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Enslaved Lives Documented in the Slaveholding of James Monroe, Virginia Planter and Political Figure, 1774-1836

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

Enslaved Lives Documented in the Slaveholding of James Monroe is a dataset that provides identifying information about the unfree men, women, and children who labored for James Monroe in the city of Fredericksburg, Virginia; Albemarle, King George, Loudoun, and Westmoreland counties in Virginia; Washington, DC; and New York City. The current dataset incorporates information assembled since 2012 and identifies all the people now known to have been enslaved by James Monroe (b.1758 in Westmoreland County, d.1831 in New York City), a

younger member of the United States' founding generation and its fifth president. Monroe's papers are not entirely published, and this work uses unpublished letters and other documents from disparate sources, as well as those found in *Founders Online*¹ and William & Mary's digital archive.² Published letters are primarily from the seven volumes of *The Papers of James Monroe* published to date,³ providing selected letters from the period prior to Monroe's presidency.

One hundred seventy-eight individuals led lives in Virginia, New York, and Washington, DC while enslaved to James Monroe. The individuals were enslaved by Monroe at his homes and on his plantations from the moment of his father's death in 1774 to 1836, when his own estate was settled. They experienced and contributed to the growth in the young United States in profound ways as individuals and communities, building agricultural and economic systems and creating the physical manifestations of nation-building. The roles they occupied were central to the national and transatlantic economies. Of the unfree people identified here, the majority whose occupations are known fall within roles associated with agriculture. Monroe was a plantation owner, and several generations of enslaved workers toiled to extract profits from tobacco, wheat, and timber from his properties in the Virginia Tidewater and later in the Piedmont. In 1828 those he enslaved saw the dominant cotton industry tear away several families from Highland, James Monroe's plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia, to the labor-hungry cotton plantations of Florida.

Details that emerge from the documents allow us to trace the whereabouts of families and individuals and reveal relationships among the communities, sequential and simultaneous, at Monroe's various properties. Visible in the records are historical facts such as names, ages, and occupations, and for some an imposed monetary valuation in their legally unfree status. In addition to the factual details we enumerate here, we can imagine lived experiences based on the presence and absence of spouses, siblings, and children, and the patterns of everyday lives in routines, seasonal and daily. So much of the scholarship of American slavery has been devoted to reestablishing the facts of what occurred, and who was where at given times: essential components of knowing important truths about millions of lives. The greatest value of facts such as the ones presented in this dataset is that we can use the data to push further and create richer histories and more complete accounts of the majority populations in places such as those claimed by James Monroe.

James Monroe's national prominence and his dual roles as a public figure and a private citizen add a specific dimension to the value of this dataset. While Monroe was a lifelong plantation owner, he also had an official role in creating and expanding the United States. Monroe's prominent public life makes this an unusual and relevant dataset, particularly because it includes rich information about slavery from the time he fought in the American Revolution through appointed and elected terms as Virginia's delegate to the Confederation Congress and the ratifying convention of the Constitution of 1787, U.S. Senator, Washington's minister to France during the French Revolution, multiple-term Governor of Virginia (including the moment of Gabriel's Rebellion, which framed state and federal thinking about slavery, freedom, and fear of Black power), Jefferson's envoy to France in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, ambassador to Great Britain, Secretary of War and Secretary of State, and two-term U.S.

¹ "Founders Online," <http://founders.archives.gov/documents//lib/home/home.xml>.

² "James Monroe Project: The W&M Digital Archive," <https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/22563>.

³ Daniel Preston, ed. *The Papers of James Monroe* vol. 1–7 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003).

President during a period of national expansion, including the Missouri Crisis. The dataset illustrates Monroe's simultaneous role as politician and plantation owner with layered interests in agriculture, the Southern plantation economy, and American capitalism. Monroe and 178 enslaved people participated in systems that shaped the political and economic history of the United States, and it is on the granular level of individual lives and patterns of personal slaveholding that we see the realities of the larger historical trends that formed social and economic foundations of the United States.

James Monroe's Highland is a public historic site interpreting the people and events of Monroe's Piedmont Virginia plantation,⁴ primarily between 1793 and 1828. The dataset compiled at Highland has already been put to work as a core element of its new exhibits: one that opened in September 2021, and a second under development in 2022 and expected to be installed in 2023. The central tenet of Highland's site interpretation is the interconnectedness of personal stories and local events with larger events and themes in U.S. history. This combination of microhistory and macrohistory relies on detailed knowledge of people and place, including individuals Monroe enslaved at Highland and his other properties, especially Oak Hill; the present dataset contributes intimately to meeting this need. The principal mode of Highland's storytelling on both scales is the proximity of stories about the President and enslaved individuals, and the presidency and slavery. Because Highland has the opportunity to reinterpret its narratives and site spaces based on the recent rediscovery of the lost and forgotten 1799 main house, the whole site is currently receiving new interpretation that uses the same spaces for the narratives of all its residents. The co-prioritized treatment of the President and enslaved people's stories in the same places sounds unremarkable, but in the context of Virginia historic sites, often dominated by elite living spaces, this is quietly revolutionary. The dataset contributes to this quietly revolutionary act.

The authors hope that by making the dataset publicly available, other researchers will explore Monroe's intertwined interests in politics, capitalism, and personal slaveholding, and other historic sites and public history programs, as well as educators, will also be able to use the information in public and educational settings.

