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A Just and True Return

Pennsylvania's Surviving County Slave Registries, 1780-1826

Article Authors

Cory James Young, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Dataset Creators

Cory James Young, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Description

A Just and True Return (JATR) contains information about more than 6,300 Black people and their enslavers principally taken from extant registries from fifteen Pennsylvania counties: Adams, Allegheny, Bedford, Berks, Bucks, Centre, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Fayette, Lancaster, Northampton, Washington, and Westmoreland. It also includes a handful of records from four counties—Crawford, Franklin, Philadelphia, and York—whose registries have not been located, but which can be partially reconstructed from a variety of other sources. An ongoing project, JATR is the first effort to compile all surviving registration data in a single location and contributes to our understanding of slavery's survival in the northern United States during the early republic.¹

Implemented during the Revolutionary War, Pennsylvania's "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" mandated that enslavers register "any Negro or Mulatto slave or servant for life or till

¹ I would like to thank Arielle Gordon, Colin McCrossan, Christine Grant, Larry Bolin, and Leroy Hopkins for providing research assistance throughout this project, as well as Robert Wright and Ruth Hodge for providing inspiration.

the age of thirty one years” with their county clerk by November 1, 1780 in order to continue holding them in lifetime bondage. A supplemental act passed in 1788 extended this obligation to the children of registered women, granting enslavers six months to register newborns as their property for twenty-eight years. Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition legislation resulted in the construction of an archive that describes thousands and thousands of unfree people: those who were registered as slaves for life and those who were registered as slaves for a term. It was legal to register the children of term-enslaved people as well, until an 1826 state supreme court decision ruled it contrary to the spirit of the law. It is for this reason that the registrations effectively cease in 1826: hereditary term slavery had been struck down.²

Pennsylvania term slavery was a modified form of Black chattel slavery. Enslavers developed the institution through innovative applications of colonial statutes and favorable readings of gradual abolition law. Enslavers treated the young Black people they held in bondage for twenty-eighty years like lifetime slaves, managing them as property rather than as servants and purchasing, separating, and bequeathing them accordingly. When they advertised their sale in newspapers, enslavers were as likely to declare that they owned people with time to serve as they were to declare that they owned their time. Contributing to this elision was the fact that enslavers provided county clerks with the same information about the children they registered as term slaves as the people they had registered as lifetime slaves. Although the Pennsylvania legislature had intended to create clear records distinguishing these two groups, the repetitive act of registering people as property helped to reinscribe existing structures of white supremacy. In an ironic twist, the very legislation that purported to advance slavery’s abolition in Pennsylvania generated thousands of legal documents that codified its existence.

Nearly all of the data in JATR are derived from four kinds of sources, as can be seen in the accompanying citation list. The first are individual registrations, also called returns. These documents were produced by enslavers or their agents and contain the most descriptive information about the people they registered. Significant numbers of returns have survived from Cumberland and Fayette counties. The second are manuscript slave registries. These volumes were produced by clerks and constitute a convenient record of a county’s individual registrations. Some clerks, like those in Chester and Dauphin counties, copied down the returns verbatim, while others, like those in Adams and Washington counties, summarized or tabulated the information. The third are transcribed slave registries. These are copies of manuscript slave registries produced at a later date (likely for the sake of preservation) and are the reason such complete data exist for Allegheny and Lancaster counties. Finally, the fourth are published county histories that summarize or reproduce original records. While these are the least detailed

² *Miller v. Dwilling* 14 Pa 445 (1826). A thoughtful discussion of this case can be found in Joe Smydo, “Unlikely Partners: Collaboration Between Colonizationists and Radical Abolitionists in Washington County, Pennsylvania, during the 1830s” (MA thesis, Duquesne University, 2016), 47-50. I develop the concept of hereditary term slavery in Cory James Young, “From North to Natchez during the Age of Gradual Abolition,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 143, no. 2 (April 2019): 117-128, as well as in Cory James Young, “For Life or Otherwise: Abolition and Slavery in South Central Pennsylvania, 1780-1847” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2021).

sources, they remain invaluable as a record of registered people who lived in far-flung northeastern and southwestern Pennsylvania, or what was then Northampton and Westmoreland counties. I use the phrase “registered people” rather than “enslaved people” to acknowledge that this category contains those who were enslaved for life and those who were enslaved for a term. The phrase also nods to the fact that registered people sometimes used these documents to assert their liberty. In these moments, slave registrations became freedom papers.

