

**“I think I shall never be comfortable again . . .”**

## **The Family During Slavery**

No less than any other population, enslaved African-Americans acted upon the fundamental human aspiration to perpetuate their family lineage and care for their kin, but slavery posed daunting obstacles. They created extensive kinship networks, in part because all West African societies placed a high value on such networks. In the New World, such networks took on a new significance, as they mitigated the worst effects of the slave system. As owners routinely separated husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, enslaved people visited each other and remained in touch as long as they stayed within the region. As such, kinship networks extended from plantation to plantation and, in some cases, from plantation to city. These connections helped soften the impact of family separations, as enslaved people remained in contact with at least some of their family members. Kinship ties helped foster a distinct identity among enslaved people so that they never absorbed their owners' interests as their own. This consciousness enabled them to resist the exacting work regimens



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and arbitrary punishments as they weathered the family separations imposed by their owners.<sup>1</sup>

When Adam Plummer and Emily Saunders married in 1841, they not only pledged to take care of each other and their children, but they also joined together two large extended families with deep roots in Prince Georges County, Maryland. These connections sustained Adam and Emily, as they raised eight children (a ninth child died as an infant). While enslaved, Adam and Emily never lived in the same quarters, separated by as much as twenty-six miles. While the couple could not overcome the power of the slave system, each seemed ideally suited for their role in the family. Adam used his abilities to earn money to improve conditions for his family. In addition, his contacts within the African-American community and broader society enabled him to keep his family connected. The separation prevented Adam from educating his children, at least on a day-to-day basis. Emily tended to their needs and, when necessary, risked her own physical safety by confronting owners who inflicted arbitrary punishment on her children.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to reconstruct the story of the Plummer marriage and their extended families because Adam could read and write. These skills undoubtedly benefitted his work life, but



threatened many white people, particularly the owners of Emily and her family.<sup>3</sup> Most important, his skills enabled Emily and Adam to keep in touch between 1856 and 1863, when they endured a twenty-six mile separation. Their letters provide an especially powerful and poignant testimony of the harrowing impact of separation among enslaved families. He also kept a book of remembrances wherein he recorded significant dates in his family's history, notes regarding his ancestors, purchases made for the family, and significant land transactions after emancipation. The public has access to these documents, thanks largely to the efforts of youngest daughter of Adam and Emily, Nellie Arnold Plummer. She published her own book of family remembrances and reprinted many of her parents' letters. This documentary heritage attests to the importance of kin and Adam's and Emily's achievement in advancing their goals.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the Plummer family is inextricably intertwined with the development of slavery in the Chesapeake region. Prior to 1720, planters relied upon the immigration of white indentured servants from the British Isles and, to a lesser extent, the importation of slaves from the West Indies and Africa to cultivate tobacco. Increasingly, however, they



relied upon an enslaved population to work the fields and process the crops. This shift in labor strategies at once reflected and encouraged a trend already underway. Owners began to see the benefits of family formation, as it encouraged reproduction among their slaves and diminished the dependence upon the transatlantic slave trade. By 1730, the enslaved work force reproduced itself. At the same time, white officials enacted a series of laws defining the place of African-Americans, free and enslaved, in society. These codes expressly denied marital and parental rights to the enslaved. Though recognized by African-American communities, marriages between enslaved people had no legal standing. In addition, owners' authority over enslaved children supplanted that of their parents. These codes also forbid marriages between white and black people.<sup>5</sup>

The Plummer family included several children of interracial unions. It is unclear when the first member of the Plummer family arrived in Maryland, although the family was established by the Revolution. Cupid Plummer, Adam's grandfather, was the earliest ancestor remembered by the Plummer family. He worked a plantation owned by John Hodge, fought as his substitute during the Revolution, and had several children, including Barney,



Adam's father.<sup>6</sup> Barney married Sarah Norris, and her ancestry embodied the ambiguities of family relations in the period. Despite social and legal sanctions against such unions, her mother Nellie Beckett, an Indian-mulatto, married William Norris, an English indentured servant contracted by her owners, the Calvert family. She bore two of his children, including Sarah, yet she also bore several children by her owner, George Calvert. Powerless to interfere with Calvert's liaisons with his wife, William "died of a broken heart."<sup>7</sup> Calvert covered his transgressions by freeing them so that they could live elsewhere. Meanwhile, Nellie raised the two children fathered by an indentured servant. Her daughter Sarah Norris married Barney Plummer in 1800, and they raised three sons and five daughters - Henry, Elias, Adam, Rachel, Caroline, Rose, Ellen and Elizabeth.<sup>8</sup>

