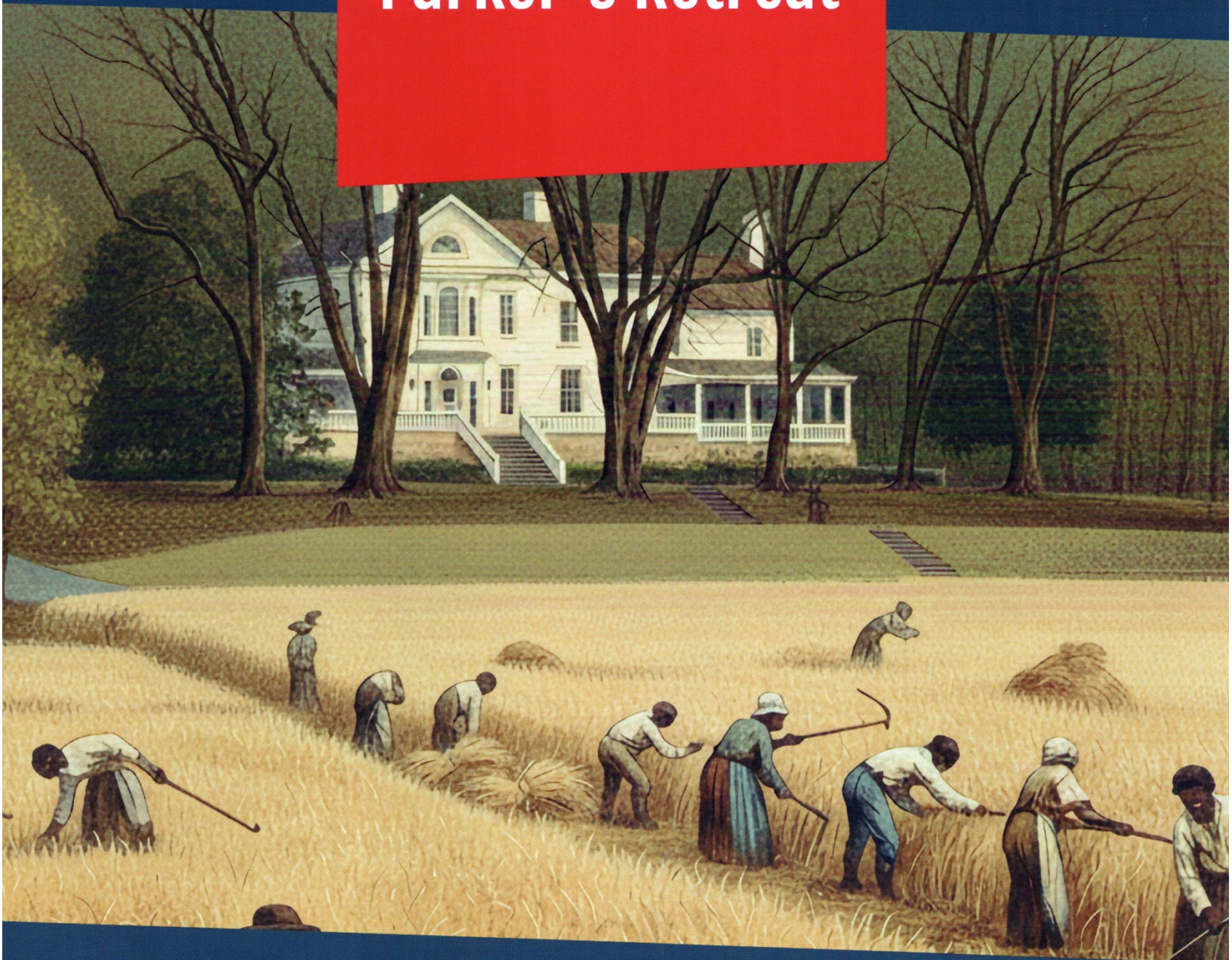


Slavery & Parker's Retreat



A HISTORICAL WALKING TOUR

*Tour developed by Shenandoah University's McCormick Civil War Institute.
Financial support provided by the Community Foundation of the
Northern Shenandoah Valley's Boxley-Fox Endowment Fund.*

Introduction

Welcome to Shenandoah University's River Campus at Cool Spring Battlefield. This 195-acre site was once part of a 1,120-acre plantation. From the moment General Thomas Parker, a veteran of the American Revolution, purchased this land from Ralph Wormley in 1799 and built his home "The Retreat," sometimes referred to as "Soldier's Retreat," enslaved people lived and labored on this land until slavery's abolition. Census records and other documents indicate that the Parkers enslaved between twenty-four and thirty-six people at different times from 1800 until the start of the Civil War.

The tour begins at the trailhead kiosk. After you read the interpretive materials at the kiosk, proceed north on the trail (to your right if you are facing the front of the kiosk) to stop A.

