stretches of time. Lewis, an enslaved man from Fauquier County, is one such example. Sold by Hannah Brook of Germantown to “Carolina Traders” in 1817, he was to be taken and sold in the Deep South, where he would labor in the cotton or sugar trade under brutal conditions. Lewis chose to escape. However, within a few days he was recaptured and taken to the Alexandria Jail. An ad went out informing the public of his capture and asking

for his enslaver, the traders, to come and take him. Otherwise, he was to be dealt with “as the law directs,” which was to be sold again into the slave trade.

Charlotte of Auburn in Fauquier County may have escaped for similarly sudden reasons. According to the runaway ad put out by her enslaver, Charlotte was raised in Berry Hill, Culpeper, and then sold to George W. Fitzhugh in Auburn. Although Fitzhugh set a reward price for Charlotte if she was found out of state, he believed she was heading to her sister in Auburn, her grandmother in Mitchell’s Station, or her father and sister at Berry Hill—“at one of which places,” he said, “she may be lurking.” Charlotte may have fled because of some immediate threat, such as physical or sexual abuse or the threat of sale, and may not have wanted to undertake the dangerous journey north. The safety of a family network may have been preferable to traveling to a free state in this situation.

Networks to Freedom

Sometimes networks of enslaved communities worked together to propel themselves to freedom. An example is the Christmas Eve escape of 1855 described previously. Frank, Anne, Barnaby, and Mary Elizabeth were from separate plantations and were met, whether by accident or by design, by two enslaved men from Fauquier on horseback. There is an indication of coordination in their story that suggests a long-term plan for freedom. Even the date, Christmas Eve, seems chosen to ensure the least number of patrollers on the road at night as they made their way from Loudoun County.

Other instances also indicate a level of coordination that some freedom seekers were able to achieve. On August 2, 1856, an ad went out for nine “servants” who were arrested and lodged in the Old Jail in Warrenton. The ad noted the following: “The people of Loudoun and Fauquier are taking steps to preserve their property from the arts and designs of persons supposed to be concerned in the matter. A number of slaves have recently either run off, or attempted to do so, in the two counties.” In fact, late 1855 through 1856 accounts for a significant number of the instances we found of freedom seekers in the newspapers, including several multiplantation runaways such as the Christmas Eve and August 2 escapes. In early September 1856 an ad went out with a \$1,200 reward for six freedom seekers from three different enslavers. Then, just two weeks later on September 23, 1856, eight runaways from Fauquier County were arrested. They had fought their captors and fired a gun at one of their chests, though the pistol did not go off.

All of these instances of mass escape speak to a possible network of coordination that existed between enslaved people in Fauquier County, though more research will be needed to discover any link between all of these mass escapes. What is certain is that freedom seekers came to the decision to run away based on many different factors and resisted capture in myriad different ways.

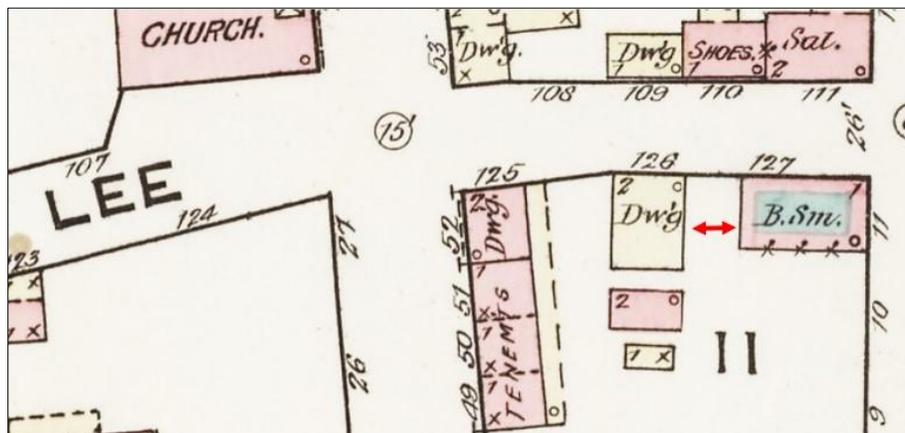
—By Sean Redmiles, Executive Director
Fauquier History Museum at the Old Jail

Beverly W. Howard: A 19th Century Blacksmith and Free Man of Color

At the corner of Lee Street and Second Street in Warrenton stands a one-story, red brick building. It was built during the 1850s and was first occupied by a blacksmith named Beverly Howard, a free man of color. Born free around 1826, Howard was taught the blacksmithing trade by his father, who was also born free. In his words, “I worked for my father until I began to work for myself. I never was bound an apprentice to a white man or to anyone. My father was a blacksmith and I learned my trade from him.” By 1860, Beverly Howard had a well-established blacksmithing business in Warrenton.



