

The Presidents and Their Slaves

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Introduction

Slavery is the memory that haunts our nation; the idea that no matter how progressive we become, the milestones we pass towards equality, or the laws passed that promise a better future for minorities, there is no way to abandon the idea that our country went to war over the institution of human bondage. The voice of those who lived in slavery is often times silenced, only those who had the courage to rebel or stand up have any type of paper trail left that signified their existence on earth. But, what seems to happen is those who lived their lives the best they could, keeping a watchful eye of their master, just trying to survive another day, are completely and utterly silenced. There may be records of names of slaves, but there is a miniscule amount of entries written by slaves themselves, as they were virtually inarticulate, unable to read or write, not that anyone would have taken what they said into account. Archaeology of slave plantations has brought a voice back to those who lived indefinitely in bondage. My objective is to search for the voices lost in slave life, specifically those slaves owned by four of our founding fathers, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, and see if these men were consistent in the treatment of their slaves when compared to their politics towards the dividing issue of slavery.

George Washington

George Washington was an average southern boy, born and raised in Virginia. Slavery was a part of his life, it was engraved in his everyday. Washington came to accumulate his slaves at age 11, and held them as his “people” until he freed them with a change of heart after the Revolutionary War. While Washington was in Mount Vernon, though these people were no less still kept in bondage, they were treated with a higher respect than slaves on some

neighboring plantations. Using the excavations of Mount Vernon from the 1980s, we are able to see some evidence of this respect towards his slaves. The most compelling evidence of treatment comes from the excavation of the House for Families slave quarters. The excavation proves that these slaves had leisure time, as marbles and stone pipes were found among the remains. Further research has gone to show that Washington ordered in large quantities “short pipes”, which represented a lower class compared to “long pipes” that were generally used by guests.

Archaeologists also found a pair of brass cuff links, most likely used by a man, as a replaceable button for collars on different articles of clothing. This can be interpreted to show that slaves were well dressed, and supplied with sufficient clothing (The Archaeology of Slavery). The greatest evidence for respect for slaves as a people, comes with the finding of white stoneware which was an expensive china used by the Washingtons. After finding numerous pieces of these plates, it is inferred that these sets were possibly passed down to slaves as George and Martha purchased new sets.

Slaves were given a small plot of land to tend themselves, their health was minded closely, and Washington even had black overseers. George also must have carried a sense of trust among his slaves as he allowed them to go into town to sell their own good, and even take guns to shoot game and sell them for their own profit. The greatest testament of this “trust” also came from the excavation of the slave quarters, as archaeologists found more than 25,000 faunal remains, including pig and deer. These remains can be interpreted to defend the idea that slaves would hunt on their own, bringing home meat of their own for their dinner. Among the faunal remains was sufficient evidence of fish, meat, and cornmeal, testifying that Washington’s slaves were given appropriate rations, including supplements for a healthy diet that included hunting

and fishing (The Archaeology of Slavery). As he returned back home from the war, he was filled with an uneasy guilt at the sight of his slaves, once remarking to an abolitionist, “there is not a man living who wished more sincerely that I do” to see slavery terminated. He expressed that he was never “to possess another slave by purchase” (Delano, 44).

When it came to Washington’s politics towards slavery though, he was silent, this being he knew it had the power to divide the new nation apart. While he was in a sense pro-emancipation, he remained quiet, not wanting to provoke a new nation towards separation. Though he knew this was an issue that required a voice, he knew 1776 wasn’t the time for opposition of a controversial institution. When the capital was relocated to Philadelphia, he wanted to take his “people” with him, but Philadelphia had a law that emancipated adult slaves after a certain period of time, so to avoid freeing his slaves, he sent them back to Virginia every 6 months to avoid the law. By then end of his presidency, he had no doubt in his mind that slavery was inhumane, once stating, “the unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labor in part I employed has been the only unavoidable subject of regret” (Delano, 49). Finally in 1799, Washington wrote, “It is my will and desire that the slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom” (Delano, 50). Though Washington begins with the idea that blacks were inferior to whites, archaeological evidence tends to show that his slaves were generally treated with as much respect as an enslaved person could have. With the final emancipation of his slaves, Washington for the most part stays consistent with his politics towards slavery and its place in America.