A Where the Enslaved Lived

Although little evidence exists to pinpoint the exact location of the buildings that housed enslaved people on this property, research on similar properties and other nearby dwellings that housed enslaved individuals suggest they would have been positioned "behind or to the side of the... residence." For instance, the remaining slave dwelling at Clermont Farm, five miles east of here, is located next to the main house. In his last will and testament, Judge Richard Elliott Parker, who enslaved twenty-eight people valued at \$7,420 (about \$275,000 today) at the time of his death in 1840, instructed that his son, Richard Parker, also a judge, could "rent the Land & have the Slaves use the Dwelling House."

Meet Presley Dunwood



While little is known about the individuals whom the Parkers enslaved, much is known about Presley Dunwood. Born in Clarke County, Virginia, in 1838, Dunwood was, as he recalled later in life, "taken from his mother when one year old." By the time he was a teenager, Dunwood was "hired out" to various individuals in Clarke and Loudoun counties. In 1857, Dunwood "fell to the ownership of Judge Richard Parker." Dunwood served as Parker's carriage driver, including during the time of John Brown's trial in 1859. When the Civil War began in the spring of 1861, he was impressed into the Confederacy's service. In the spring of 1862, he escaped and sought refuge with the 46th Pennsylvania Infantry. From that moment until the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, Dunwood served as a cook for the regiment. After the war, Dunwood moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and then to Ohio. He died in 1920 and is buried in Hillcrest Cemetery in Canton, Ohio. The image of Dunwood at left appeared in the Alliance Review & Leader, an Ohio newspaper, in 1916.



The buildings used to house enslaved people at the Retreat might have looked similar to this slave dwelling located several miles west of here near Berryville. Noted photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston took this photo in the 1930s. Library of Congress.

Continue north on the trail to stop B.

B**"From Can to Can't"**

Enslaved people, like those who labored here at the Retreat, worked "from can to can't"—meaning they worked from the early morning light until it became so dim they could no longer see. For over sixty years before the Civil War began, dozens of enslaved people toiled in the fields in front of you, planting, caring for, and harvesting either wheat or corn, two of the Shenandoah Valley's main crops. During the summer, enslaved people laboring in the fields worked, on average, fourteen hours per day. During harvest season, the workday sometimes lasted a few hours longer.



Scenes like the one depicted in this sketch of enslaved people near Culpeper, Virginia, about sixty-five miles from here, harvesting wheat, would have been a common sight at the Retreat during harvest time. (Library of Congress)

Return to the kiosk. Once you reach the kiosk turn right onto the paved path and follow it to the Shenandoah River. Once you reach the wide grassy area leading to the river, turn left. Walk a short distance toward the river. The next stop is on the left.

C**A Hideout for Freedom Seekers?**

Conditions are not always safe to view the west side of the tree. This photograph shows the tree's entrance. Photograph by Jonathan A. Noyalas

It is undeniable, as the last stop on this tour will reveal, that freedom seekers set foot on this property during their northward journey. But what attracted them to the Retreat? Oral tradition notes that freedom seekers who used the Shenandoah River to reach Harpers Ferry, an important stop on the Underground Railroad located approximately fifteen miles from here by water, hid in a hollow sycamore tree on this property situated along the banks of the Shenandoah River. It is believed that the massive sycamore tree in front of you is that tree. The tree is hollow, with the entrance on its west side, facing the river. At some point in the tree's life, the entrance was covered with stone. Scientific testing conducted on the tree in the summer of 2025 revealed that it is nearly 420 years old and would have been large enough to serve as a hideout for freedom seekers in the decades prior to the Civil War.

Return to the paved path and walk north, keeping the Shenandoah River on your left. The next stop will be on the right.

D To Mill & Market

About ten feet to the east (your right if the Shenandoah River is on your left) of the path that led you here was Parker's Mill Road. It ran parallel to the Shenandoah River to a mill located at the northern end of the Retreat, outside the boundary of the property managed by Shenandoah University. Once enslaved laborers harvested the wheat, it was loaded into wagons and taken to the mill, where enslaved people processed it. The flour was then shipped on flat-bottom boats to Harpers Ferry and subsequently sent to markets in Baltimore and Washington, DC.

Continue north on the path. The next stop, the last on this tour, will be located on the left.

E Tragedy on the Path to Freedom

On September 3, 1854, six enslaved men, three enslaved by James LaRue and three rented by Alfred Castleman, decided to escape slavery. These six men came to the Retreat that night and sought help from an unidentified enslaved person here. After receiving some food, the six men took a small boat, placed it in the river at a point south of here, and headed north. Sadly, the boat overturned when it reached Parker's Hole, the green swirling waters of the Shenandoah River in front of you. All six men drowned. Their bodies were pulled from the river the following day. While it is unknown if any of the people the Parkers enslaved ever attempted to flee, evidence indicates they did resist their enslavement in other ways. For example, Judge Parker noted in the autumn of 1859, following abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, that enslaved people here burned some outbuildings on the plantation, a typical response among enslaved people in the Shenandoah Valley once they learned of Brown's attack.

Suggested Reading

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

Kenneth E. Koons. "'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. University Press of Florida, 2000.

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche. *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

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

Brenda E. Stevenson. *Life in Black & White: Family and Community in the Slave South*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*. University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

The tour route is approximately 1.2 miles. While most of the route is paved, please be advised that the terrain can be uneven at times and so you should proceed cautiously.

