

THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN ST. JOHN'S PARISH, KINGSVILLE

The legacy of slavery is an inextricable part of the story of St. John's Parish, which was founded by Royal Charter in the Colony of Maryland in 1692, fifty years after slavery had been established by law.

The most striking fact about slavery's legacy in the parish annals is that there remain no written records pertaining to slavery in any of the parish's archival material, either in Kingsville or at the Diocesan Archives. In a time and place where the system of chattel slavery was part of everyday life, it is striking that no records pertaining to enslaved people remain, if they were ever kept at all.

The first years of St. John's life in Joppa Town certainly included the presence and labor of the enslaved persons who were considered the legal property of members of the parish. Of them we have no records, only their nameless witnesses as part of the Communion of Saints.

One of the major contributing factors to this sad loss of information is the lack of records from the years of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. During both conflicts, the parish was temporarily closed. It is most telling in the story of African-Americans in St. John's Parish that Vestry minutes and other records of the Civil War were intentionally destroyed, the pages ripped out of books that remain in the Diocesan Archives to this day. The removal of these records, however contentious they may have been, was undoubtedly thought to have been in the best interests of healing a divided community. It is, however, a great loss for us today as we seek to rediscover the legacy of slavery in the history of the parish and the greater Church.

The life of the parish reached a turning point in 1816, when Edward Day offered to build a new church in Kingsville, several miles west of the dying

Joppa Towne, where many members of the parish had already relocated.

Edward Day was, in the words of parish historian Mary H. Cadwalader, "a cantankerous, crusty sort."¹ Two years before he offered to build the new church building, Edward declined being a Vestryman, having objected to the Oath of Allegiance. We know that his mother, Anne Fell Day, brought her own slaves with her when she fled her first marriage in Baltimore to marry Edward Day, Sr. According to the Census of 1830, the younger Edward Day owned four slaves: three young men and one adult woman.² Also in the same census of 1830, Edward's son Ishmael was recorded as owning two slaves: a young boy and a young woman under the age of twenty-three.³ It is thus almost certain that slaves helped to build the 1817 church, and even if they did not, the fact that Edward Day owned and profited from slaves means that the labor of enslaved peoples contributed to the construction of the building, and to every facet of the parish's life from 1692 through Emancipation, which took effect in Maryland under the ratification of the new state constitution of October 13, 1864. (Edward Day is buried in the St. John's Churchyard between the two church buildings.)

Records outside of the parish remain attesting to the fact that many other members of the parish also owned slaves, and the Slave Gallery in the church Edward Day built bears silent witness to their presence. Like the economic prosperity of America under chattel slavery, the prosperity of St. John's was also dependent upon this system that denied the inherent humanity of some persons while declaring that they are the "property" of others. As we examine our history we must acknowledge that the story of slavery is also the story of St. John's.

Even those who owned slaves were not unambiguous in their feelings about the institution of slavery. The aforementioned Ishmael Day, son of Edward, was a Unionist and Abolitionist despite owning slaves himself. In 1846, Ishmael freed his slave Eliza, declaring in the manumission document that he lived "under a Republican Government & believing as I most sincerely do that all the Human Race without respect to sex or Colour (*sic*) should & ought to be free."⁴

On July 11, 1864, a band Confederate

soldiers were in the area, and Ishmael Day placed a Union flag over his gate. Sergeant Eugene Fields told Day to take the flag down. An argument followed and Ishmael Day shot Sergeant Field. The soldiers burned Day's home. (A historic marker is roughly one mile west of St. John's on Sunshine Avenue.) Field later died of his injury. Ishmael Day fled into the nearby fields and hid under a cider press for several days until he could escape into the city of [Baltimore](#). After a time, he returned and rebuilt his home.⁵ (Ishmael Day is buried in the cemetery of Fork United [Methodist](#) Church, approximately two miles west on Sunshine Avenue.)

A deeper look at the census data from the 18th Century attests to the complexity of the status of African-Americans in the area. During the years of the Civil War the population of African-Americans in Baltimore and Harford Counties was divided nearly equally between free and enslaved people.⁶ So it is possible that both enslaved and free people of color were involved in the construction of the building and in the larger life of the parish. Perhaps slave and free persons of color even worshipped side by side in the gallery, divided by the law but united by segregation? Given our lack of source material, this is all speculation.

The significance of St. John's location also bears mention. Kingsville was an important stopping point on one of the few routes from north to south in Maryland, and was a place where a hugely diverse population of white and black, slave and free would travel, both openly and secretly; journeying either north to freedom, or south to war. We may speculate that the closed property also served as a place of rest and cover for some of the many people who travelled through Kingsville.

Our most recent complete parish history is "A Short History of St. John's Parish" written by Mary Cadwalader in 1967 in commemoration of the 275th Anniversary of the parish and the 150th Anniversary of the foundation of the 1817 church. Despite the absence of any primary sources relating to slavery, it is clear that, at least in 1967, the parish still recognized the legacy of slavery. The gallery of the 1817 church is clearly referred to as "the Slave Gallery" in the historic community tour organized for the anniversary.⁷

Participating in the Trail of Souls Pilgrimage has given St. John's the opportunity to reflect upon and rediscover our heritage as a place in the crossroads of tremendous conflict and social change; and to grapple with our history as it challenges us be a community of reconciliation.

This truth spurs us onward in our baptismal calling to be a community of justice, love, and peace, "respecting the freedom and dignity of every human being"⁸ and, in the words of our Parish Mission Statement, "welcoming all, worshipping, witnessing, and continuing God's work in the world."

*The Rev'd Timothy E. Kroh
Eastertide, 2014*

WORKS CITED

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3. <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/>
4. Phillips, Christopher. *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860*, 1997, University of Illinois Press, p. 257.
5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmael_Day
6. <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/>
7. *Historical Tour*, St. John's Parish, 1967.
8. The Baptismal Covenant, *The Book of Common Prayer 1979*, p. 304.