Thomas Jefferson

“We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is one scale, and self preservation in the other.” - Thomas Jefferson (Miller, xi)

Thomas Jefferson was said to carry some of the same sentiments about slavery as that of George Washington. He denounced the institution in its entirety, and advocated for the removal of it from American soil, but could not be taken especially seriously as he owned them himself. Though he believed that slavery was a “moral depravity” he knew that this controversial issue had the opportunity to destroy a fragile nation. His personal opinion on the institution of slavery lied in the idea that it contradicted the laws of nature stating that everyone had a right to personal liberty, that personal liberty defined in the constitution. He believed that democracy and the emancipation process would have to be intertwined, that it was anti-democratic and contrary to the principles of the American Revolution for a branch of the federal government to enforce a nationwide emancipation (Dierksheide).

To combat the institution of slavery, he encouraged the cultivation of crops that did not require as heavy slave labor, such as advocating for wheat production, as a way to calm his own conscience on the nearly unapproachable issue of slavery in the States. This switch is present in excavations that found slave diets progressed from almost entirely salted pork and cornmeal, to beef and sheep, signifying the transition from tobacco to wheat production (Morris, Giles, and Baars). From the mid 1770s until his death, his plan for gradual emancipation circled around the idea that he continued to believe that the white man was superior to the black man, and advocated for an African American colony being established in West Africa or the Indies. Raised as a Virginia aristocrat, he believed white Americans and enslaved blacks lived in two definite and separate worlds, even bearing the idea that African Americans were as “incapable as

children” (Dierksheide). Though Jefferson and Washington share a similar story, Jefferson was committed to continuing to buy and sell slaves all the way until his death, even though he openly hated the institution and detested its existence.

When it came to the treatment of his slaves, Jefferson was seldom known as a particularly cruel slave master; though his overseers may have been more physically brutal, as a plantation owner he generally wasn’t considered inhumane. While visitors to Monticello reported that Jefferson’s slaves were “well nourished, clothed, and treated well as white servants should be”, what the master did not seem to comprehend was the idea that no matter how humane the slaves were treated, they were still being kept in human bondage and yearned to be freemen (Miller, 105). One of the first series of excavations on the Monticello plantation, was the home of James Hubbard, a nail worker who was a continuous runaway, reiterating the fact that his quarters were located next to the overseer’s home, isolated from the other slave quarters. The fact that a majority of the slave quarters were located away from the overseer’s cabin, it is evident that there was an increase of slave autonomy not only regionally but within the Jefferson plantation. Further defending the idea of an increased level of slave individuality on the Jefferson farm, was the excavation of Mulberry Row, or the slave quarters. Archaeologists found that structures on Mulberry Row evolved from large one-room buildings where underneath, slaves were held in small cellars living in barrack styles, to one-room inhabitations with less cellars, or none at all, overall suggesting that slaves increasingly lived in small family-based units. This idea was based on the presence of only one subfloor pit in the new structures. Jefferson, and other plantation owners were willing to make these adjustments because they were able to see a direct increase in slave cooperation and quota increase. These house inhabitants could have ranged

from a biological family, or a group of comrades who submitted to the idea of living together, suggesting that this farm respected the idea of individuals determining who they associated and lived with. One could argue that this discovery could parallel to the idea that Jefferson was then not afraid of a slave rebellion within his plantation, justifying the idea that his slaves were of general content for their circumstances (Housing for Slaves on Mulberry Row). Along with excavation of structures, archaeologists connected the findings of discarded fashion ceramics, such as plates from China or England, that would have been purchased by slaves during market trips to Charlottesville, as the emergence of slave class identity and just an individual identity overall, one outside of just being a slave. (Can You Dig It?).

