

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sparking Freedom: Enslaved Resistance in Fredericksburg and Stafford, Virginia

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(Received 05 September 2024; revised 12 September 2024; accepted 23 October 2024)

Abstract

Inspired in large part by the author's residence on the grounds of a former plantation in Stafford County, Virginia, *Sparking Freedom* highlights local stories of enslaved resistance. The program incorporates stops at multiple National Park Service sites, as well as several other historic locations and the Fredericksburg Area Museum. Combining historical documentation and archival research, the tour features accounts of enslaved resistance including an uprising of enslaved men at Chatham Plantation in the winter of 1805, the story of Anthony Burns, an enslaved man who escaped to Boston in 1853 but was later apprehended under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and enslaved individuals like Bethany Veney who resisted sales and auctions. *Sparking Freedom* is a highly personal example of innovative and engaging public history work honoring enslaved communities.

Keywords: Slavery; Museums; African American History

Two years ago, I moved into a small rental house on the grounds of a former plantation. Enslaved laborers built Chatham in 1771, under the forced direction of William Fitzhugh, a wealthy white Virginia planter. Fitzhugh had ties to many of the most prominent Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and George Mason, each of whom visited the property during their travels across the state. During the Civil War, the US Army used the mansion as a headquarters, and following the Battle of Fredericksburg, the building became a field hospital, where Clara Barton, Walt Whitman, and Dr Mary Walker cared for wounded soldiers.

The house at Chatham is enormous and imposing, brick with windows like watchful eyes overlooking the Rappahannock River. Located in Stafford County, Virginia, Chatham sits atop a ridge, visible from nearly any angle in the city of Fredericksburg, where I work as Curator of African American History and Special Projects at the Fredericksburg Area Museum. Chatham is owned and operated by the National Park Service (NPS), part of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields National Military Park, which also includes Chancellorsville, Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House, and another plantation site, Ellwood.

In the eighteenth century, the property comprised roughly 1300 acres. My little house sits at the corner of Chatham Heights Road and Chatham Street, the repetition in the name gesturing to its former life as part of the plantation complex. NPS posits that around 500 people were enslaved on the site between its establishment in the 1770s and the Civil War's end in 1865.

When I arrived in summer 2022, I felt haunted by the plantation's past. I walked the grounds and felt the sun pushing down on me, a heat so intense it felt like an actual, physical weight. I met with a friend, John Hennessy, who worked as the Chief Historian at Chatham for two decades before his retirement in 2021. He told me some of its most painful stories as we looked over the Rappahannock River, and I tried not to weep.

He described an uprising that took place at Chatham in the winter of 1805. By the early nineteenth century, William Fitzhugh had decided to sell Chatham. He was not on the property at the time, but he'd hired a new overseer. When John shared the story, he said that there had previously been another overseer, who seemed to have built a mostly cordial relationship with the enslaved community. The new overseer, Starke, had not.

During the winter holidays, Starke called the people enslaved on the property back to work, disrupting one of their most important periods of rest and autonomy. Frederick Douglass wrote of the necessity of this downtime, "From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity."¹

Starke did not heed this warning.

It is important to note that our only sources of this uprising are white people. We do not know how people enslaved on this property or elsewhere would have described this incident. According to a *Virginia Herald* article from January 4, 1805, on Wednesday, January 2, Starke told a group of enslaved men to perform some labor, and they refused. He tried to force them, and they rebelled, seizing him, tying him up, and whipping him. He was able to free himself and went to the nearby town of Falmouth, returning with several other white men. The enslaved men overpowered them before a larger party came over and a struggle ensued. At least one enslaved man was killed in the struggle, one white man was killed, and another enslaved man attempted to escape to Fredericksburg and fell through the ice of the Rappahannock River.

The enslaved men included Robin, a carpenter, believed to have initiated the uprising by resisting Starke. Robin was not involved in the later part of the uprising, but he was tried and condemned to death for "conspiracy and insurrection." Instead of being executed, he received a commutation and was transported out of the country.

The second person is Phil. After the initial altercation was initiated by Robin, which left Starke injured, Phil followed Starke into Falmouth, and warned him not to return to Chatham "as he was determined that he [Starke] should not reside at the Estate." Phil

¹ Douglass 2005.

was shot and killed during the second confrontation, after being “taken” and attempting to escape. He is likely the same “Phil” referenced by Fitzhugh in an undated letter (probably 1797): “Phil my gardner has proved so great a villain that I have not a plant of any sort in the garden.”

Abram or Abraham, “a strong, daring and resolute Negroe” who “generally acted as a leader amongst the Negroes on the estate.” He engaged Starke, Bussell, and Bett when they returned from Falmouth and probably inflicted the fatal wound on Bussell, the white man who was killed. Tried for murder (with Cupid and Robin) on January 14, and he was executed on the 15th.

Cupid. A participant was tried and condemned for murder, but his death sentence was commuted, and he like Robin was transported out of the country.

