

The Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

Oatlands Plantation

Below is the rationale for including the Oatlands Plantation as a member of the Underground Railroad Network, a National Park Service organization. The text included here was taken from the application for membership submitted by the Oatlands Plantation to the Network. Network members are those who are “ attempting to identify, document, preserve and interpret sites. . . related to the Underground Railroad.”

George Carter, great-grandson of Virginia’s famed grower, Robert “King” Carter, began Oatlands Plantation, a well-known, 3400-acre wheat plantation in Loudoun County, in the 19th century in 1804.

Owned by a prominent family and famed for its hospitality and beauty, its prosperity was made possible by a workforce of enslaved African-Americans. In 1850, for example, Carter’s widow Elizabeth was Loudoun County’s largest slaveholder, owning 85 slaves. This group included 43 males and 42 females, of whom 26 were under age thirteen. (Brenda Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 182). The plantation included a grist & sawmill, a manufactory of bricks, greenhouse, etc, providing employ for enslaved house servants and skilled and unskilled workers (especially field laborers, Stevenson, 186) in 19th century manufacture and agriculture.

Antebellum life on the plantation inspired some of those enslaved to escape. On 2/8/1809 George Carter of Oatlands advertised in the *Alexandria Daily Gazette Commercial & Political*:

RAN AWAY from the subscriber, on the first instant, a Mulatto Man, a slave, named BILLY, sometimes calls himself *William Jordan Augustus*--his color nearly as light and approaches that of a whiteman --his hair is straight and he generally wears it platted and turned up behind with a comb--his visage is remarkably thin, and his cheek bones high--he has been brought up in the house and is a good dining room servant--is about 5 feet 10 or 11 inches high, very straight built--his constitution is not strong and he is subject to indisposition--is about 30 years of age... he wore a blue coat and a silver watch.--As Billy is related to some mulattos emancipated by R. B. Lee, Esq. [sic] who lives in the neighborhood of Alexandria and George-Town, the probability is that he is to be found in that neighborhood...

On May 13, 1809, George Carter of Oatlands and A. Long of Culpepper were advertising again for Billy, as well as Nelly, about 45 (*Alexandria Daily Gazette*). The description of Billy was almost word for word that above. Nelly was described as "tall and rather inclined toward corpulency, a tawney color and about forty-five years of age." The transcribed ad notes: "They went off as man and wife, but it is very probable Billy will attempt to pass as a white man and will endeavor to sell Nelly as his slave." Billy must have successfully reached freedom, for by 1817, George Carter writes "...he had lived in

Pennsylvania for the last 8 or ten years as a free man, where he enjoyed every privilege (sic)...” (4 Dec. 1817, Letterbook, GC to nephew, Tom, p. 185).

Apparently Carter came to regard Billy as an inveterate runaway. Interesting correspondence has survived among the Carter papers. In 1817, Carter writes to his nephew Tom, referring to receipt of a letter from R. C. Lockwood informing him that “Billy has returned to Phila (sic)...” Apparently Billy had been in the “Publick jail of Baltimore”, and Carter had intended to sell him to a “well known Georgia trader,” having refused sale to Dr. John Arnest, because of Billy’s proclivity to escape and the facility of fleeing from Virginia to Pennsylvania. (Letterbook ps.180-181, GC to nephew Tom, Sept 25, 1817). Dr. Arnest had facilitated the escape, willingly or not, by lying to nephew, Tom, saying Billy had been given to the doctor’s wife – resulting in the jailer letting Billy out “from his late confinement in the Publick jail of Baltimore.” (Letterbook GC to John Arnest, Nov. 1817, GC to nephew Tom, Dec. 4, 1817, 184-5). Carter was clear that he had wished to make an example of Billy, “this impudent offender.... So that others might be intimidated and deterred from similar offences.” (Letterbook, GC to nephew, Dec 4, 1817).