3,392 of the 6,312 registrations are complete, meaning that the majority of entries provide the name, place of residence, date of birth, race, and sex of the registered person; the date they were registered; and the name and occupation of their enslavers. Slightly less than two-thirds (3,937) of the entries describe people whom enslavers held in lifetime slavery, whereas more than one-third (2,347) describe children they held in term slavery. Sex is clearly stated in over 90% (5,723) of entries with an almost perfectly balanced sex ratio (2,859 males and 2,864 females). For the 10% (589) of entries that do not clearly state sex, given names are a useful proxy. Race is clearly stated as either “Negro” or “Mulatto” in over 90% (5,701) of entries, with the vast majority of registered people—85% (4,844)—being described as “Negro.” Although only 15% (857) of registered people are described as “Mulatto,” this is not evenly spread across space and time. For example, term-enslaved people were more likely to be registered as “Mulatto” than their parents who were enslaved for life. Term-enslaved people were more likely to be registered individually, whereas those who were enslaved for life were often registered as part of a racially monolithic group of “Negroes.”

The two-thousand-plus registrations of term-enslaved people highlight the danger of relying on federal census records to analyze the transition from slavery to freedom in Pennsylvania during the age of gradual abolition. U.S. marshals, forced to choose between sorting Black people into the column for “slaves” or the column for “all other free persons,” obscured the existence of a generation whose legal status resembled lifetime slavery in its heredity, longevity, and racist restriction.³ JATR is an argument for the transformation, rather than the elimination, of Black bondage in early national Pennsylvania.

The title of the project comes from a Cumberland County term slave registration. In late summer 1788, a Shippensburg farmer named Robert Peebles provided “a Just and true return of the names and ages of my Negro’s” to the county clerk. Under Pennsylvania law, Palm, Ruth, Nell, Pegg, and Jo belonged to Robert until they turned twenty-eight. It is rare that these returns clearly identify family relationships, but there are often clues. For instance, Robert only registered a single person as a lifetime slave in 1780—a twenty-three-year-old woman named Peg—suggesting that the five young people he claimed as his property were her children. This dataset, then, provides a rich starting point for the reconstruction of Black family trees. JATR is intended to serve as a kind of reparative justice. The data contained within these

³ For the limitations of early U.S. federal censuses as indicators of freedom status, see James J. Gigantino II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 170-1.

documents—these slave returns—must be made accessible to the descendants of those whom they purport to describe.

Dates of Data Collection

2016-2022

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Pennsylvania, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina

Temporal Coverage

1780-1845

Document Types

Census or Register

Sources

Adams County Term Slave Registry

Register of Negroes and Mulattoes, 1800-1820, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Adams/r47-SlaveRecords-AdamsInterface.htm#AdamsSlave.

Allegheny County Term Slave Registry

Schenkel, Edwin N. "The Negro in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania from 1789 to 1813." Unpublished Manuscript. 1913. Detre Library and Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.

Bedford County Slave Registrations

Records of Negro and Mulatto Children and Miscellaneous Slave Records, 1780-1834, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Bedford/r47-SlaveRecords-Bedford3rdGroup.htm#bedford3.

Berks County Slave Registry

Schaeffer, Paul N. "Slavery in Berks County." *The Historical Review of Berks County* 9, no. 4 (July 1941): 110-5, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/siebert/id/18980>.

Bucks County Slave Registry

Bucks County Register of Slaves, [ca. 1783-1830], RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Bucks/r47-SlaveRecords-BucksInterface.htm.

Centre County Term Slave Registrations

Birth Returns for Negroes and Mulattoes, 1803-1820, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Centre/r47-SlaveRecords-CentreInterface.htm#CentreSlave.

Chester County Slave Registry

"A Census of the Slaves in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1780-1815," Box 3, Folder 8, Slavery Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection (MS 717), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Crawford County Records

Bates, Samuel P., R. C. Brown, and John Brandt Mansfield. *History of Crawford County, Pennsylvania, Containing a History of the County; its Townships, Towns, Villages, Schools, Churches, Industries, Etc.; Portraits of Early Settlers and Prominent Men; Biographies; History of Pennsylvania; Statistical and Miscellaneous Matter, Etc. Etc.* Chicago, IL: Warner, Beers & Co., 1885, 293.

