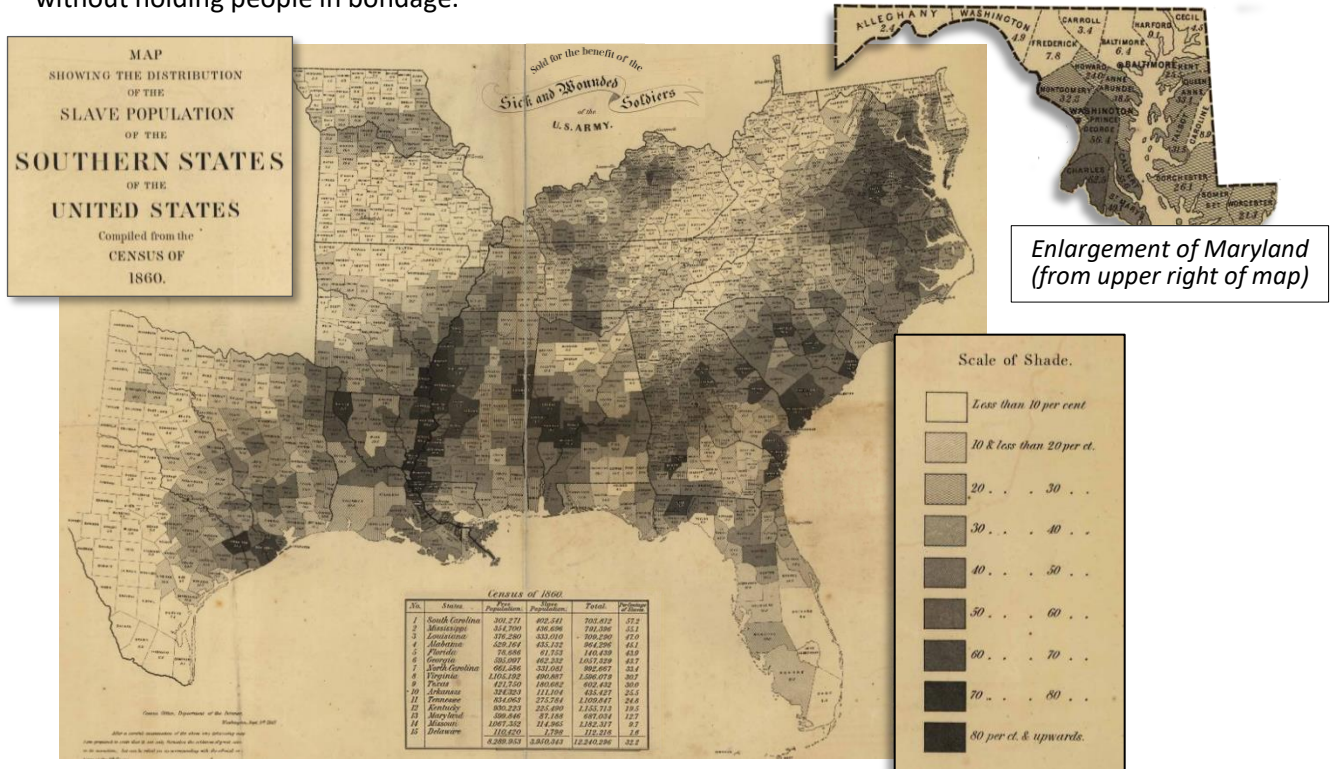


# Background - Slavery in Montgomery County

Slavery played a more significant role in Montgomery County’s history than is generally perceived today. Although it was not on the same scale as in the Deep South, where the institution shaped nearly all aspects of life, slavery in antebellum Montgomery County was nearly as pervasive. (The 1860 map below helps provide a visual representation.) The county was then mostly rural and agricultural, and farms of any significant size for the most part relied on enslaved labor. For large landowners, whose wealth often translated into community prominence and influence, such status and wealth were rarely possible without holding people in bondage.



In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, about four in ten people in Montgomery County were enslaved. By 1860, this had decreased to three in ten, largely due to planters having switched from tobacco to grain production, the former having worn out the soil and the latter requiring less year-round labor. With this change, some enslaved were manumitted (released from slavery); sold, usually further south; or “hired out” to people needing labor, with payment to the enslaver.

For the most part Montgomery County residents holding enslaved people had fewer than 10 and—more often than not—just a few. On the eve of the Civil War, only one county resident held more than 100 enslaved people, and just under 50 residents held 20 or more people in bondage. Although the 770 enslavers in the county at that time represented only 7 percent of the white population, the enslaved were spread among about a third of the county’s white households—roughly reflecting the percentage of the county’s population that was enslaved. Even those who did not personally hold anyone enslaved participated in an economy based on slave labor and benefited from it generally.

<b>1860 Enslavement</b>	
<b># of Enslaved</b>	<b>Held by</b>
1 – 5	431
6 – 9	155
10 – 15	88
16 – 20	47
21 – 30	32
30 – 40	12
40+	5
<b>5,421</b>	<b>770</b>
18,322 total county population in 1860	

Property records also provide an indication of slavery’s role here. While land transactions make up the bulk of these records, they are heavily interspersed with bills of sale of “Negroes”—though sometimes also manumissions of enslaved people, for “divers [sic] good causes” noted in a few cases.