Though Thomas Jefferson's plantation offered less opportunity for the interpretation of excavated artifacts, the findings based on the location of the slave quarters and their transition, offer us a different perspective on the way Jefferson may have viewed slave autonomy. I believe the biggest crime with Jefferson as a master, was his use of hypocrisy when living different lives in the public and private sector. While Washington continuously transitioned from a less slave dependent lifestyle, eventually halting the buying of slaves altogether, Jefferson continued to buy and sell slaves throughout his life to defend his life as a Virginia aristocrat. While there seems to be no evidence that Jefferson was an overwhelmingly cruel slave master, it does seem that he tends to be fairly contradictory in his policies on slavery versus his treatment.

James Madison

"These people, and the structures they lived and worked in, left a very small paper trail - but the physical remains, the ceramics, bottles, bones, reveal all kinds of information of their humanity."

-Reeves, Montpelier Archaeologist (Archaeology for All).

The trend of contradicting political policies and private life continue with that of James Madison and his slaves. Madison was in agreement with Jefferson, concluding that after their role in the Revolution and the new country's fight for independence, they couldn't politically support the institution of slavery. This of course did not stop them from continuing to lay steady in the idea that the white man was above the black man. Madison carried out this sentiment by advocating for an African American colony, believing that creating a colony off the coast of Africa for these freemen would be a fundamental part of emancipation. Any act conceived to treat his slaves "better" than others, was based out of selfish political endeavors because he knew his role as a slave master deemed him a hypocrite. He held onto his slave labor because he was too financially dependent on the human beings he inhumanly owned. Though James Madison was known as a fairly easy master, Dolly on the other hand, was considered particularly cruel, even undermining her husband's wish upon his death to free his personal servant, Paul Jennings (Swarns).

The excavation of Montpelier has been less than extensive, as the project centered around slave life is truly just starting to take form. What has been found so far is generally from the South Yard Quarters where those directly working for the Madison's in the house lived. Two of the most obvious artifacts found in these quarters were two decorated pipe bowls. The first pipe is notable because it expresses notable Masonic iconography, connecting Masonry ideals, ones that stood for manhood, justice, and equality, were relevant and known with Madison's enslaved community. The second pipe has the word "liberty" carved around the side, though it conveys a simple message, it demonstrates that these slaves had their own set of ideas and values, and had political opinions, though that right was taken away from them. Along with these political

statements, there were also an intricate array of ceramics, buttons, and glass fragments that were linked to other regions of Virginia suggesting trade and participation in the economy. From these artifacts found, and the connections they make with the individual, we can assume that the slave community was very alive at Montpelier, they went into town to buy and sell pipes, ceramics, and food (Archaeology for All).

The final notable discovery on the Madison plantation was the close proximity of the South Yard slave quarters, ranging less than 50 yards from the main residence. While linking together different clues, such as a lack of burnt clay, establishing the idea of a raised hearth, these houses were stocked with wooden floors, brick chimneys, and even glass windows. The other rows of slave quarters did not embody consistent characteristics in either value or proximity to the house. These quarters were used as a display for visitors to the plantation and were located extremely close to the residence, representing that the Madison's truly liked to establish the idea that these slaves were treated highly, living just in their backyard, not isolated, with above average cabins. Historians note that this was a way Madison attempted to deter the public sphere from viewing him as a slave master who didn't support the institution of slavery (Reichhardt). Generally Madison was embarrassed to own slaves, but not because he didn't morally support it - he knew in his head that it undermined the government that he helped create. Though his treatment of slaves was not relatively cruel or inhumane, I am positive his slaves lived no easy life, and always yearned to be free citizens.

