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Death among the Enslaved and Free in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1853-1869

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

We compiled this dataset by extracting information from the Fairfax County (Virginia) Circuit Court Register of Deaths. In original source material, the register begins in 1853 and ends in 1869, but no recordings were made in the years 1860 through 1864 because of the chaos spread by the Civil War. Further, source material for the period after the war (1865-1869) is

incomplete because of unsettled socioeconomic conditions. The records are part of a wider Fairfax Court Slavery Index project, which is housed at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center in Fairfax, Virginia. Since 2015, court archivists and genealogists have sought to index all enslaved people, free[d] persons of color, and white indentured servants who can be found in the Clerk's Office's historical records, which date from 1742 to 1870. The dataset may assist genealogists in identifying ancestors, as the Virginia Death Register lists names of enslaved people and a familial relationship (mothers' names), facilitating the construction of family trees before 1870.

Across Virginia, clerks of county courts began collecting records on deaths, births, and marriages in 1853 when the Virginia General Assembly mandated that "the clerk of every county and corporation court shall keep three books, to be called respectively the register of marriages, the register of births, and the register of deaths." When they could, clerks obtained the required information from the head of each family. A head of family conveyed information about those who lived on his property including enslaved people.[1] Recordkeeping facilitated tax collection. Among taxable property were enslaved people twelve years and older. Further, a tithable tax, or a "head tax," was also required to be paid on every white male over the age of 16 and on enslaved people who were 16 years and older.

To collect data, county tax commissioners visited every household in the county once a year and recorded information in rows in a ledger. This was no small feat. In the mid-nineteenth century, Fairfax County was a rural landscape with a population of 10,000 to 11,000, a quarter to a third of which was enslaved. Many people lived on relatively isolated farms; some lived in towns such as Fairfax, Alexandria, Colchester, Matildaville, Dranesville, and Union Mills.[2]

In the Death Register, the clerk recorded the name of the deceased, race ("colored" or "white"), status ("slave" or "free"),[3] name of the enslaver (if the deceased was enslaved), sex of deceased, date of death, place of death, name of the disease or event that caused the death, age of deceased, name of the deceased's father and mother (explained further below), where the deceased was born, occupation of the deceased, consort of the deceased, name of person giving the information, and the relationship of the person giving the information to the deceased. For deceased enslaved people, the enslaver, who clerks referred to as "owner" and "master," was usually the informant since the enslaver was usually the "head of family" or head of the household, which included white and enslaved people. When the informant could not provide the requested information, the clerk usually left a field blank. There are more blank fields in the recordings of the deaths of enslaved people than free people, which reflects enslavers' lack of knowledge of (or lack of concern for) the lives of those they enslaved.

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[1] *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Passed in 1852-3* (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, Public Printer, 1853), 40-43.
[2] On Fairfax towns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see http://www.connectionnewspapers.com/news/2018/mar/01/lost-towns-fairfax-county/, which summarizes Heather Bollinger and Jeff Clark's presentation on "Lost Towns of Fairfax County."
[3] White residents of Fairfax were always free. Some "colored" residents were listed as free in the register.

It is striking that in cases involving a deceased enslaved person, only the name of the enslaved person's mother was recorded in the Death Register. This was the same in the Birth Registry, which we are completing a dataset for, where the ledger's column heading was explicit: "Father's name in full if Child be free and born in wedlock, or Name of Owner if Child be born a Slave." This is to say that the state mandated that in death and birth records the names of free people's mothers and fathers be recorded. In the case of enslaved people, mothers and their enslavers were to be recorded. Fathers went unnamed so as not to name them as white men; additionally, the state excluded the fathers of enslaved people from records because under Virginia law, this information was irrelevant. Slave status passed through the mother's line, so if the mother of a child was a slave, the child was a slave, no matter the legal status of the father.[4]

The dataset has entries for 615 deceased people, 131 of whom were enslaved and 484 of whom were free, white and Black alike. Most of the deceased enslaved people are named, and 103 of deceased enslaved people's enslaved mothers' names are listed. Of course, after 1865, everyone in the dataset is listed as free. In all years (before and after 1865), whites and free people of color are listed among the free.

Because our dataset includes information about both enslaved and free populations, it can be used to compare causes of death and, by extension, health in the two population groups occupying a relatively small area. Other scholars have undertaken similar analyses for different times and different places in North America. Most have concluded that differences in life expectancy for enslaved and free populations resulted principally from differences in infant mortality rates. Moreover, as scholars have compiled increasing amounts of data, estimates of the life expectancy of enslaved people in the U.S. South have trended downward and estimates of enslaved infant and child mortality rates have trended upward. In 1951, William Dosite Postell calculated the infant (under 1 year of age) mortality rate in enslaved populations in the U. S. South at 152.6 per 1,000. A decade later, Robert Evans, Jr., calculated it at 182.7 per 1,000, and a decade after that Reynolds Farley placed the rate at 274 to 302 per 1,000. More recently, Richard H. Steckel estimated the rate at 350 per 1,000 and estimated a rate of 500 per 1,000 if stillbirths are included.[5] Steckel derived conclusions from a dataset he constructed from records from eleven large plantations in South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana.

