

Haley, Christopher. "Legacy of Slavery in Maryland: 'Chattels.'" *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 5, no. 2 (2024): 36-40. <https://doi.org/10.25971/SZC3-N164>.

## Legacy of Slavery in Maryland: "Chattels"

Dataset Article

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<http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/links/credits.html>

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## Description

The "Chattels" dataset is currently composed of 8,691 records that enumerate transactions regarding the purchase and sale of enslaved people in central Maryland between 1790 and 1862. The dataset is derived from lists of sales of property ("chattels"), which included crops, livestock, farm implements, furniture, and wagons. Prior to the Civil War, the sale of enslaved individuals was also recorded in the chattel sales records. Archival records may include bills of sale, chattel mortgages, and releases; additionally some manumission records are included.

Chattels records housed at the Maryland State Archives contain recorded sales of property for other than real estate from 1790 to 1862 for twenty-one of the state's counties: Allegany, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Baltimore City, Calvert, Caroline, Carroll, Cecil, Charles, Dorchester, Frederick, Harford, Howard, Kent, Montgomery, Prince George's, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico, and Worcester. The "Chattels" dataset utilizes information from four counties in central Maryland: Anne Arundel, Dorchester, Kent, and Prince George's. Chattel records have been archived in three different formats: original handwritten documents, bound ledgers, and microfilm.

Chattel records illustrate the brutal realities of a morally bankrupt but commercially lucrative system, which equated one race of human beings with both the animals and the inanimate tools with which they often had to conduct their chores. As such, chattel records are among the most impactful and most informative records related to the institution of slavery and those it directly affected. While runaway ads, certificates of freedom, and manumission deeds, for example, often provide substantive biographical and genealogical data that identifies free and enslaved Blacks, as well as slave owners, document witnesses, family members, and motivations for freedom seekers, chattel records remind us that the dark crux of the institution was the buying and selling of human beings for money. Although record series such as those referenced above show positive agency and efforts to achieve, gain, or confirm a person's freedom, chattel records show the brutal introduction or further inculcation of a person's commercialized dehumanization.

Looked at as a whole, chattel records reveal prominent patterns and intra-state traffic routes for slavery transactions and those who engaged in the business. Purchases between cities such as Baltimore, Maryland and New Orleans, Louisiana and slave traffickers such as Austin Woolfolk, Joseph S. Donovan, and Hope Slatter offer historians, scholars, and genealogists possible clues on where and by whom their forebears may have been forcibly migrated. Consequently, review of records that document these transactions may reveal new regions for family researchers to look for evidence of their kin who lived during slavery's reign. It is bittersweet but fortunate that

chattel records offer those who may never have enjoyed a free day in their lifetimes the opportunity to be discovered and cherished by free descendants.

The "Chattels" dataset is part of the larger Maryland State Archives' Legacy of Slavery in Maryland database. Begun in 2001 as a way to document the lives of individuals fighting against slavery, the "Legacy of Slavery in Maryland" database now encompasses seventeen different data sets of over 400,000 individuals, including enslaved and free people, and white and Black owners, primarily from the years 1830 through 1880.<sup>1</sup> The individual datasets include transcribed information from runaway ads, deserter lists, certificates of freedom, and manumission records, among other sources. In addition, Legacy of Slavery in Maryland also contains records, such as "Chattels," that focus on individuals who did not escape slavery and whose lives might otherwise go undocumented. These datasets utilize records of ownership to provide information on enslaved people and their lives.

This is the first dataset from the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland to be connected to Enslaved.org's linked open data search; additional collections will follow as funding and time allow.

## **Dates of Data Collection**

2001-2022

## **Dataset Languages**

English

## **Geographic Coverage**

Anne Arundel County, Maryland  
Dorchester County, Maryland  
Kent County, Maryland  
Prince George's County, Maryland

## **Temporal Coverage**

1790-1862

## **Document Types**

Appraisal or Assessment  
Auction or Sale Notice  
Bill of Sale, Invoice, or Receipt

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<sup>1</sup> For a searchable list of the seventeen collections in the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland database, see <http://slavery2.msa.maryland.gov/pages/Search.aspx>.

Contract  
Digital Data Repository  
Letter

## Sources

Anne Arundel County Court (Chattel Records, Index), Collection MSA C51, Maryland State Archives  
Dorchester County Court (Chattel Records), Collection MSA C69, Maryland State Archives  
Kent County Court (Chattel Paper), Collection MSA C1035, Maryland State Archives  
Prince George's County Court (Chattel Papers), Collection MSA C1174, Maryland State Archives

## Methodology

The methodology used in the dataset emerged from analysis of what topics would be most helpful to a researcher looking for an enslaved ancestor. Information on an enslaved individual's name was vital, but it was also important to provide as much geographical information as possible. Thus main fields included name, county and state of both buyers and sellers; name and gender (if known) of enslaved individuals sold; and the purchase transaction date.<sup>2</sup> (Some duplication of names may exist because of inconsistencies in the original documents). Columns were also provided for specific source citations and for any information not included in other fields.

For ease of inputting, chattel records were grouped by archival format: original handwritten documents; bound ledgers; and microfilm. Because the creation of the "Chattels" dataset was not funded by a specific grant, archives staff entered all information into spreadsheets as time allowed over a span of several years.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing nature of the project necessitated development of procedures and training to ensure continuity of data input.

When all available data had been entered, the spreadsheets were given to I.T. technicians to develop a searchable data set for inclusion in the larger Legacy of Slavery in Maryland database. In addition to carrying over the main fields from the spreadsheet, I.T. technicians added a Details field, which provides additional information from the sale transmittals, including document type; the age and date of birth of the enslaved person (if known); and information on the document source, including citation number and source record page. The Details field also includes any notes included in the original transmittals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gender, when not specifically indicated, was inferred from first names of enslaved individuals.

<sup>3</sup> Begun in 2001, the gathering and inputting of information is an on-going process as more source documents are discovered. For a list of organizations that have provided grant funding for the Legacy of Slavery since 2001, see the Acknowledgements section below.

<sup>4</sup> For example, some additional notations on the original included, "child," "child sold with mother," and "black buyer."

## Date of Publication

April 2024

## Data Links

Project Website: <https://slavery2.msa.maryland.gov/pages/Search.aspx>

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/P7JV0Q>

Linked Data Representation: [Enslaved.org](https://Enslaved.org)

## Acknowledgments

National Endowment for the Humanities

City of Annapolis

City of Bowie

C. V. Starr Center

The Dominion Foundation

Goucher College

Maryland Public Television

Morgan State University

National Historical Publications and Records Commission

National Parks Service Network to Freedom Program

US Department of Education Office of Post Secondary Education Underground Railroad  
Education and Cultural Program

Washington College

## Cite this Article

Haley, Christopher. "Legacy of Slavery in Maryland: 'Chattels.'" *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 5, no. 2 (2024): 36-40. <https://doi.org/10.25971/SZC3-N164>.

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