It is likely that additional research, for some time to come, will continue to modify our understanding of the people Monroe enslaved and will fill in details of their experiences, as well as increase the numbers of individuals we are able to identify.

Dates of Data Collection

2014-2022

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Albemarle County, Virginia

⁴ James Monroe's Highland, <https://highland.org/>.

Fredericksburg, Virginia
King George County, Virginia
New York, New York
Loudoun County, Virginia
Washington, DC
Westmoreland County, Virginia

Temporal Coverage

1774-1836

Document Types

Account Book
Assessment
Bill of Sale
Civil Document
Day Book
Freedom or Emancipation Certificate
Inventory
Inventory or Probate Record
Letter
Life History or Narrative
Payment
Runaway Advertisement
Will and Testament

Sources

"Founders Online: Home." Accessed May 11, 2022.

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents//lib/home/home.xml>.

"James Monroe Project | The W&M Digital Archive."

<https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/22563>.

Preston, Daniel, ed. *The Papers of James Monroe*. Vol. 1–7. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003.

Methodology

This dataset compiles the known documentary record of individuals enslaved by James Monroe from the time of his father's death in 1774 through the dispersal of the President's estate in Loudoun County, Virginia in 1836. It includes people enslaved at Monroe's land and residences between those two moments, including his inherited properties in Westmoreland and King George counties in Virginia, and the primary residences of his adult life in Albemarle and Loudoun counties. Several enslaved people from these locations also appeared in Monroe's households in Washington, DC. Discussion of the enslaved household of James Monroe during his presidency is treated in Matthew Costello's 2020 "The Enslaved Households of President

James Monroe.”⁵ The dataset presented here documents 178 individuals enslaved in Albemarle County, Fredericksburg, King George County, Loudoun County, and Westmoreland County, Virginia; Washington, DC; and New York City.

The first and most complete compilation of documentary references to people enslaved by James Monroe was created by Lori Kimball and Wynne Saffer and emphasized the records associated with Oak Hill in Loudoun County, which was Monroe’s last private home. The work by Kimball and Saffer was first published on the website of the Thomas Balch Library in Loudoun County, Virginia in 2012.⁶ The Balch Library list of documentary references has been foundational in all subsequent work identifying individuals enslaved by Monroe. Kimball and Saffer’s work focused on compiling the documentary references to enslaved people in Monroe’s holdings, beginning with the records in Loudoun County, Virginia. It created an entry for each appearance of an enslaved person in the documentary record, providing an invaluable resource for the additional work identifying individuals. Our efforts at Highland in the past ten years have included the analysis of the Balch Library list and other references to construct a non-redundant list of individual people: men, women, and children enslaved by Monroe who appear in documentary records. Some individuals appear in multiple references, and others appear in only one. In many instances we interpreted single individuals who were the subject of plural references. We have attempted to be conservative in our assessments, especially in stating that multiple references were to a single person; we were careful not to elide references where there was room for the possibility that another individual might be represented. We hope they will be identified in the future. We recognize unnamed individuals in the dataset and acknowledge that there are likely others who are not reflected here due to their invisibility in known documentary records. Individual data points are preserved by the retention of the multiple references to people who appear in more than one document.

We have also relied on the detailed work of Amy Murrell Taylor, who completed a University of Virginia Institute for Public History internship at James Monroe’s Highland (then called Ash Lawn-Highland) in 1997. Her internship project, *From Slavery to Freedom at Ash Lawn-Highland: Preliminary Evidence & Conclusions*, documents the African American community at Highland until about 1920. Murrell reached into historic Albemarle County, Virginia, documents to shed light on enslavement at Monroe’s Highland and land Monroe previously owned that is now part of the University of Virginia, retroactively called Monroe Hill. We returned to those documents in our study and incorporated Taylor’s original identifications.

Research by Miranda Burnett and Martin Violette fills in an essential part of the Highland story in documenting the enslaved families who were forcibly relocated to Jefferson County, Florida after a sale from Highland in 1828. Their work is published in the *Journal of Slavery and Data*

⁵ Matthew Costello, “The Enslaved Households of President James Monroe,” White House Historical Association, February 25, 2020,

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-enslaved-households-of-president-james-monroe>.

⁶ Lori Kimball and Wynne Saffer, “References to People Enslaved by President James Monroe with a Focus on Loudoun County, Virginia,” April 10, 2022,

<https://www.leesburgva.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/8851/635477178326200000>.

Preservation⁷ and their dataset included in the Enslaved.org data. Twelve individuals from our dataset also appear in that of Burnett and Violette.

Additional resources for the current dataset include *Founders Online* and *The Papers of James Monroe*, both of which provide subsets of Monroe's correspondence, a major source of information about the names, occupations, and locations of people enslaved by Monroe.

The data fields for this dataset include Individual, Enslaved Person Record (ID), Location, First Name, Surname, Gender, Age Category, Role Type, Occupation, Status, Valuation, Former Owner, Owner, Source, Source Location/Link, and Notes. They are addressed in depth in the data documentation table that accompanies the dataset, which defines the data fields and includes the range and number of values in the fields where appropriate.

Date of Publication

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TNMLSA>

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

Cite this Article

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⁷ Miranda R. W. Burnett and Martin H. Violette, "Take Them in Families: The Enslaved People of Casa Bianca Plantation, Florida," *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 1, no. 2 (2020): 15-21. <https://doi.org/10.12921/w24n-vd39>.