

**September 27, 2015**  
**Plunder in Our Backyard – 69 Slaves Flee Corotoman**

**Reading**

My reading is from the historical highway marker on the Lancaster County side of the Norris Bridge, one of 19 created for the Virginia Bicentennial of the American War of 1812 Commission, each of which has a text specific to an aspect of the war on one side and this summary of the war on the other.

“Impressment of Americans into British service and the violation of American ships were among the causes of America’s War of 1812 with the British, which lasted until 1815. Beginning in 1813, Virginians suffered from a British naval blockade of the Chesapeake Bay and from British troops plundering the countryside by the Bay and along the James, Rappahannock, and Potomac rivers. The Virginia militia deflected a British attempt to take Norfolk in 1813 and engaged British forces throughout the war. By the end of the war, more than 2000 enslaved African Americans in Virginia had gained their freedom aboard British ships.”

**Plunder in Our Backyard**

As a new Virginian, I’ve been reading a lot of Virginia history, and I was excited as only a history buff can be when I realized that the book that won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for History was partially set close to our new home. *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia* by Alan Taylor devotes considerable attention to Corotoman, Robert Carter’s plantation.

Corotoman is in the Fellowship’s back yard. The main buildings were at Weems – eight miles from UUFR by road, but two miles as the crow flies. Carter’s 7,000-acre plantation encompassed all the land between Carter’s Creek and the Corotoman River, extending inland to about Black Stump Road, and including the housing development Hill’s Quarters, named after a section of the plantation.

In the 80 years between Robert Carter’s death and the War of 1812, the plantation and its slaves passed undivided to his son John, grandson

Charles, and great-grandson George, and by the time of the war, it had just been divided between his great, great grandchildren – Mary and Charles. Mary’s husband, Joseph C. Cabell, managed Corotoman as an absentee landlord from his own plantation in Nelson County, 150 miles west of Corotoman.

The War of 1812 caught the British with their troops and navy tied up with Napoleon. In 1813 the British sent a few ships to the Chesapeake Bay to blockade ports and capture ships, particularly privateers. The reverse side of the historical marker at Norris Bridge, titled “Capture of the Dolphin,” tells that the British seized four American privateers out of Baltimore on April 3, 1813 “at the mouth of the Corrotoman River” in “one of the largest naval engagements in Virginia waters.”

Captains of British ships patrolling the Chesapeake Bay had to send men ashore from time to time to replenish food and water. They needed river pilots and guides on land, and captains found the occasional runaway slave helpful. There was an ambiguous policy that the British should not entice slaves away from their masters, but a slave aiding the British should not be left at the mercy of his master. This was a sensitive issue; the slave trade in the British Empire had just been abolished in 1807.

Ship captains were improvising on the spot, rewarding helpful slaves with freedom. Increasingly, a slave would seek out a British ship and, once on board and free, arrange to have a boat from the ship go ashore to bring back his family to share in that freedom.

By the end of the summer of 1813, the British had taken 200 Virginia slaves to Bermuda, where, as free men, they were paid dockworkers. Pointedly, the British were not taking these now free people to the Caribbean to be sold into slavery on an island sugar plantation where slavery would not be abolished for another 20 years.

Two hundred years later, most of us are cheering for the slaves. For Virginians, though, slaves were essential to working their plantations. Slaves were Virginians’ wealth, their capital and their children’s inheritance, particularly for daughters. Understandably, Virginians saw their slaves as kidnapped – captured – stolen – carried off.

Alan Taylor, a modern historian, sees the slaves as “escaping” and “eloping.” Another historian, Stuart Butler, who spoke at the dedication of the Dolphin marker and whom I will quote soon, sees the slaves as fleeing to freedom, and titled his 2007 article in the *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, “Slave Flight in the Northern Neck During the War of 1812.”

1814 brought a change to the British campaign. Napoleon abdicated, freeing up British resources for the war with America. The aggressive Admiral Cochrane became the naval commander, and he was sending more ships and men to the Chesapeake Bay, although the major force would not arrive until July.

Cochrane issued the proclamation printed in the Order of Service. As you can see, he would set up a British base on Tangier Island to house slaves and their families, recruit some slaves into the Colonial Marines, and send the rest to Halifax. He printed 1,000 copies for distribution among slaves in the Chesapeake Bay area.

Now for the “in our backyard” part – this is a story local people know, but it was new to me. As Stuart Butler wrote: “Four barges came up Carter’s Creek in pursuit of a vessel loaded with flour. They landed on the plantation’s shores and began to plunder and remove slaves,” taking 69 slaves and 60 head of cattle.

Alan Taylor tells the story a little differently: “On April 18, four British barges entered Carter’s Creek in pursuit of two merchant sloops.” The plantation overseer saw them in the creek. He drove all the stock into the woods and sent the slaves off to the new slave quarters that had been established five months earlier in a wooded swamp at the head of one of the prongs of Carter’s Creek, called Deadman’s Bones.

