

“Employed to Advantage”

Hiring and the Enslaved People of Arlington

By Jessica Kaplan

On July 1, 1856, farmer Richard Southern hired Henry Speaks, a twenty-eight-year-old man enslaved by Arlingtonian William D. Nutt. Nutt lived near what is now the East Falls Church metro station and enslaved twelve individuals. Speaks was described by Southern as “an able-bodied farm hand, jet black, medium size, and of good regular features” and a “valuable farmer and gardener and had no disease nor infirmity of any sort” (Fig. 1). Speaks worked Southern’s land near Wilson Boulevard and Harrison Street. For his labor, Southern paid Nutt \$75 per year for the period of September 15, 1857, to September 15, 1862.¹

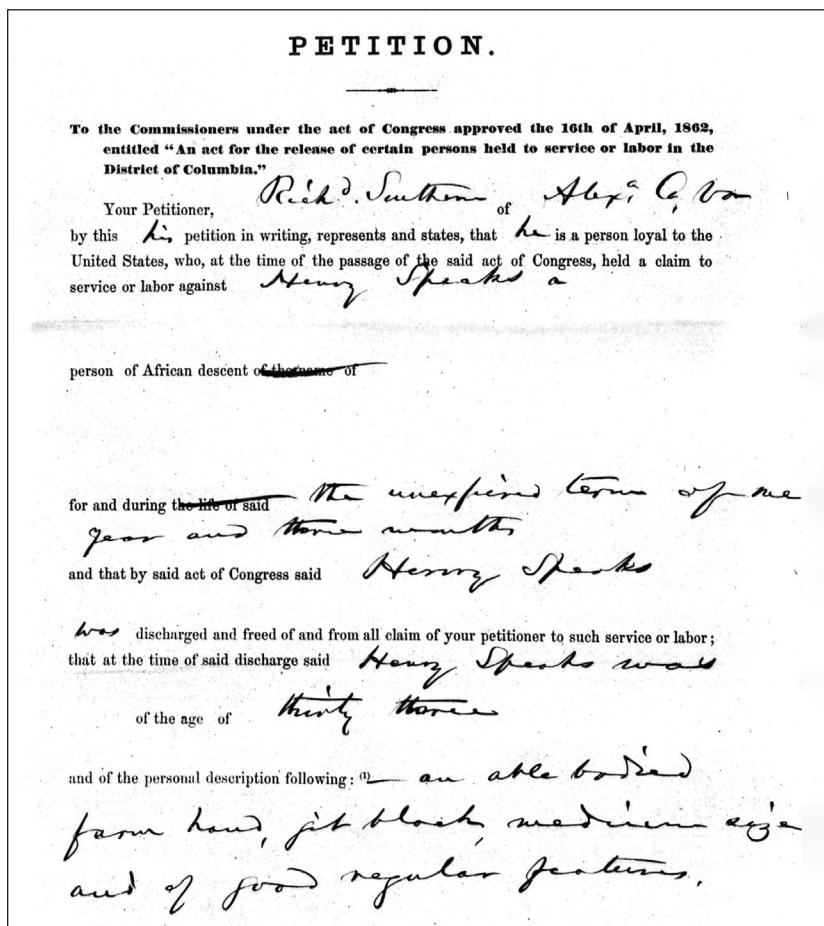
This type of transaction was known as hiring or hiring out. An enslaved person would be temporarily leased by their enslaver or hiree to perform agreed upon work for another enslaver, called a hirer, who paid remuneration for their labor. Most people do not think of hiring when considering enslavement, but it has a long and well-documented history.

It is likely that hiring in Arlington began as a routine among neighbors and family members who needed short-term help with planting and harvesting their crops, butchering, shearing, construction projects, cooking, and more. Hires would barter for services or charge by the hour, day, week, or job. As the hiring practice became more institutionalized, enslavers began renting their bondspeople for longer terms; most often for a year, less commonly for three or more years. Costs varied depending on the skill set of the hired hand, the type of work required, and the length of time their services were needed (Fig. 2).

In Arlington and throughout the Upper South (Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina), the hiring practice became entrenched and ubiquitous

between the Revolutionary War and the end of the eighteenth century. A combination of population growth among the enslaved community and the shift from less labor-intensive tobacco cultivation to mixed farming brought about the change. Growing tobacco required many workers, whereas the farming of mixed crops like wheat, corn, vegetables, and fruit needed fewer hands. As enslavers faced an increased workforce, fewer enslaved workers were needed. George Washington famously observed this phenomenon at Mount Vernon in 1799: "It is

Fig. 1: Arlington enslaver, Richard Southern, requests compensation for freeing Henry Speaks in a District of Columbia Slave Owner Petition, 1862.