By the time that Adam and Emily were born, in 1819 and 1816 respectively, the slave system had transformed yet again. By the Revolution, the demand for tobacco on the world market was declining, pushing Maryland farmers to cultivate wheat, corn, and other crops for sale in the domestic market. In addition, land in Maryland was becoming increasingly scarce. Planters first turned to the Piedmont region, approximately fifty miles



away, to establish farms for their children. With the settlement of those lands, planters moved even further away, taking their slaves to western states such as Kentucky and, by 1810 even further still, to Alabama or Mississippi. The closing of the transatlantic slave trade in 1809 intensified a pattern already underway: Maryland was a slave-exporting state, as planters sold their slaves in large numbers to the deep South.<sup>9</sup>

Although the slave trade certainly affected the families of Adam and Emily, both lived within extraordinarily stable plantations. In 1829, when Adam was ten-years-old, the Calverts split up its slaveholdings, including the Plummer family, when they established a second plantation in Prince George's County, Riversdale. Adam moved there, leaving behind his mother, brother, and other kin. At a young age, Emily's father, Richard Saunders, was sold to Annapolis. Unable to endure the separation, her mother married another man, Frank Arnold. Together, they had twenty-three children. Despite such disruptions, both Adam and Emily valued the stability provided by their owners. Adam and his owner, George Benedict Calvert, played together as children. As the relationship change to master-slave, Adam served Calvert faithfully and industriously. Emily recalled that her owner, Sarah Ogle Hilleary at "Three



Sisters," never traded her slaves. She owned generations of the same enslaved families, including many of Emily's ancestors.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, Adam Plummer was ideally situated to make the most of this milieu. One of George Benedict Calvert's most trusted slaves, Adam worked his fields and sold his crops at marketplaces. Calvert also set aside provision grounds for Adam to cultivate during his "free time," only after the completion of his plantation duties. Such provision grounds were not unusual, as planters throughout the South engaged in this practice. The crops harvested on these grounds supplemented the rations provided by owners to the enslaved families. Adam had sufficient yield that he sold crops at the market and used his earnings to buy commodities such as sugar, coffee and tea which he gave to his mother, sister, and other relatives.<sup>11</sup> His ability to market goods for himself and his owner proved a boon for his family, not only because he could enhance their provisions but also because he routinely traveled to the markets in Washington and Georgetown, where he could see his kin. Particularly if he could combine these regular treks with the release time awarded by his owner, he could visit many of his family members, offering them gifts and news of others.<sup>12</sup>



In this context, the marriage of Adam Plummer and Emily Saunders seemed quite workable. They met in 1839, when Emily traveled eight miles with her mother Nellie Saunders-Arnold to Riverdale, where Emily's Aunt Lucy had become ill during a visit with her husband. Emily caught Adam's eye during her brief stay. Within months, Adam received permission from Sarah Hilleary to court Emily, as he met her standards of cleanliness, honesty, piety, and industriousness. With Miss Hilleary's blessing, Adam acted on his desires and regularly walked the eight-mile distance between "Three Sisters" and Riverdale<sup>13</sup>

The marriage began auspiciously, with hopes for a brighter future. On May 30, 1841, Adam Plummer and Emily Saunders wed in Washington, at the New York Avenue and Fourteenth Street Presbyterian Church, with Reverend Richardson presiding. He required that the couple secure a marriage license before officiating the ceremony. Adam and Emily approached William B. Brent to secure the necessary license. Since there was no legal recognition for the marriages of enslaved people, it was highly irregular for an enslaved man and woman to receive a marriage license. It is highly likely that the Plummers immediately understood the significance of their marriage license issued by the District of Columbia. In the northern states and Canada, a





marriage certificate constituted proof of freedom, as enslaved couples could not legally marry.<sup>14</sup>

