

THE RETREAT & THE ERA OF SLAVERY

(Image courtesy Library of Congress)

ENSLAVED AT THE RETREAT

From the moment General Thomas Parker, a veteran of the American Revolution, purchased 1,120 acres from Ralph Wormley in 1799, and built his home “The Retreat,” sometimes referred to as “Soldiers’ Retreat,” enslaved people lived and labored on this land until slavery’s abolition. On this plantation enslaved laborers planted, cultivated, and milled wheat that was then carried on flat bottomed boats down the Shenandoah River to Harpers Ferry, then moved on the Potomac River to markets in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore.

While little is known about the details of the everyday lives of enslaved people at the Retreat, census records and other documents, such as deeds and wills, offer important insight into the history of enslaved people here. Census records show that the Parkers enslaved anywhere between twenty-four to nearly thirty-six people at various points. For example, the 1810 census reveals Thomas Parker enslaved thirty-four individuals. Three decades later, following the death of Judge Richard Elliott Parker, the father of Judge Richard Parker, the jurist who presided over John Brown’s trial in the autumn of 1859 and owned the Retreat during the Civil War, an appraisal of personal property shows that Parker enslaved twenty-eight people at the time of his passing in September 1840. The document, which only includes the first name of each enslaved person and their appraised value, reveals fifteen of the enslaved people were male. The County Court of Clarke County appraised the value of these enslaved people at \$7,420—nearly a quarter million dollars today.

Character of Property	Appraised Value
Lepus a negro man	75.00
Jenny " woman	75.00
Job " man	450.00
Betty " woman	75.00
Walter " man	400.00
John " man	550.00
Emeline " woman	450.00
Hannett " woman	300.00
Lincy " woman	300.00
Betty " woman	450.00
Emily " woman	450.00
Mary Jane " woman	450.00
Phil " man	500.00
Washington " boy	500.00
Jenny " boy	400.00
George " boy	400.00
Indiana " girl	250.00
Robert " boy	200.00
Hannett " girl	120.00
Milly " girl	120.00
Charles " child	50.00

The first page of the appraisal of Judge Parker’s property in 1840. This page lists 21 of the 28 total people enslaved by Parker at the time of his death. The list includes the first name, gender, and assessed value of the enslaved person. (Courtesy Judge Richard Parker Papers, folder 7, Chicago History Museum Research Center)

RESISTING SLAVERY

While unclear as to the extent to which people enslaved by the Parkers resisted their enslavement, evidence indicates they did. For example, following news of John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in mid-October 1859, Judge Richard Parker, the judge who presided over Brown’s trial, reported that enslaved people committed arson at the Retreat—a typical response among enslaved people in this part of the Shenandoah Valley once they learned of Brown’s attack. One month after Brown’s raid a newspaper correspondent reported that “incendiary fires are becoming very frequent in various parts of the country... Incendiary burnings have lately occurred in Jefferson and Clarke counties.”

Although arson proved a means of resistance, one of the most significant ways any enslaved person could resist was running away. While records offer no insight into the extent to which those enslaved by the Parkers fled, documents reveal that an attempt by six enslaved men to flee bondage in the late summer of 1854 ended in tragedy in Parker’s Hole—a deep abyss among the Shenandoah River’s usually calm waters (see stop 5 of the Cool Spring Battlefield tour for the location).

On Sunday, September 3, 1854, six enslaved men, three enslaved by James LaRue and three rented by Alfred Castleman, both residents of Clarke County, decided to escape their bondage. Reported, as one newspaper correspondent noted, as “runaways” by Castleman, the six men ventured to the cabin of an enslaved man here at Judge Parker’s Retreat (unfortunately the location of the cabin is unknown) on the evening of September 3. One account reported that a “servant of Judge Parker states that on Sunday evening six men stopped at his cabin door and asked for chickens.” Whether or not they received them is unknown. The six enslaved men then took a boat which reportedly belonged to a “Mr. Elliott” with hopes of escaping slavery

SIX NEGROES DROWNED.—A correspondent of the Leesburg (Va.) Washingtonian states that six young negro men were found drowned in a place called Parker's whirlpool, in Shenandoah River, just below the "Retreat," the former residence of Judge Parker, on the 4th inst. A servant of Judge Parker states that on Sunday evening six men stopped at his cabin door and asked for chickens. They left, and the boat belonging to Mr. Elliott was missing on Monday morning, and some time during the day the men were found dead, as before stated.

News of the fate of the six enslaved men who drowned in "Parker's whirlpool" appeared in newspapers throughout the nation. The notice above appeared on September 19, 1854, in *The New Orleans Crescent*.

via the Shenandoah River. Sadly, their quest for freedom ended when the boat, a skiff, upset and plunged the men into Parker's Hole. A newspaper correspondent for the *Leesburg Washingtonian* wrote that "six young negro men were found drowned in a place called Parker's whirlpool, in [the] Shenandoah River, just below the 'Retreat,' the residence of Judge Parker."

Although evidence reveals the bodies were pulled from the Shenandoah River, nothing indicates their specific identities or what happened to their remains.

MEET PRESLEY DUNWOOD

Unfortunately, the stories of the lives of most of those enslaved by the Parkers is lost, however, a great deal is known

about one enslaved man who undoubtedly made numerous trips here to the Retreat, Presley Dunwood. Born in Clarke County, Virginia, in 1838 (several other accounts state Dunwood was born in 1844), Dunwood was, as he recalled later in life, "taken from my mother when one year old." From his first birthday until 1857 Dunwood was "hired out" to various individuals in Clarke and Loudoun counties. In 1857, Dunwood, as he wrote "fell to the ownership of Judge Richard Parker." Dunwood served as Parker's carriage driver, including during the period of John Brown's trial. In a memoir of his life Dunwood recalled: "I had charge of Judge Parker's carriage and drove him to and from the courthouse to his home every day during the trial. I often saw John Brown during this time."

At the Civil War's outset Dunwood noted that he "was pressed into the Confederate army and was with that army in the first battle of Bull Run." In the spring of 1862, more than likely in the aftermath of the First Battle of Kernstown, Dunwood sought refuge with the 46th Pennsylvania Infantry. From that moment through at least the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 evidence indicates Dunwood served as a cook for the regiment.

By the Civil War's end Dunwood moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and initially worked for Benjamin Morgan, captain of Company F, 46th Pennsylvania at the time he was liberated from his life as an enslaved person. In the final decades of his life Dunwood regularly attended annual reunions of the 46th Pennsylvania. During the first reunion of Company F, 46th Pennsylvania in 1880 the veterans "made" Dunwood "a member of the company."

In 1902 Dunwood moved from Pittsburgh to Ohio. He died in 1920 and is buried in Hillcrest Cemetery in Canton, Ohio.



This postwar image of Dunwood appeared in the *Alliance Review & Leader*, an Ohio newspaper, on October 21, 1916.

SUGGESTED READING

Ayers, Edward L. *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863*. New York: Norton, 2003.

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Dunaway, Wilma A. *Slavery in the American South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Koons, Kenneth E. "The Colored Laborers Work as Well as When Slaves': African Americans in the Breadbasket of the Confederacy." In *Archaeological Perspectives on the American Civil War*, edited by Clarence R. Geier and Stephen R. Potter, 229-252. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

Noyalas, Jonathan A. *Slavery and Freedom in the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War Era*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021.

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