Courtesy of Ancestry.com.

demonstratively clear...I have more working Negroes by a full moiety, than can be employed to advantage.”²

Though a few enslavers freed their surplus workers, most chose to either sell their chattel through slave traders to the Lower South (Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi) or to hire them out. From 1800 to 1860, a deeply destructive domestic slave trade took hold in which roughly one million enslaved people were separated from their loved ones and sold by human traffickers from the Upper South to the Lower South. Individuals, especially the young, were transported in chains to these cotton- and sugarcane-growing states where the need for laborers was expanding (Fig. 3).

Why Hire Out?

Profit was the main reason Arlington's enslavers leased out their excess enslaved people; however, several other factors entered the mix. Hires were not required to pay for clothing, shelter, or taxes for the lease term, a considerable savings. Heirs often hired out during the settlement period of a relative's estate to insure a steady stream of income and fewer expenses. Enslavers facing financial difficulties could use rental income to bolster their earnings, especially during hard times. This was especially true for widows and single women who often lacked other sources of income. In the 1860 US Census Slave Schedules, Catherine Minor (Yorktown High School area), the widow of William Minor, fit this category. She hired out a nine-year-old boy to Dr. Thomas Frye, a fourteen-year-old girl to Robert Ball, and a twenty-five-year-old man to William Ross.³

Arlington's enslavers hired out their bondspeople for more cynical reasons as well. Many sought to rid themselves of "troublemakers" or

SERVANTS WANTED TO HIRE.—The undersigned wishes to hire for the year 1852, at his residence in Alexandria county, Va., a **SLAVE WOMAN**, to cook, wash, and iron for a small family, and to help with the milking; also, a **GIRL** of from 12 to 15 years of age. For good servants, fair wages and a comfortable home will be given. Address soon, through the Washington Post Office, dec 17—3.* **W. D. WALLACH.**

Fig. 2: Alexandria Gazette advertisement for the hire of a "slave woman" and a "girl" for a year, December 18, 1851.

as a form of punishment. How often this occurred remains unclear. Robert E. Lee, after inheriting Arlington House, the estate of his late father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, leased many of his enslaved hands he considered troublemakers. In his will, Custis promised freedom to the enslaved people at Arlington House within five years. Lee felt he could hold them for the full five years. The bondspeople vehemently disagreed, believing they were free after Custis's death in 1857. Complaints were common and many fled the estate. In retribution, Lee hired out eleven of his sixty-two enslaved people in 1858. By the middle of 1859, Lee had hired out almost all of his prime field hands leaving only "old men and boys" as laborers at Arlington House.⁴

Fig. 3: A page from Lewis Miller's Sketchbook of Landscapes in the State of Virginia depicts a coffle of enslaved people on a forced march to Tennessee, ca. 1850.



Courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

In a well-publicized incident, siblings Wesley and Mary Norris and George Parks chose to self-emancipate themselves. They left Arlington House and made their way towards Pennsylvania and freedom but were apprehended and returned to Lee. Wesley wrote a statement published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in which he described what came next,

In his [Lee's] presence, we were tied firmly to posts by a Mr. Gwin, our overseer, who was ordered by Gen. Lee to strip us to the waist and give us fifty lashes each, excepting my sister, who received but twenty.... [A] county constable, was called in, who gave us the number of lashes ordered; Gen. Lee, in the meantime, stood by, and frequently enjoined Williams to lay it on well, an injunction which he did not fail to heed; not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh, Gen. Lee then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine, which was done.”⁵ (Fig. 4)

As further punishment, Lee hired out all three in Southern Virginia, where the men were employed in difficult and dangerous work with the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. In 1863, they fled to approaching Union troops.

Hirers

The reasons men and women hired enslaved people's labor varied with the class and needs of the temporary enslaver. Throughout Virginia, many did not have the cash necessary to purchase enslaved hands. Instead, they hired chattel, perhaps for shorter terms, a more affordable option. This also enabled them to “increase their standing in society” by

Fig. 4: Wesley Norris describes his brutal beating at the direction of Robert E. Lee in this *National Anti-Slavery Standard* article, April 14, 1866.