Freedom proved elusive, however. Adam and Emily planned their escape in 1845, by that time with two children, three-year-old Sarah Miranda and an infant Henry Vinton. Leaving the state as a couple with two young children would have been difficult enough, but the Plummers never even left their plantations. Perhaps to advance her own position with the Miss Hilleary and keep Emily nearby, one of her relatives gave Miss Hilleary the marriage license that Adam and Emily hoped to use as proof of their freedom. This disclosure dashed any hopes of escape, at least with the protection of this legal document. Emily's relationship with her owner never recovered. A household slave, Emily began working the fields. Moreover, there were at least two occasions before Miss Hilleary's death in 1849 that Emily's sale seemed a real possibility. Little wonder that, for the rest of his life, Adam recalled this betrayal with bitterness.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these troubles, the Plummers remembered the early years as happy ones. Certainly, the first eight years lived up to their best possible expectations. In addition to Sarah Miranda and Henry, the Plummers had another son: Elias Quincy



born in 1846. Adam saw Emily weekly and transformed her cabin by carrying furnishings to her. He put in "glass windows, knobs and latches to doors, building stairway instead of ladder to loft, [and] real four-legged chairs instead of three legged stools." These improvements so transformed the cabin that one of Miss Hilleary's visitors believed that Adam would put in a piano someday.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Adam established strong ties with Emily's mother, brothers, and sisters. At the request of his mother-in-law, Adam secretly taught one of her youngest brothers, William, to read and write with one lesson per week out of a spelling book.<sup>17</sup>

The death of Emily's owner, Sarah Ogle Hilleary, disrupted the Plummer marriage and the lives of every family member who depended upon them. The reading of an owners' will always provoked anxieties among enslaved people, as they had just as much, if not more, interest in the provisions of their owners' wills than the heirs themselves. For Emily, Miss Hilleary's will revealed her new owner Tilman Hilleary, who she knew would be an arbitrary master likely to sell her and her children. This transfer of ownership triggered a series of events that threatened to send members of the Plummer family to the Deep South. By a combination of passionate resistance and deliberate



negotiation, both Emily and Adam thwarted Mr. Hilleary's plans. Yet, the compromise - her sale in 1851 to the Thompson family of Meridian Hill in Washington - removed her from her mother, sisters, and two of her children and served as a prelude to a far more disruptive separation. In 1856, the Thompsons abandoned their Meridian Hill property and transferred Emily to Mount Hebron, near Ellicott City.

Between 1849 and 1851, Adam and Emily lived with the near certainty of hers and the children's sale and scrambled to mitigate its effects. Tilman Hilleary acted quickly, as he first put Emily and her children up for sale in March 1849. Yet, Emily had just borne her fourth child, Julia Caroline Maria, so that Emily's sister Henny was sold in her place.<sup>18</sup> With extra time, Adam tried to identify a local purchaser who could provide Emily and the children the best living conditions possible. Owners had customarily allowed their slaves to propose their next owner. If the terms of both buyer and seller could be met, the enslaved had mitigated the impact of the sale or, in some cases, improved their situation. This system placed Adam in the center of a dehumanizing transaction, the sale of his wife and children. He undoubtedly used all resources available -- the goodwill of his owner, contacts made at the



markets, and the knowledge of his family members - to provide the best living situation for Emily and the children. Even with these best efforts, the fate of the family depended upon the prospective owner, in this case Colonel Livingston Gilbert Thompson of Meridian Hill, Washington.<sup>19</sup>

The Plummers could hardly take the sale to the Thompsons for granted. Mr. Hilleary did not accept the sale proposed by Adam until Emily and her children went up for auction in late 1851. By that time, Mr. Hilleary had waited for Emily's recovery from illness and the birth of her fifth child, Nicholas Saunders. With her six-week-old baby in her arms, her four other children by her side, and her husband watching, Emily stood on an auction block, awaiting the sale that would irrevocably separate her from her birthplace. A slave trader named "M\_\_\_\_\_" taunted Emily, proclaiming his interest in her two-year-old daughter Julia. Nellie Plummer recalled his harassment and her mother's visceral reaction in the family memoir:

. . . Snatching the bonnet from little Julia's head, [he] said, "this one will make a fine maid for my wife." As the mother had often heard how hard and cruel the M\_\_\_\_\_ were to their slaves, she couldn't stand to even think of being separated from 4-year-old-baby, and, although fore-warned by her husband to keep quiet, she burst out in tears, exclaiming, "For God's sake, don't let Mr. M\_\_\_\_\_ have my child! This



so insulted M\_\_\_\_\_ that he exclaimed "Why A'nty, what do you know about me? What do you know about me?" And he actually got to fighting with another trader. Meanwhile a friend of [Sarah Ogle Hilleary] snatched the bonnet from M\_\_\_\_\_ and, placing it on Julia's head again, stood her back beside her mother, saying, "You wouldn't separate the mother from that baby?" Breathing out vile oaths, M\_\_\_\_\_ answered, "Yes, by God! I am the one to make the niggers' heart ache. I care no more than I do taking a lamb from its ewe, by God!"<sup>20</sup>