[4] A 1662 Act in Virginia established that slave status followed the mother's line. It held that, for enslaved people, *partus sequitur ventrem*, or, literally, "offspring follows belly." See Jennifer L. Morgan, "*Partus sequitur ventrem*: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no.1 (2018), 1-17.

[5] Richard H. Steckel, "A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves," *Social Science History* 10, no. 4 (Winter, 1996). 427-465. See also, Ricard H. Steckel, "Slave Mortality: Analysis of Evidence from Plantation Records," *Social Science History* 3, 3/4 (1979): 86-114; "Birth Weights and Infant Mortality among American Slaves," *Explorations in Economic History* 23: 173-198; "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity," *Journal of Economic History* 46: 721-741.

Our dataset draws conclusions that diverge from Steckel's. From 1853 through 1859, we estimate infant mortality rates, including stillbirths, for the enslaved population in Fairfax County, Virginia, at 159 per 1,000. Stillbirths are not recorded in the Death Register but are recorded in the Birth Register for the same years, so for our calculation we added them to derive an infant mortality rate. The infant mortality rate in the white community was 115 per 1,000, meaning that enslaved infant death rates were 32% higher than those for white infants. We caution that some enslaved infant deaths may have gone unrecorded in Death Registers because of a lack of enslaver knowledge or recollection. Enslaved women did not give testimonies to clerks of the court; enslavers did.

The mortality rate we calculate is lower than that presented by Steckel because our data are time- and place-specific and representative of a very different enslaved population than the ones represented in Steckel's dataset. The enslaved people on the plantations that are the focus of Steckel's scholarship grew rice, cotton, and sugar in the Deep South, under especially brutal labor and climatic circumstances. In Fairfax County, Virginia, enslaved people grew wheat, corn, oats, and rye in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, the size of the enslaved holdings on each plantation from which Steckel derives his data was from 65 to 230 with a mean of 145, which was large compared to the size of enslaved holdings in most of the United States. Across the U.S. South on the eve of the Civil War, 72% of enslavers held 10 or fewer enslaved people. In Virginia, the average of size of enslaved holdings was 18.8 and a majority (71%) of enslavers enslaved 10 or fewer people.[6] In 1850 in Fairfax County, 626 people held 3,250 enslaved people for an average holding of 5.19.

But this figure does not give a complete picture of Fairfax. Twenty-one men enslaved comparatively large numbers (20 or more) people, with Dennis Johnson, who counted among his possessions 53 enslaved people, being the wealthiest enslaver. Further, about half of enslaved people lived on farms with 10 or more enslaved people. In addition, about a quarter of enslavers enslaved only one person.[7] These small holders of enslaved people had wide-ranging socioeconomic statuses. Some were relatively wealthy professionals who enslaved one person to undertake household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes, which were time consuming in an age without electricity. Others were less wealthy rural people who enslaved one person to farm small plots or raise animals or for hire to others.

Across North America, life expectancy and infant mortality were affected by differences in the life experiences of enslaved persons. Different crops required different labor regimes, each of which shaped enslaved people's health in unique ways. Further, enslaved people who lived on farms with large holdings of enslaved people were usually forced to live in dank, dirty, crowded quarters set apart from those of their enslavers. In these quarters, pulmonary diseases such as

[6] Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slaver,* vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 200; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 30.
[7] 1850 U.S. Federal Census, Slave Schedules for Fairfax County. Consulted on Ancestry, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8055/, January 8, 2024.

diphtheria and tuberculosis spread quickly. Enslaved people who were part of smaller holdings often lived under the same roof as their enslavers and, consequently, were exposed to very different hygiene and health environments. Moreover, from towns to the countryside the workloads and diets of the enslaved in Fairfax varied, which impacted average life expectancy.[8]

That said, most enslaved people in Fairfax County led arduous lives that took a toll on their health. Evidence of this can be found in our finding that the enslaved infant death rate was 32% higher than the white infant death rate. Moreover, on average, whites in the county lived 36% longer than enslaved people. From 1853 to 1859, the average age of death for whites was 29.6 years old. The average for enslaved people was 18.6 years old. According to some estimates, the average lifespan for white Americans was 25.5 in 1850, meaning that white Fairfax residents lived longer, on average, than most in the country. Estimates place the average lifespan of Blacks in the United States at 21.4 in 1850, meaning that enslaved people in Fairfax seem to have lived shorter lives on average than Blacks elsewhere in the country.[9]

Average life expectancy for both whites and enslaved people was low by today's standards, foremostly because of high rates of childhood mortality in the nineteenth century. Among enslaved people in Fairfax, children under 5 years of age accounted for about half (51.1%) of deaths. Among whites, mortality rates in this age group were not nearly as high, accounting for about a third (35.5%) of deaths. All told, 68.2% of deaths of enslaved people as compared to 51.6% of white people occurred before the age of 20 years. Whites and enslaved people who survived into their twenties in Fairfax County had about the same life expectancy, so differences in Black and white life expectancy can, for the most part, be accounted for by differences in infant and childhood death rates.