ROBERT E. LEE.
—
HIS BRUTALITY TO HIS SLAVES.
It has frequently been represented by the friends and admirers of Robert E. Lee, late an officer in the rebel army, that, although a slaveholder, his treatment of his chattels was invariably kind and humane. The subjoined statement, taken from the lips of one of his former slaves, indicates the real character of the man :
“My name is Wesley Norris ; I was born a slave on the plantation of George Park Custis ; after the death of Mr. Custis, Gen. Lee, who had been made executor of the estate, assumed control of the slaves, in number about seventy ; it was the general impression among the slaves of Mr. Custis that on his death they should be forever free ; in fact this statement had been made to them by Mr. C. years before ; at his death we were informed by Gen. Lee that by the conditions of the will we must remain slaves for five years ; I remained with

Courtesy of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.

appearing to be an enslaver.⁶ Historian John Zaborney argues that the hiring system in Virginia built white solidarity and further entrenched the slaveholding system, as white people of all classes were able to play a role in the enslavement system.⁷

Hirers often rented enslaved laborers for large construction projects including building a new home, a plantation, or a large transportation or industrial enterprise. When John Mason began constructing his lavish plantation on Analostan Island (Roosevelt Island), he placed advertisements for twelve to fifteen “stout Negro workers” in the newspaper.⁸ In 1839, James Roach advertised for fifty men and twenty boys for the “ensuing year” for an undisclosed project. He oversaw building of the Alexandria Canal and ran a brickmaking factory, so either enterprise may have needed workers.⁹ Enslaved hands leased to

industrial or large-scale projects were often given the most tedious, dangerous, and onerous tasks, basically those that whites shunned.

Some enslavers chose hiring to avoid selling their chattel to the “Deep South.” The brutality and inhumanity of the domestic slave trade was well-known. Enslaver Eliza Sommers specified in her 1836 will (executed in 1848) that her bondspeople were only to be sold “to persons residing in Virginia, Maryland, or the District of Columbia,” and they were not to be removed from those places. In addition, she stated, “I positively forbid them being sold to the traders.”¹⁰

One of Eliza’s enslaved men was Henry Speaks. Eliza’s executors sold Speaks to Arlingtonian William D. Nutt, and, adhering to Eliza’s wishes, Nutt hired Speaks out to Richard Southern instead of selling him South. Henry was probably relieved to remain in Arlington where his mother, Letty Speaks, and brother, Josias, resided, despite being sent to work for yet another enslaver.¹¹

The Hired-Out Hand

The type of work required of hired hands and their living situation affected how enslaved individuals became accustomed to their

temporary homes. Those in more urban areas like the District of Columbia probably experienced more freedom of movement, but the opposite could be true for those employed in a more rural environment or as a single enslaved person. Isolation, restricted movement, and loneliness might be the result. Employment in an industrial setting like a brickyard or railroad could be grueling and dangerous.

Regardless of where an enslaved person was forced to work, employment away from home meant separation from loved ones. It's natural to assume grief and depression could result for the hired hand as well as the family left behind. For those with small children, the emotional toll must have been excruciating. Building new relationships in a temporary home could also be difficult, especially when dealing with enslavers who had little interest in their well-being. Overwork and beatings were commonly the result. For Black women, there was the additional threat of sexual exploitation.

Some enslaved individuals attempted to control the hiring out process and improve their working conditions through negotiations. An example of this is "Merridy" an enslaved man hired out by Mary and Robert E. Lee of Arlington House to a Mrs. Cooper in 1838.¹² Merridy confounded and exasperated Mrs. Cooper by refusing to cook for her family. She wrote a letter to Molly Custis (the Lees were living in St. Louis) about Merridy's behavior,

I am obliged to send Merridy to you as he is so unmanageable I can do nothing with him...he positively objects to cooking saying he is sick which I cannot think is the case as well as he looks. I have enquired into his complaints and find they are night fever, which he says being over the fire will raise. He has never cooked at all since he has been here except yesterday our Sunday dinner which is always cold meat, and potatoes was all he had to cook.... To day in a like accidental manner I found it convenient for him to cook but he objected indeed refused on the plea of being sick and finished off by saying I had hired him for a dining room servant and he could not cook.¹³

Mrs. Cooper sent Merridy temporarily back to the Arlington House. When confronted by Molly Custis about his conduct, Merridy stated,

“[H]e would not be trampled upon (meaning I suppose [??]) by nobody.” Molly threatened to hire him out as a farm laborer, but he remained uncowed, “[H]e stands in no fear,” wrote Molly.¹⁴

Merridy’s recalcitrant behavior was not uncommon among people resisting their enslavement, especially when hired out. If Merridy played his cards right, he had a real chance of gaining more favorable terms of service. Merridy may have assumed, with the Lees in St. Louis, that his refusal to cook would be met with few repercussions and that a hirer such as Mrs. Cooper had less power over him than the Lees.