Cumberland County Slave Registrations

Slave Returns, Clerk of Courts Records, Cumberland County Archives, Carlisle, PA, <https://ccweb.ccpa.net/archives/Inventory?PSID=541>; Returns for Negro and Mulatto Slaves, 1780-1781, 1788-1811, 1813-1821, 1824-1826, 1833, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Cumberland/r47-SlaveRecords-CumberlandBOCC.htm#cumberland2.

Cumberland County Lifetime Slave Registry

Slave and Slave Owners Register, Clerk of Courts Records, Cumberland County Archives, Carlisle, PA <https://ccweb.ccpa.net/archives/Holdings?PSID=1819>.

Cumberland County Term Slave Registry

Slave and Slave Owners Register, Clerk of Courts Records, Cumberland County Archives, Carlisle, PA, <https://ccweb.ccpa.net/archives/Holdings?PSID=1819>.

Dauphin County Term Slave Registry

Dauphin County Pennsylvania Slave Records, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

Delaware County Term Slave Registry

Delaware County Slave Dockets, in the possession of the Delaware County Bar Association, on display at Delaware County Community College, 2022,
<https://www.dccc.edu/dockets-exhibit>.

Ashmead, Henry Graham. *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884, 203-5.

Fayette County Term Slave Registrations

Birth Records for Negroes and Mulattoes, 1788-1826, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA,
www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Fayette/r47-SlaveRecords-FayetteInterface.htm#fayette.

Franklin County Records

"Negroes - Indentures & Manumissions, 1792-1854," Box 11A-B, Folder 2A, Historical Society of Pennsylvania miscellaneous collection (Collection 425), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Lancaster County Lifetime Slave Registry

Slaves in Lancaster County in 1780, MG-240: African American Records Collection, Series 1: Slave Register, Folder 17: Handwritten Copy of Slave Register, LancasterHistory, Lancaster, PA.

Lancaster County Term Slave Registry

Eshleman, J. B., comp. "Record of the Returns Made in Writing...As Clerk...By Possessors of Negro or Mulatto Children Born After March 1, 1780...John Hubley, clerk, June 7, 1788." Call Number 326 R294p. LancasterHistory, Lancaster, PA.

Lancaster County Term Slave Registrations

Returns of Negro and Mulatto Children born after the year 1780, 1788-1793, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA,
www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Lancaster/r47-SlaveRecords-LancasterReturns.htm#LancasterReturns.

Philadelphia County Records

Historical Society of Pennsylvania miscellaneous collection (Collection 425), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Pennsylvania Abolition Society papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Northampton County Lifetime Slave Registry

Henry, M. S. *History of the Lehigh Valley, Containing a Copious Selection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, Etc. Etc., Relating to its History and Antiquities. With a Complete History of all its Internal Improvements, Progress in the Coal and Iron Trade, Manufactures, Etc.* Easton, PA: Bixler & Corwin, 1860, 97-8.

Mathews, Alfred. *History of Wayne, Pike, and Monroe Counties, Pennsylvania.* Philadelphia, PA: R. T. Peck & Company, 1886, 103-4.

Washington County Slave Registry

Negro Register, 1782-1851 (bulk 1782-1820), RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Washington/r47-SlaveRecords-WashingtonInterface.htm.

Westmoreland County Lifetime Slave Registry

Appendix A in Albert, George Dallas, ed. *History of the County of Westmoreland, Pennsylvania: With Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men.* Philadelphia, PA: L. H. Everts & Co., 1882.

York County Records

Bolin, Larry C. "Slaveholders and Slaves of Adams County." *Adams County History* 9 (2003): 4-92.

Prowell, George R. *History of York County, Pennsylvania.* Vol. 1. Chicago, IL: J. H. Beers & Co., 1907, 591.

Intelligencer, & Weekly Advertiser (Lancaster, PA), 27 Aug 1814, p. 3, Newspapers.com

Methodology

There is no single archive for Pennsylvania's extant county slave registries. Instead, records are scattered throughout multiple repositories, in multiple formats, in at least three states. The Pennsylvania State Archives provide the most centralized collection, including digitized microfilm records from eight counties, but their website lacks metadata and search functionality. Ancestry.com, meanwhile, has made these records searchable, but locks them behind a paywall. Moreover, both of these institutions are missing thousands of records from more than half a dozen counties. The purpose of this project, then, is to aggregate and make freely available data from as many county registries as possible.