James Monroe

James Monroe, the last of the founding fathers, while being well liked in his two term presidency, tends to be one of the most forgotten presidents. This idea is reflected in the

underwhelming amount of evidence found from the Monroe household: the Highland House, located in Orange, Virginia. Excavations on this house have only been planned to be conducted, not actually carried out. The only compelling piece of archaeological evidence found at the Monroe excavation sight, is that of a hidden structure found just recently. For decades, people had believed that the main Monroe residence was the current standing house, even though its architecture was not contemporary with the time period of when they believed it was built. In the last couple years, archaeologists were able to find the base of another structure they believe to be the primary house, as they believe, using archeological evidence and historical documents, that it burned to the ground. This is where the excavations ceased. Unfortunately, there have been very few projects conducted on the Monroe plantation, even though slavery was alive and bustling in the Monroe backyard (James Monroe's Highland).

I used historical documents and personal accounts to fill in some of the blanks about James Monroe and his view towards slavery in the United States. Just like the previous presidents, overall Monroe shared with them the idea that though African Americans were unequal to the white man and the institution of slavery did not hold a lawful place in the new American government the founding fathers had just fought for. Monroe, though he cumulatively owned 250 slaves during his lifetime, supported the idea of gradual emancipation with the creation of an alternative colony in Liberia for their settlement. As president, he endorsed the American Colonization Society's plan to recolonize freemen even, establishing the capital of that colony, "Monrovia". Records show that Monroe as a master had the occupation and name of every slave written down, protected family units, and provided medical care for his people. Though he seemed to support treating slaves as human beings, he did not, similar to his close

friend and personal mentor, Thomas Jefferson, decide to free his slaves as he believed it was irresponsible. The lack of archaeological evidence of the Monroe residence, and therefore the absence of information on the Highland plantation slave relations, just supports the importance of archaeology in determining the way a slave community lived day to day (James Monroe).

Conclusion

As a student new to the world of anthropology, when I began this endeavor, I believed I was looking for artifacts that obviously pointed to mistreatment, that of shackles or whipping posts, but instead my research of different excavations showed me something different. I was able to gather that using things such as types of ceramics, location of slave quarters, or even an abandoned tobacco pipe, archaeologists can make deeper connections to the relationships between a slave and their master than simply finding a disintegrated whip to show the master was physically abusive to his slaves. It's the deeper connections, such as evaluating the architecture of slave quarters and determining that the slave master was extremely fond of appearances, that paint a truer picture to the type of master each slave owner truly was. The best conclusions on slave treatment can be made by using a mixture of historical documents and accounts, combined with archaeological evidence, to truly place a person on that plantation during the 17th century.

After conducting research on four different founding fathers, with some plantations being more excavated than others, I attest that, based on my findings, Thomas Jefferson was the most contradictory slave master of the founding fathers. All of the founding fathers were aware that their contribution to slavery was unconstitutional, that it contradicted the government that

declared all men equal they had established. Out of the four researched, Washington was the only president who actually freed his slaves after his death, something that to the following presidents was deemed “irresponsible”. Jefferson knew slavery contradicted the idea of personal freedoms outlined in the new constitution, and continued to shamefully buy and sell enslaved Americans with the goal of maintaining his aristocratic life. James Madison is a close contender, but I have deemed Jefferson a more contradictory slaveholder based on the fact that Madison had planned to free his personal servant, Paul Jennings, unlike Jefferson who kept all of his slaves in bondage. With more extensive research, it is quite possible that James Monroe could be added to the list, but without research a proper conclusion cannot be drawn.

Slave culture was surely alive in 17th century Virginia. These founding fathers knew in their hearts that slavery contradicted everything a free nation stand for, but all lay silent as they continued to keep slaves for their plantation. George Washington seems to be the true hero though, as he fundamentally believed by the end of his life, that black men and white men weren't all that different, that they were both created by the same God, and they deserved to be free. His guilty conscious was based on a true belief that slavery was not only politically wrong, but morally wrong, and vowed to stop buying or selling slaves, and even freed his people at the end of his life. When we think back on the inhumane idea of human bondage in our own backyard, we can at least be comforted in the idea that our first president knew at his death that we were all created equal.

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