Such resistance could have discouraged other potential buyers, as nearly all slaveholders listed compliance as a desirable attribute in a slave. It also created the type of spectacle reported by abolitionist newspapers to demonstrate the inhumanity of the slave system and thereby loathed by slaveholding interests.<sup>21</sup>

The Plummers faced retribution from both Tilman Hilleary and M\_\_\_\_\_ for Emily's behavior on the auction block, although she successfully blocked the sale of Julia. Mr. Hilleary went through with the deal to sell Emily, Julia, and Saunders to the Thompsons. This new plan separated nine-year-old Miranda and five-year-old Elias from their mother, as Hilleary planned to hire Miranda out in Washington and have Elias' aunts care for him at "Three Sisters." Meanwhile, the slave trader M\_\_\_\_\_ threatened to exceed the price offered by the Thompsons for seven-year-old Henry.<sup>22</sup>



Emily demonstrated that she would go to any length to protect her children from the cruelty of an owner. She so feared M\_\_\_\_\_’s violent nature that, on the day of hers and the children’s transfer to Meridian Hill, she took Henry to a cornfield, two miles from “Three Sisters,” to save him from M\_\_\_\_\_. Emily told him to hide there and not to answer anyone but her, while she returned to “Three Sisters.” She intended go back to him, after things settled, and then drown him and herself. Meanwhile, Adam packed her belongings to transfer her and the children to Meridian Hill. During that time, Adam learned that Mr. Hilleary had changed his mind. Perhaps convinced by the protests of Adam and Emily, he decided to sell Henry to the Thompsons. Greatly relieved, Emily confessed her plan to Adam and instructed him to find Henry in the cornfield. When he returned unable to find him, Emily went back to the exact spot she left him and brought him back to the family.<sup>23</sup>

The sale definitely left both Adam and Emily in a worse position than before. December 2, 1851, the date of Emily’s transfer, was remembered as a turning point for the family. Adam and Emily could not possibly feel safe from the slave trade again. Emily found the sale heart-wrenching, as it separated her from her mother, brothers, and sisters by approximately



fifteen miles. Initially, they needed to keep in touch with Miranda, although in 1852 Mrs. Thompson hired her for \$1 per month and thereby allowed her to live with her mother. For Adam, his travel time to Meridian Hill was probably similar to the time spent going to "Three Sisters." Perhaps because Mrs. Thompson did not allow as frequent visits as Miss Hilleary, Adam's visited Meridian Hill once every two weeks and sometimes weekly, somewhat less frequently than his weekly visits to "Three Sisters."<sup>24</sup>

The living conditions were also far worse for Emily at Meridian Hill. The sixth child was born in early August 1853. Because of neglect, the baby girl, named Marjory Ellen Rose Plummer, died less than one year later in late June 1854.<sup>25</sup> The living quarters were dingy. Again, Adam transformed the place by carrying household items purchased from his earnings to her. An inventory in his diary indicates that he outfitted her kitchen with a stove, a white teapot, cooking pots, twelve stoneware plates, vegetable dishes, twelve tumblers, six wine glasses, a coffee mill, pitchers and more. He also provided furniture such as three glass lamps, two bedsteads and two tables in addition to flat irons.<sup>26</sup>



The Plummers had barely adjusted to Meridian Hill, when another family will sundered the family. In this case, the owner had not died, but the mistress's father. He left Mrs. Thompson an estate known as Woodlawn, located outside Ellicott City. In 1855, Emily and the children, including one-year-old Margaret, moved first to Mount Hebron, where they waited one year for their transfer to nearby Woodlawn. This transfer, which left the Plummers with even fewer options than the sale in 1851, placed approximately twenty-six miles between Adam and Emily. The train offered Adam his only means of transportation. In addition to paying for the ticket, he needed a travel pass and more release time from his owner to make the visits. As a result, he saw Emily and the young children only twice a year.<sup>27</sup>