JATR began with my discovery that the lifetime and term slave registries as well as hundreds of individual registrations exist for Cumberland County. Not only have these materials survived, but hardworking county archivists have digitized them all. Their labors made this project possible, as my initial lack of anything resembling a data collection plan meant that I had to return to the sources several times. Only once I learned that Lancaster County also boasts a complete set of records did I begin to develop a deliberate method to facilitate comparative analysis. It was also at this point that I began to search for other county slave registries, my interest piqued by their seeming rarity in scholarship on Pennsylvania slavery. One explanation for this oversight is that the registry for Philadelphia has not been located, meaning that the majority of existing studies have relied on a different set of sources.

This search for extant registries required creative guesswork. I mined local histories, county journals, and regional scholarship for citations. I searched databases for references to "RG47," Pennsylvania's code for the records of county governments. I checked the Library of Congress, WorldCat, and ArchiveGrid, and emailed archivists and librarians, clerks and prothonotaries. Each effort pointed in a new direction. Some registries were preserved in historical societies, others in university libraries, and others still in nineteenth-century publications. The lack of uniformity made the process laborious, but the payoff energizing. The dataset has grown fivefold since its inception, expanding from around 1,250 entries in 2016 to more than 6,300 as of publication.

This is a dataset of Pennsylvania's surviving county slave registries, meaning that the data currently replicate the shortcomings of their sources. Since an incomplete registration could be deemed defective, generating a cause of action for a registered person to sue for freedom, I have tried not to obscure this fact by supplying missing data from other sources. The dataset is organized into the following fields:

Registered Person ID

Guaranteed to be unique since each person was only registered once.

Registration County

The county where the person was registered. This can differ from place of residence and modern county. Spelling standardized.

Place of Residence

The city, town, or village in which the registered person resided. This can differ from registration county and modern county. Spelling standardized.

Modern County

The county in which the place of residence is located in the present. This is to account for the fact that there were only eleven counties in 1780, while there are sixty-seven now. For example, Lebanon, now the seat of an eponymous county, was initially located in Lancaster and then

Dauphin counties and consequently appears in both their registries. Distinguishing between “Registration County” and “Modern County” helps convey the geographic breadth of this data.

Registration Date

The date when the enslaver registered the people they claimed as their property. For some of the entries, only the year is known.

Name of Registered Person

Transcribed from the sources. Spelling clarifications are occasionally provided in brackets.

Sex of Registered Person

Male, female, or unspecified as provided by the sources. When unspecified, given name can typically be used to determine an imputed sex.

Race of Registered Person

Taken from the sources with standardized spellings. One exception is the designation “Likely Negro.” This refers to individuals in Bucks and Westmoreland counties who appear in registries that only specified when a person was “Mulatto,” which suggests that all others were “Negro.”

Status of Registered Person

Nearly every registered person in this dataset was being claimed as a lifetime slave or a term slave for twenty-eight years.

Date of Birth of Registered Person

Instances of day-month-year come directly from the sources. When only the year or the month-year is supplied, this was calculated by subtracting a person’s stated age from the registration date. For example, if an October 1780 registration identified a person as nine months old, their date of birth is given as January 1780. If an October 1780 registration identified a person as thirty years old, their date of birth is given as 1750.

Enslaver ID

Cannot be guaranteed to be unique since enslavers could register different people at different times in different places. Identities were determined by name, date of registration, registration county, and census records.

Name of Enslaver

Transcribed from the sources. Spelling clarifications are occasionally provided in brackets.

Sex of Enslaver

Determined by first name, prefix, or title/occupation (e.g. widow, wife, or seamstress). Unlike with the sex of the registered person, this is an imputed category.

Occupation of Enslaver

Transcribed from the sources with standardized spellings.

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Young, Cory James. "A Just and True Return: A Dataset of Pennsylvania's Surviving County Slave Registries" version 2. *Magazine of Early American Datasets* 46 (2022), <https://repository.upenn.edu/mead/46/>.

Linked Data Representation: Enslaved.org

[<https://enslaved.org/visualizedata?type=Dashboard&field=po&proj=just+and+true+return>]

Project Website: <https://coryjamesyoung.com/justandtrue/>

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