1860 Census

The 1860 US Federal Census Slave Schedules for Arlington provides a snapshot of hiring in the region. It’s the only US Census that recorded leasing information including the names of hirers, hirees, and the ages and gender of enslaved people. By 1860, leasing out chattel had become so standard in states with enslavement that the federal census now documented it (Fig. 5).

The statistics taken from the 1860 slave schedules reveal interesting facts about the system of hiring in Arlington. Of the fifty-one Arlingtonians who appeared on the slave schedule, 45 percent employed enslaved people, 22 percent hired out bondspeople, and 33 percent did not participate in the leasing system. Hiring was practiced by two-thirds of Arlington’s enslavers and fully accepted among them. Roughly half of all hirers leased only one enslaved person. Thomas Antisell (Air Force Memorial on Columbia Pike) hired an eighteen-year-old girl from Robert E. Lee, probably to work as a house servant. Some enslavers like William Ross (Rosslyn) and Moses Febrey (Ashlawn) employed two to four enslaved laborers for their farms, while a few such as Nicholas Febrey (Westover) and A. E. Addison (Addison Heights) used enslaved laborers in addition to their already established enslaved workforce.

Statistics on enslaved hands involved in the hiring system in the 1860 slave schedules are not as enlightening. Unlike their white enslavers, none of the fifty-one enslaved people are named. Their identities consisted of an age, a gender, and whether they were black or mulatto, stripping them of more humanizing features. Females and males were hired out at roughly the same rates despite a slightly larger number of enslaved males in the county.¹⁵ Enslavers leased sixteen children who

Fig. 5: 1860 US Census Slave Schedule for Alexandria County (Arlington). Beside many enslavers are the notations "Emp" or employed by and "Owner." The nameless enslaved people are designated by sex, age, and color.

Page No. 126

SCHEDULE 2.—Slave Inhabitants in ~~the County of Arlington~~ in the County of ~~Alexandria~~ State of ~~Virginia~~ ~~on the 31 day of May~~, 1860. D. M. French, Ass't Marshal.

NAME OF SLAVE OWNERS.	DESCRIPTION.						NAME OF SLAVE OWNERS.	DESCRIPTION.						NAME OF SLAVE OWNERS.							
	Number of Slave.	Age.						Deaf & dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	Number of Slave.	Age.	Age.					Deaf & dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	Number of Slave.	Deaf & dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	Number of Slave.		
		2	3	4	5	6					7	8	9								
1. Mrs. B. J. Page* Emp	1	9	M	13.																	
2. Mrs. Wm. W. Davis, Va.	1	9	M	13.																1	
3. Mrs. H. P. Allen, Emp	1	9	M	13.																2	
4. Mrs. John Campbell, Emp	1	26	F	13.																3	
5. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	35	F	13.																4	
6.	1	35	F	13.																5	
7.	1	11	F	13.																6	
8.	1	5	M	M																7	
9.	1	1	M	13.																8	
10. Mr. L. Welch* Emp	1	10	F	13.																9	
11. Mrs. C. Brown, Emp	1	70	M	13.																10	
12. Mrs. C. Campbell, Emp	1	35	F	13.																11	
13. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	11	M	13.																12	
14. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	11	M	13.																13	
15. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	35	M	13.																14	
16. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	F	13.																15	
17. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	22	M	13.																16	
18. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	15	F	13.																17	
19. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	13	F	13.																18	
20. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	12	M	13.																19	
21. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	14	F	13.																20	
22. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	15	M	13.																21	
23. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	15	M	13.																22	
24. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	18	F	13.																23	
25. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	17	M	13.																24	
26. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	F	13.																25	
27. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	M	13.																26	
28. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	17	F	13.																27	
29. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	13	F	13.																28	
30. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	14	M	13.																29	
31. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	12	F	13.																30	
32. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	14	M	13.																31	
33. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	F	13.																32	
34. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	M	13.																33	
35. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	17	F	13.																34	
36. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	M	13.																35	
37. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	15	F	13.																36	
38. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	13	M	13.																37	
39. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	12	F	13.																38	
40. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	12	M	13.																39	
41. Mrs. J. S. Powers	1	16	F	13.																40	
No. of owners, _____		No. of male slaves, _____				No. of females slaves, _____				No. of children, _____				No. deaf and dumb, _____				No. lame, _____			
No. of houses, _____		No. of male slaves, _____				No. of females slaves, _____				No. manumitted, _____				No. blind, _____				No. idiotic, _____			
Total slaves, _____																					

were under sixteen years old. John Febrey (Upton Hill) hired out an unaccompanied eight-year-old girl and Thomas B. Frye (Chain Bridge), a farmer and doctor, leased a nine-year-old boy. Two hired out mothers along with their babies and toddlers.