And finally, James. According to one account, he successfully escaped to Fredericksburg, only to be confronted there. He fled again, fell through the ice on the Rappahannock, and drowned.

I cannot stop thinking about this story. I cannot stop thinking about those men, the families they left behind, and how the enslaved community around them reacted to their loss. I cannot stop thinking about James, who died in the same river I cross every single day on my way to work. I cannot stop thinking about them, and I cannot sleep.

I do not sleep for the first three months I live in that house. I keep seeing visions of the people enslaved on the land where I now lay, keep encountering their presence on the ground as I walk from room to room, and keep feeling that I owe them, that I need to do something to honor them. And by the end of 2023, I would figure it out.

Like many other NPS sites, Chatham’s staff has limited funding for updating and expanding exhibitions. Staff work hard to maintain the site, welcome thousands of visitors each year, and continue researching the stories of those who lived and labored on the property. However, without funds for a full-scale reimagining of the permanent exhibits, some of the more recently uncovered stories, especially those related to the people enslaved on the site, have not yet been made fully visible.

I start full-time in person at the FAM in August 2022. My position is created after three years of concentrated community conversations surrounding an Auction Block, associated with the sale of enslaved people, that stood on the corner in downtown Fredericksburg, Virginia, from around 1843 until 2020. In addition to the relocation of the Auction Block, the City of Fredericksburg responds to the community conversations by partnering with the FAM to hire a curator. In my current role, I am responsible for efforts to update, expand, and enhance African American history at the museum and across the city.

Upon my arrival, I develop and implement an array of successful projects, including an exhibition surrounding the Auction Block’s new location at the Fredericksburg Area Museum, a series of lectures and presentations at the museum and across the city, downtown walking tours exploring local African American entrepreneurship, web material for the FAM and city websites, rack cards and brochures for the Visitor Center and other area museums, an inventory of municipal wayside panels, and exhibit tours for museum visitors, local schools and university classes, and professional and social organizations. Fredericksburg community members respond positively and continue sharing their memories and

experiences, along with expectations for the continued expansion of African American public history efforts at the museum and across the city.

One of my biggest goals in my first year is to connect with all the other museums and cultural institutions in the area. I meet with and establish relationships with two NPS staff at Chatham, Interpretation Branch Manager Beth Parnicza and Superintendent Lewis Rogers, and start brainstorming how I can help them share the incredible stories of the Black people who once lived at their site. I recognize that I do not work for the Park Service and that I really have no authority to interpret the park, but I feel this immense responsibility, both as the person charged with African American public history efforts in the area and as an inhabitant of the land on which Chatham formerly stood.

I delve into the research. Two local historians, Ruth Coder Fitzgerald and Norman Schools, had written about Black life at Chatham and nearby Falmouth. There was Ellen Mitchell, an enslaved laundress who successfully crowdfunded for her freedom in 1859, Eliza and Dunmore Gwinn, who self-emancipated in 1862 and became prominent members of a freed people's community in Yellow Springs, Ohio following the Civil War, and Anthony Burns, who became one of the most famous fugitives in the country when he was tried under the Fugitive Slave Act in 1854. I realize Stafford County is rich in stories of enslaved resistance, and that I need to figure out a way to bring the stories together and to ground the project at Chatham. And I still need to figure out how I can manage the project from my position...not at the National Park Service, and not in Stafford County.

I put together a proposal for a thematic tour entitled *Sparking Freedom: Enslaved Resistance in Fredericksburg and Stafford, Virginia*. The title comes from a quote featured in Norman Schools' book, *Virginia Shade: An African American History of Falmouth, Virginia*. He opened with Alice Walker: "And so our parents and grandparents have, more often than not anonymously, handed down the spark of freedom, 'the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see, or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.'"² Beth, Lewis, and I, along with the FAM President and CEO, Sam McKelvey, write a grant for the National Park Foundation's Park Ventures program, and connect with Sue Henderson from the Stafford Museum and Cultural Center (currently a virtual museum). The NPF announced that we won the grant in November 2023, and we decided we'll debut the tour the following spring.

Sparking Freedom launches in April 2024. We partner with the Fredericksburg Trolley to ensure the accessibility of the tour (we want to make sure elders and people with limited mobility can join us) and set four dates, two in the spring and two in the fall. The dates sell out before we even share on social media, and we add several more throughout the summer. A partnership between the NPS, the FAM, and the Stafford Museum, the tour begins at Chatham, where Beth and her NPS colleagues speak about the 1805 uprising, Ellen Mitchell, and members of the United States Colored Troops formerly enslaved at Chatham. From there, we travel to the Moncure Conway house, where the Gwinns were enslaved, and then the historic Falmouth Union Church, where Anthony Burns was baptized and later preached.

I take over from Beth after we leave Chatham and serve as the speaker for the remainder of the tour stops in Fredericksburg, where we talk about Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site), the oldest remaining African American church in the city. We stop at the Fredericksburg Train Station, where I share the better-known stories of Henry Box Brown and Ellen and William

² Norman Schools 2012.