In 1872, Howard filed a Southern Claim in the amount of \$422.15 for goods and services demanded of him by the Union Army during the Civil War. Howard's accounts journal shows that his shop and materials, mostly iron and coal, were regularly confiscated by the Union soldiers, and Howard and his one employee, John Corbin, were made to shoe horses and mend wagons and ambulances for weeks at a time without pay. The claim also explained that the Confederate Army confiscated his shop on several occasions and stole materials, including his anvil and bellows, without which he could not ply his trade.



1886 Warrenton Sanborn map showing Beverly Howard's property (red arrows)

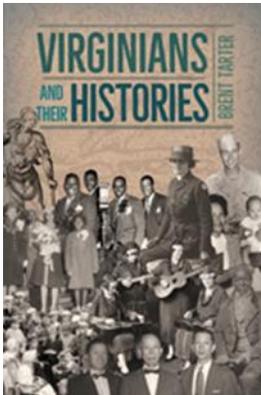
In the claim, Howard stated, “I do not wish to make anything out of the government and wish to be as lenient as I can be, but I can't afford to give them my time and material.” When justifying his allegiance to the Union and asked about his attitudes toward the

Confederacy, he recounted, “I was quiet as all free men of color had to be. I kept my sentiments to myself. I sympathized with the Union, of course. I did not say anything publicly but I talked with men of my own color and expressed myself to them in favor of the Union. I was careful with whom I talked, for some colored people might divulge it. I used to get the papers and read to them [his enslaved neighbors]. I remember getting the proclamation of President Lincoln and reading it [but] I had no vote.” Beverly Howard’s claim was ultimately rejected, and he was never compensated for his losses.

Howard rented his shop during the war, but county records indicate that by 1866 he owned the Lee Street lot. Soon after, he built a two-story house next to the shop. In 1884, he married Josephine Moran. Beverly W. Howard died in 1887. He was buried in the Union Church Cemetery in Falmouth, Virginia.

—By Wendy Wheatcraft, Preservation Planner
Fauquier County

For more in-depth stories about Fauquier County's people and places, dip into the archives of [News & Notes](#), Fauquier Historical Society's newsletter series that ran from 1979 to 2012. You can find it on our website, under the [Resources](#) tab.



Book Review

Virginians and Their Histories

by Brent Tarter

University of Virginia Press, 2020

504 pp; ISBN 9780813943930

Brent Tarter has accomplished a unique feat: He has written a fresh and engaging primer of Virginia history that goes beyond the elites to include the complete range of the state's varied population over the centuries. At the same time, he gives us great stories, reliable facts, and a broader understanding of how Virginia's residents have interacted, from the earliest times to recent history.

Tarter, a retired historian and a founding editor of the Library of Virginia's multivolume *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, has authored, co-authored, edited, or co-edited 16 books and numerous scholarly and popular articles.

The driving force behind this book is the need to view Virginia history from a new perspective that draws on new materials and modern understanding. To set the stage, Tarter shares the viewpoint of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1892 address to the American Historical Association, in which Turner asked members to imagine themselves watching American history pass by—wild animals to Indians to farmers—from east to west via Cumberland Gap. The image captured the 19th century view of American history as a progression from wilderness to a great democratic nation, fulfilling the demands of Manifest Destiny. However, this origin story was almost entirely focused on the accomplishments of white males engaged in political and military exploits. The first Americans—the native Indian tribes—were largely ignored except as people to be assimilated or destroyed; women played merely background roles in support of men; and African American experiences and contributions were ignored or marginalized.

Tarter asks us to turn around and consider the opposite perspective from the one Turner proposed for his audience--focusing on a view of the east from the western edge of Virginia to see the massive immigration of people into America and the conflicts or cooperation that arose from that process. Tarter recounts the familiar stories of Virginia history but adds new ones to encompass four centuries of "culturally and racially diverse peoples" who "cooperated with, competed against, and contested one another from the Chesapeake to the Piedmont and beyond." With a deft touch, Tarter interprets these stories and their varying impacts on the lives of Virginians today.

At 504 pages, this book is not a quick read. It also is an overview rather than a comprehensive history; for example, both world wars and the Great Depression are covered in a single chapter of 24 pages. But it is a very satisfying jumping-off point and a solid grounding for more detailed exploration. The section on Further Reading could spark innumerable armchair journeys.

Whether you are a serious student of Virginia history or someone who likes skimming the past to gather insights, this book is highly recommended.

—Reviewed by Elizabeth Simon