Beyond the statistics, the census reveals small stories. Several white farmers originally from northern states hired out enslaved people: Sewell B. Corbett (New York), Henry S. Wunder (Pennsylvania), William B. Lacy (New York), and Elizabeth Jenks (Massachusetts). These newcomers were part of an influx of “Yankees” who moved to Arlington in the mid-nineteenth century in search of inexpensive land and a new start. Many brought modern farming techniques to the area and fresh economic ideas. Northerners also came with varying views on enslavement. Some historians believe these newcomers “did not use slaves” when in fact the 1860 census shows they did, mostly by hiring them from friends and neighbors.¹⁶ Corbett, who lived just south of Columbia Pike, hired a six-year-old girl from his neighbor William B. Lacy. A twenty-three-year-old woman leased by Corbett from Anthony Fraser of Green Valley meant the child had an enslaved adult to provide a modicum of comfort.

On August 1, 1860, as a wedding gift, William H. Ross and his wife Carolyn were given land near Fort Myer Drive in what is now Rosslyn. They named their farm “Ross Lynn” which was eventually shortened to Rosslyn. William appeared on the 1860 slave schedule having hired five enslaved men and women to work on his property. Today, there is an annual event at Dark Star Park that celebrates the day Ross acquired his land in Rosslyn. Forgotten are the enslaved people who helped make his venture possible.

Conclusion

At the start of the Civil War, hiring out was an established tradition among Arlington’s slaveholders. Hiring enabled enslavers to extend the system of profiting off the backs of their bondspeople by filling the labor needs of nonslaveholding neighbors and friends throughout the region. It also helped these same enslavers feel virtuous for not selling their chattel South. For the enslaved people of Arlington, hiring out was just another form of enslavement that exposed them to the control of others.

About the Author

Jessica Kaplan co-coordinates the AHS and Black Heritage Museum of Arlington project, Memorializing the Enslaved in Arlington. She wrote this article using material uncovered during research. Jessica is also the editor of the AHS Magazine and a six-term board member of the AHS.

Endnotes

1. Ancestry.com, “District of Columbia, US, Slave Owner Petitions, 1862.”
2. George Washington, “Letter from George Washington to Robert Lewis,” August 17, 1799. “Moiety” means half.
3. Ancestry.com, “1860 US Federal Census—Slave Schedules,” Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2010.
4. John Bedell and Andrew Wilkins, National Park Service, “African American Experience Before Emancipation—Historic Context Narrative,” June 2022, 130.
5. Wesley Norris, “Account of Wesley Norris,” *Anti-Slavery Standard*, 1866.
6. *Encyclopedia of Virginia*, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/hiring-out-of-the-enslaved/>.
7. John Zaborney, *Slave Hiring in Virginia*, Louisiana State University Press, 2012.
8. John Mason, *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette*, January 16, 1793.
9. James Roach, *Alexandria Gazette*, December 7, 1838.
10. Ancestry.com, *Virginia, US Wills and Probate Records, 1652–1900*, Eliza Sommers, Alexandria County, District of Columbia, Will Books, Vol 4–6, 1831–1855.
11. FamilySearch.com, Orphan’s Court of Alexandria County, District of Columbia, “Partition of the Personal Estate of Simon Sommers,” January 4, 1838. Letty was freed in 1842.
12. Letter from Molly Lee Fitzhugh Custis to Mary Custis Lee (Arlington House manuscripts, #12643), June 20, 1848. It’s likely that Merridy was Philip Meriday, who appears to have been owned by Robert E. Lee. There is also a lease of a man named Philip Minday, who may very well be Meriday, by Lee in 1852. Finally, the research team at NPS has suggested in their study at ARHO that Meriday may be part of the Meredith family documented at Arlington; the family shows up as Meredith and Merriday. They identified a free Black man named Philip Meredith in the 1860 DC census, who could be the same person—but the Merediths/Merridays were owned by GWP Custis, and it seems clear that Philip Meriday was not.
13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.
15. Ancestry.com, “1860 US Federal Census—Slave Schedules.” Of the 282 enslaved people on the census, 149 were male and 133 were female.
16. Richard H. Abbott, “Yankee Farmers in Northern Virginia, 1840–1860,” *The Virginian Magazine of History and Biography* 76, no. 1 (Jan. 1968), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4247368>.