On May 11, 1814, George Carter (Letterbook, pgs. 120-121) wrote to Edmund McGinnis, Esq., admitting in reply to a letter of the 10th that two bondsmen had run away, and declaring that he never wanted them back. “As long as my slaves choose to remain with me, I feel attached to them, but as soon as they leave me, I consider myself absolved from every tye (sic) of affection...” As a result, Carter declared himself willing to let a Mr. Stallings buy runaway Isaac (“certainly a most valuable negroe”) from him for \$330 and take the risk of catching up with him. The terms for splitting expenses in the proffered agreement are unfortunately illegible. Sale was seen as a punishment to the runaway; hence George Carter's agent recommended sale of the bondsman Sam who had escaped and injured his leg, interfering with his ability to work, and as the agent said, “such conduct is [a] dreadful example.” (cited by Stevenson 179 from George Whitlock to George Carter, Nov. 11, 1805)

Oatlands may have harbored or “enabled” some runaways from elsewhere, ironically from Carter's point of view. Brenda Stevenson (254) cites an ad in the *Washingtonian* (Nov. 12, 1836) placed by William Shaffer for a 25 year old woman who had escaped from him and who he presumed was headed to visit relatives enslaved by George Carter at Oatlands. This woman had recently been transferred by George Carter to his cousin Fitzhugh Carter in Fairfax, but by the time the advertisement was placed in the Leesburg paper the “dark mulatto woman” had escaped for a year and perhaps was being hidden by relatives.

Other advertisements bear a similar story, such as an ad placed in the *Genius of Liberty*, Jan. 20, 1817:

‘...Ran away from Benjamin Dean, Prince William county...a Negro man named EPHRAIM, about 5 feet 10 inches high, stout made, yellow complexion; very pleasant when spoken to, subject to intoxication – he can write tolerably well &

has probably forged a pass – he carried with him all his cloathing, therefore it would be difficult to describe his dress – his father lives with mr. George Carter on Goose Creek, probably he may be lurking about there...”

After the Civil War, beset by dependants and mounting debts, George Carter II and wife, Kate, began operating Oatlands as a summer boarding house for affluent Washingtonians. As this did not produce sufficient income, the Carters were forced to sell the property in 1897, to Stilson Hutchins, a co-founder of the *Washington Post*. Hutchins never lived on the property and in 1903 sold it to Mr. and Mrs. William Corcoran Eustis. Eustis and his wife, both from wealthy philanthropic families, were instinctive preservationists and under their ownership the gardens were restored, and the property was used for entertaining. After the death of her husband in 1921, Mrs. Eustis continued to visit Oatlands until her death in 1964. In 1965, the Eustis daughters, Mrs. David Finley and Mrs. Anne Emmet, presented the 261-acre estate, mansion and furnishings to the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP).

As a property of the NTHP, the site initially offered to the public tours of the mansion and 4 ½ acre garden. At that time, research of records and primary sources pertaining to Oatlands history was conducted, and tours were created based on existing research. In the past ten years, additional research has been conducted and dependency buildings scrutinized, with an eye toward restoration and interpretation. Today, considerable effort has been made toward stabilization and restoration of dependency buildings and tours have been evaluated and re-crafted, as information becomes available.

In 1999, Oatlands participated in the National Trust’s Initiative to incorporate the story of slavery at its historic sites. In April 2000, a day-long program was held on “Recovering African-American History at Oatlands: Preliminary Findings From Archaeology, Architecture and Remote Sensed Imagery.” Featured speakers included John Vlach (George Washington University), Maria Franklin (University of Texas at Austin) and Robert Whisonant (Radford University). Another program featured a presentation by Catrice Montgomery, descendant of an African American enslaved at Oatlands. Most recently, a grant was awarded to Oatlands for an Interpretive Training Program designed to provide staff with the information and skills necessary to confidently include information about the enslaved population. The program includes 4 day-long seminars, and will include lectures: Enslaved and Free Blacks In Loudoun; Many Voices: The Need For Multiple Sources; Lost and Found: Mapping Loudoun’s African-American Sites; Interpreting Loudoun’s Plantation Landscape; Speaking The Truth: Guidelines for Interpreters. In February, a lecture was scheduled with speaker, Karen Hughes-White of the Fauquier Afro-American Association.

In addition, a guided tour of the plantation has been added, which, using 19th century dependency buildings, discusses the lives of Oatlands enslaved population. Based on primary sources such as George Carter’s letter book, this tour discusses food ways and life ways, as well as issues such as resistance and freedom by flight. The tour, also designed as self-guided, includes a brochure and 10 wayside markers, many of which include interpretation of slavery.

Oatlands is committed to creating comprehensive interpretation and will continue to conduct research and schedule lectures, seminars and tours focusing on the interpretation of African –American history.