Our dataset contains information about a broad range of causes of death, many of which are also listed as causes of death of enslaved people in Stephen Berry, "Database of Coroners' Inquisitions Taken Over the Bodies of Enslaved, Formerly Enslaved, and Free Black Peoples in the U.S. South, 1840s-1890s" and in his Graveyard of Old Diseases, which provides useful definitions for disease names from the nineteenth century.[10] In our dataset, enslaved infants are frequently listed as "smothered," meaning, in the thinking of the informant, who was usually the enslaver, that the enslaved mother rolled on top of the child at night. Smothering was frequently listed as a cause of death for enslaved infants across the U.S. South but rarely listed as a cause of death for the children of white mothers. Indeed, in our dataset, no white children are listed with smothering as a cause of death. Scholars doubt that Black women accidentally smothered children with any frequency. Indeed, most think that if smothering occurred, it was rare. Most

[8] Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
[9] Stanford Medicine, "Health History: Health and Longevity Since the Mid-19th Century," https://geriatrics.stanford.edu/ethnomed/african_american/fund/health_history/longevity.html.
[10] Stephen Berry, "Database of Coroners' Inquisitions Taken Over the Bodies of Enslaved, Formerly Enslaved and Free Black Peoples in the U.S. South, 1840s-1890s," *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 1, no. 2 (2020): 10-14, https://doi.org/10.12921/n7d3-f135; Berry, *CSI Dixie,* https://csidixie.org/.

scholars argue that reports of smothering were usually the mischaracterization of deaths from SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome), which is more common among low-birth-weight and poorly nourished infants than healthy infants. To be sure, enslaved children were poorly nourished. Enslaved women often worked hard days in fields while pregnant, many suffered from worms and other parasites from walking barefoot, and many were unable to feed their children regularly. In other words, accounts of "smothering" speak volumes about the callous, misogynistic, and racist attitudes of enslavers' attitudes toward Black women.[11]

Dates of Data Collection

2022-2023

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Virginia, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Mississippi, Connecticut, Tennessee, Alabama, Massachusetts, United States, Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, Germany, France

Temporal Coverage

1853-1869

Document Types

Register

Sources

Fairfax County (Virginia) Register of Deaths, Fairfax County, Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, Fairfax, VA.

Methodology

The team worked from scanned pages from the Death Register, 1853-1869, from the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center. The team members extracted data from the registry and

[11] Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 124-126; Todd L. Savitt, "Smothering and Overlaying of Virginia Slave Children: A Suggested Explanation," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 49 (Fall 1975), 400-404; Ariane Kemkes, "'Smothered' Infants—Neglect, Infanticide or SIDS? A Fresh Look at the 19th Century Mortality Schedules," *Human Ecology* 37 (2009): 393-405; Michael P. Johnson, "Smothering Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?" *Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 4 (November 1981), 493-520; Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross,* 126; K. F. Kiple and V. H. Kiple, "Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle," *Journal of Social History* 10 (Spring 1977), 284-309; Richard Sutch, "The Care and Feeding of Slaves," in Paul A. David et al., *Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 292.

entered information into a Google Sheet, which facilitated teamwork. For the first round of data entry, team members transcribed the original source information as it appeared in the record. The team then set about "cleaning" the data by correcting errors and creating imputed fields for data that would be easier to analyze if standardized. The original source registry has column headings for the name of the deceased; race ("white" or "colored"); status ("free" or "slave"); "name of the owner of the slave;" sex ("male" or "female"); date of death; place of death; "name of disease, or cause of death;" age in years, months, and days; names of the parents, place of birth, occupation, "consort of, or unmarried," name of person giving the information, and the designation of the informant. To remain faithful to the document and to give readers a sense of the attitudes of people in the period, we transcribed original source vocabulary, including "slave" and "master," instead of the preferred "enslaved" and "enslaver."

We created unique identifiers for each event and person in the data set. We also added columns for the imputed sex of "masters"; our standardization of the deceased's occupation, which we based on the Enslaved.org controlled vocabularies; our standardization of causes of death, which is not part of the Enslaved.org controlled vocabulary; and the deceased's year of birth. In source material, clerks usually entered a county or country for place of birth. We added columns for the state and country the county was in. Occasionally clerks entered villages or townships or other locations, which we placed in counties, states, and countries in our columns. After we entered all of the data, we used Open Refine to unify the spelling and format of places, names, and causes of death. Later, we used a Python script to filter through the dataset by last name to manually identify numerous records of the same person and assign them the same unique identifier. Additional information, like the names of the parents or person giving the information, was used to assess if two records with the same name were the same person. When that information was inconclusive, the records were treated as separate people. The unique identifier associated with the first occurrence of the name was used as the unique identifier in subsequent appearances.

Date of Publication

March 2024

Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/5G4VF6
Linked Data Representation: Enslaved.org

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