Taylor continues: “But three defiant young men bolted to join the raiders. At about midnight on April 21-22, the British came back with the three escaped slaves to retrieve their relatives and friends. The slaves helped the British evade the guards set at the mouth of Carter’s Creek by going up the Corotoman River to Taylor Creek.” The three

escapees crossed the neck of land to the slave quarters, awoke family members and friends, and led the slaves back to the barges.

Corotoman lost 69 slaves – 10 men, 14 women and 45 children. This was the largest number lost from any plantation during the War of 1812. Interestingly, although 30 of the children were six-year-olds and younger, Cabell's father-in-law wrote a year later, "Seventy of the best hands were shamefully carried off in the night."

The stories differ in two ways – Butler describes a single raid, in contrast to Taylor's two-stage get-away. And Butler wrote of taking 60 head of cattle, while Taylor says the cattle were driven into the woods. In fact, an article by Craig Kilby and Mike Lyman in the 2013 *Northern Neck Magazine* tells of the April 18<sup>th</sup> raid in Carter's Creek that yielded 250 barrels of flour from two ships along with 60 sheep from Pop's Castle in White Stone, just off James Wharf Road, and the April 22<sup>nd</sup> raid at Corotoman that carried away 60 sheep and the 69 slaves.

Barges are a fascinating part of the War of 1812. British war ships carried barges on deck to be used in landing operations in the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers. A barge was 36 feet long and rowed by 12 men, and the British had about 65 barges in the Chesapeake during the war. Four barges carrying 60 cows and 69 people is a stretch. In fact, British papers including ship logs of Admiral Cockburn, commander of that Bay operation, confirm that a total of 60 sheep were taken on the Lancaster raids, likely on the first raid.

To finish quickly, there were continued incursions. The British moved on from Lancaster County to the Potomac River plantations. British raids intensified in response to the American sacking of Toronto in Canada.

The war got nasty. Instead of just receiving runaway slaves, British troops went ashore again and again in Northumberland County to seize slaves, vandalize and burn buildings, and carry off tobacco, flour and animals. It was something of a scorched earth policy, and the words pillage and plunder have real meaning here. The British got word out that plantation owners who didn't resist or run away would be spared, and there was no opposition.

Famously, British troops sailed up Patuxent River and marched overland to easily defeat American forces in Bladensburg on August 24 and burn public buildings in Washington. Also, famously, the British fleet went on to Baltimore, landed troops, and shelled Fort McHenry until, on the morning of September 14,

“The rockets red glare, bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.”

The British withdrew from Baltimore but there was more destruction in Northumberland County before the fleet left the Chesapeake to sail to New Orleans. The war in Virginia still wasn't over, and a remnant of the fleet remained to harass the Americans. In December the British burned buildings in Tappahannock, fought the Virginia militia at Farnham Church, and carried away Richmond County slaves.

Another remnant of the fleet stopped in Georgia, where many more slaves came over to the British. Famously, the Battle of New Orleans, that was fought after the Treaty of Ghent ended the war, was a glorious American victory.

It is estimated that 5,000 enslaved African Americans escaped to the British, with Virginia losing more than 2,000. Of the 5,000, there was some death by disease, and British records showed 300 working as sailors and dockworkers, 3200 sent to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and 1000 to Trinidad. Slaves sent to Halifax were not welcomed, conditions there were harsh, there was starvation, and mortality was high. Trinidad was more welcoming; slaves, mostly from Georgia, were given fertile land, and their descendants are still in Trinidad.

The British expected reparations from the Americans for starting what they saw as a frivolous war, but the Treaty of Ghent disallowed any compensation. The Americans persisted in seeking payments for slaves carried away, and the dispute went to arbitration by the Russian Czar, who eventually ruled that the Americans were entitled to indemnification. The British gave the United States \$1,204,960 for distribution to slave owners, and in 1828 – 14 years after his loss, Joseph C. Cabell was awarded \$20, 640, returning the heavily indebted Corotoman to solvency.

Records that Cabell submitted are at the National Archives in a file, "Notes Relative to the Claim for Compensation for Slaves Carried Away from Corotoman by the British Forces in the Late War." Alan Taylor used the file to create the Appendix in his book, "Corotoman Enslaved Families," naming each of the 69 and, for each, showing the age and family relationships.

I've done all this from books, but I've begun to talk with local historians, and learned that we'll be hearing more about this topic.

- Dr. Patrick Heffernan has been identifying the 1,000 persons who were slaves at the Corotoman plantation at some point in its 200-year history. On October 15 Dr. Heffernan will present "The Slave Histories of Corotoman" in Kilmarnock at the Mary Ball Washington Museum and Library's Annual Meeting.
- The Lancaster Library Book Group may be featuring Alan Taylor's book at its January meeting, which means there will be nine copies in the library.
- And a group is in the planning stages for a historical highway marker commemorating the 69 Corotoman slaves' flight to the British and freedom.