Craft, who all passed through the area on their journeys to freedom. We spend extra time at Old Mill Park, where beloved Fredericksburg local John M. Washington self-emancipated in April 1862, and pause at the former Auction Block site, where we focus on how enslaved people resisted sales and auctions. I read a section from *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman*. While Ms. Veney is not local to Fredericksburg, she was enslaved in Virginia, and her words serve as a particularly powerful representation of resistance.

In the early 1850s, realizing she was to be sold, she devised a way to avoid purchase. She writes in her narrative, published in 1889, about her enslaver's attempt to sell her:

“Arrived in Richmond, we were again shut up in jail, all around which was a very high fence, so high that no communication with the outside world was possible. I say we, for there was a young slave girl whom McCoy had taken with me to the Richmond market. The next day, as the hour for the auction drew near, Jailer O’Neile came to us, with a man, whom he told to take us along to the dressmaker and to charge her to ‘fix us up fine.’ This dressmaker was a most disagreeable woman, whose business it was to array such poor creatures as we in the gaudiest and most striking attire conceivable, that, when placed upon the auction stand, we should attract the attention of all present, if not in one way, why, in another. She put a white muslin apron on me, a large cape, with great pink bows on each shoulder, and a similar rig also on Eliza. Thus equipped, we were led through a crowd of rude men and boys to the place of sale, which was a large open space on a prominent square, undercover.

I had been told by an old negro woman certain trick that I could resort to, when placed upon the stand, that would be likely to hinder my sale; and when the doctor, who was employed to examine the slaves on such occasions, told me to let him see my tongue, he found it coated and feverish, and, turning from me with a shiver of disgust, said he was obliged to admit that at that moment I was in a very bilious condition. One after another the crowd felt my limbs, and asked me all manner of questions, to which I replied in the ugliest manner I dared; and when the auctioneer raised his hammer, and cried, “How much do I hear for this woman?” the bids were so low I was ordered down from the stand.

I was now taken back to Luray; and, though McCoy was greatly disappointed at the result of his Richmond venture, he was wise enough to make the best of it.”³

Participants often mention that they find Veney’s story amongst the most compelling on the tour.

The program ends at the Fredericksburg Area Museum, where we wrap up by studying two fugitive slave ads from Virginia, one during the Revolutionary War, and another that references the Rappahannock River. Our intention for tour participants is to understand that enslaved people constantly resisted, that they had agency, and that, despite the oppressive atmosphere inherent to the system of slavery, enslaved people understood their own humanity and never stopped searching for freedom.

On June 20, 2024, I receive an email from Beth at the National Park Service. She writes, “We decided to make a modified version of *Sparking Freedom* to be our primary formal interpretive program at Chatham this summer as a result of the larger tour’s success. We offer this

³ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library 2024.

tour every day at 2 pm...and we focus on the stories of the 1805 uprising, Ellen Mitchell's emancipation, the crossing of 10,000 enslaved people to freedom across Rappahannock, and 2 United States Colored Troops who were enslaved by Lacy at Chatham and Ellwood. It lasts for 45 minutes.

This program and our partnership with FAM are all part of our larger commitment to telling historically marginalized or intentionally erased stories. We believe that centering these marginalized stories will tell a more complete and relevant story of the Civil War and will help visitors to better understand how the past has shaped society today."

At the FAM, we have made the *Sparking Freedom* tour a permanent part of our educational offerings. And now, at Chatham, across the street from my house, I know that every single day, visitors have access to the stories of Robin, Phil, Abram, Cupid, Ellen Mitchell, and, of course, James. I've done what I set out to do: I made these people, whose presences surround me as I write this in my living room in my little house on Chatham Heights Road, visible. Their lives will be recognized. Their attempts at freedom will be understood. And their memories will live on, in the minds of tour participants, Chatham visitors, and hopefully now with more people as I share their stories even wider. And I'm thrilled to report that I've been sleeping much better now.

Dr Gaila Sims is a public historian and museum educator specializing in African American history. Originally from Riverside, California, she received her BA in History and African American Studies from Oberlin College and her MA and PhD in American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation, *Imprimatur of the State: Interpretation of Slavery at American State History Museums*, examines representations of slavery at state history museums in Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Dr Sims has held positions at several museums, archives, and cultural institutions, including the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, the Bullock Texas State History Museum, the Harry Ransom Center, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. She currently serves as the Vice President of Programs and Interpretation at the Fredericksburg Area Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Author contribution. Writing – original draft: G.C.S.

Funding. *Sparking Freedom: Enslaved Resistance in Fredericksburg and Stafford, Virginia* is supported in part by the National Park Foundation's Park Ventures Grant.

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Cite this article: Sims, Gaila. 2025. "Sparking Freedom: Enslaved Resistance in Fredericksburg and Stafford, Virginia." *Public Humanities*, 1, e29, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.44>