The proportion of the county's population who were enslavers belied a more widespread acceptance of slavery, as best seen in the results of the 1860 presidential election. In a four-way contest, the most pro-slavery candidate (Southern Democrat John Breckenridge, who carried nearly all of the states that would soon secede) was favored by 46 percent of county voters (white men only). "Unionists"—who opposed secession (but were not necessarily antislavery and even included some enslavers)—were a slight plurality here. Abraham Lincoln, who opposed slavery's spread but vowed not to interfere where it existed, got a mere 2 percent in Montgomery County.<sup>1</sup> His support was entirely within the district encompassing Sandy Spring, a predominantly Quaker community. By the dictates of their faith, most Quakers had emancipated those they held in bondage beginning in the late 1700s, providing evidence of antislavery (though not necessarily antiracist) sentiment in the county, held by some non-Quakers as well.

A New Year's Day mass meeting in Rockville in 1861 underscored this division. A pro-secession resolution was defeated—barely—133-131 but measures supporting "slave owners' rights" were approved unanimously. When the war broke out, many Montgomery County men joined the Confederate military—likely a majority of the male residents who fought in the war but precise numbers are hard to determine. In contrast, not one answered Lincoln's initial call for volunteers. And during the war, the southern sympathizing editor of the *Montgomery County Sentinel* was twice imprisoned by federal authorities for his views—undoubtedly shared by many of his readers in the county.

Near the end of the Civil War, in November 1864, a new Maryland constitution abolished slavery (giving Maryland the distinction of being the only state south of the Mason–Dixon Line to end slavery on its own). Montgomery County voters, however, opposed the constitution by a three-to-one margin. A year and a half after the war, the head of the Freedmen's Bureau office in Montgomery County reported that "Southern Sympathizers" were still "largely in the majority" and that "a rebel flag" had been prominently displayed.

Conditions under which the enslaved here lived varied greatly. Philip Johnson of Sugarland, near Poolesville, recalled an overseer's cruelty in a "Slave Narrative" compiled as part of a federal project decades later.<sup>2</sup> Others may have been more fortunate: farmers with only one or two enslaved individuals usually worked alongside them but, as common as it was for an enslaver here to have this few people in bondage, it often meant families previously had been split up at auction. In fact, a runaway ad in 1800 noted that the freedom seeker's mother and father were held by two different enslavers, one of them being John Poole (namesake of a middle school in Poolesville). This and many other documented acts of fleeing—at great risk—underscore oft-intolerable circumstances.

A look at life on bigger plantations is provided by the autobiography of Josiah Henson, who was once enslaved in our county: "We lodged in log huts, and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen



Engraving from Josiah Henson's autobiography

<sup>1</sup> Breckenridge got 1,125 votes in Montgomery County; John Bell (Constitutional Union Party) 1,155; Stephen Douglas (Northern Democrat) 99; Lincoln (on the new Republican Party ticket) came in last with 50 votes.

<sup>2</sup> *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*, 1936-38, Library of Congress.

persons, men, women, and children...here were the children born and the sick—neglected.” Henson’s account was used by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel that did much to galvanize anti-slavery sentiment—a notable way that slavery here had a major impact well beyond the county’s borders.

It is sometimes asserted that as a border state, slavery in all of Maryland was less harsh than further south. To the degree enslavers holding only one or two people in bondage may have had direct, closer contact, this may have been so. However, the relatively close lure of the Mason–Dixon line (the Maryland–Pennsylvania border) prompted some enslavers to take stringent measures to deter freedom seekers.

In addition, the presence of a significant free Black population was a deep concern of those holding others in bondage, as possibly spurring “slave revolts” in one way or another. Among the unique features of race in Maryland was that in both absolute numbers and percentage terms the state had the largest free Black population of any other that sanctioned slavery. In Montgomery County by the 1840s one of every five Blacks was free.<sup>3</sup> Columbia University scholar Barbara Jeanne Fields noted that the juxtaposition of free Blacks and those enslaved “lent slavery a defensive strain in Maryland [and] slavery on the defensive could be especially overbearing, arbitrary, and vindictive.” So alarmed by growing numbers of free Blacks, the state sought to curtail manumissions, forbidding the practice altogether in 1860. And if “excess” enslaved workers could no longer be freed, the alternative was sale south—a dreadful prospect, often splitting families.

The history of slavery is exceedingly complex and variable over time and place. In general, it figured importantly in our county in ways both overt and subtle, widespread and at the same time somewhat limited. However variable it may have been, it fundamentally was the holding of people in bondage to extract labor against their will. The MCPS school namesakes who did just that were in equal measure men of their times yet among a privileged few who relied upon slavery and had both the means and inclination to do so. And while slavery came to an end in Maryland in 1864, underfunded segregated schools, restrictive racial covenants in housing, and other discriminatory legacies had deep and lasting consequences that diminished opportunities for Black people for generations. Like much in the past that reverberates today, Montgomery County’s history with slavery should not be considered a closed chapter.

#### Main sources:

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<sup>3</sup> The lives of free Blacks were very circumscribed in a host of ways, including not being allowed to vote. A leading authority, the University of Maryland’s Ira Berlin, succinctly titled his book on the subject *Slaves Without Masters*. Colonization, or repatriation to Africa of free Blacks, he wrote, “quickly became the *idée fixe* of a generation mindful of the evil effects of slavery...but unable to conceive of alternative patterns of race relations.” Its supporters included Lincoln for much of his early presidency as well MCPS school namesakes Montgomery Blair and Francis Scott Key.