With so few visits, the Plummers depended upon news, received from letters to each other and mutual friends. Emily was certainly more isolated. Of course, Adam brought news of Miranda and Elias as well as her mother, brothers and sisters. Their friend, William Dorsey, a free black man who often visited his enslaved wife at Woodlawn, brought messages from Adam to Emily.<sup>28</sup> By far their most important means of communication were the letters written to each other. While Adam could write his own letters, Emily relied upon her owners to write and deliver





her letters to her husband. In all likelihood, Emily understated her problems. In one letter dated September 21, 1856, Mrs. Thompson, on Emily's behalf, wrote that she "is quite well and likes this place very well if she could only see and hear more of you."<sup>29</sup>

In their letters, both Adam and Emily grieved the separation of their family and feared the break up of their marriage. The receipt of each letter somewhat allayed these concerns by affirming the writer's commitment to the reader. Adam so valued the letters that, for a short time, he kept an inventory of the letters received from Emily.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the letters could be upsetting. On March 2, 1856, Emily wrote to ask for a visit, but the long trip discouraged him. In his diary, he wrote: "I think I shall never be comfortable again \_ but O my God."<sup>31</sup> Shortly thereafter, on April 20, Emily wrote to him:

I was sorry to hear that you should say you and I are parted for life, and am very much troubled at it. I don't think I can stand it long. What do you mean? Does your master say he will not let you come any more? Or what is the reason you say we are parted for life? I should like to understand your difficulties very much.

. . . You have a good master and a good house, and I want you to do all you can to please him, but I hope he will let you come and see me and your children sometimes. It is heart-breaking to think we are parted. Write to me soon and tell me what your difficulty is. I can't think it is your wish to give me up for another wife.<sup>32</sup>



Emily's forceful letter and Adam's continuing fidelity hardly put to rest such concerns. After not hearing from Emily for three months, Adam wrote "i sopose you have a wish to Heire form your childrens and not form me." A little more than a year later, Adam responded to similar concerns expressed by Emily: "you are mistaken that I do not wish to here form you and the Childrens, for i have some things for you and your Childrens."<sup>33</sup>

While Adam's literacy enabled him and Emily to maintain a relationship, his skills threatened members of the Hilleary family, the owners of Emily's family, the Arnolds. Sarah O. Hilleary, Emily's former owner, claimed that, if she had known that Adam could read and write, she would not have allowed the courtship.<sup>34</sup> Her heirs shared such apprehension. In 1857, they had intercepted a letter from William Robert Arnold, whom Adam taught to read and write and by then lived as a free man in Canada. This intrusion triggered a series of tragic events. Fearing that Nellie Orme Arnold and her daughters Marcelline, Sallie and Ellen would run away, the Hillearys sold them. After staying in an Alexandria slave pen, the traders took the women to Richmond, but decided to send Nellie Arnold back. When Rosa and Marjory heard their mother was coming back, they ignored warnings of a snow storm and went to meet her. The snow drifts



were so high that they did not make it to the adjoining plantation.<sup>35</sup>

The story ends with a letter to Emily from Adam read to her by an insolent and intrusive master. When Adam wrote of her sisters' deaths and her other sisters' sale, Emily burst into tears. The intermediary who read the letters to her, Mrs Thompson, responded to her grief "if this is the way are going to cry and behave, I'll read no more of your letters!" Emily stood her ground, "If that is all the sympathy you have for me in my awful distress, I will never ask you to read another letter. . . ." Soon thereafter, Sarah H. Nicholson, the Thompsons' seamstress, accepted and read Emily's letters to her<sup>36</sup>

Emily never hesitated to confront her owners, particularly to protect her children. Each incident instigated talk of her sale to the Deep South. Her master, Colonel Gilbert Livingston Thompson, was cruel to his servants. Emily unstintingly defended her children from his cruelty, by often yelling out to her children to run away from him. On one occasion in 1858, he called nine-year-old Julia into the kitchen, but she did not immediately respond. He hit the child over the head with a trunk strap that cut her so badly she needed stitches. When Emily questioned the necessity of this punishment to him



directly, he called in the constable to whip her bare back. She refused to submit to the whipping. A fight between Mr. Thompson and Emily ensued. After he struck her with a cane, she returned the blow by striking him with the goose that she was preparing. He then threatened to shoot her. Cornered in her living quarters, Emily used a chair to block Mr. Thompson and the constable effectively. Although the incident prompted serious talk of her sale, Emily had protected herself. The Thompsons never whipped Emily, even though they whipped other slaves. In that way, she protected her children.<sup>37</sup>

Adam did not give physical protection of his children as Emily, yet he provided gifts that improved their conditions and provided tangible reminders of his fidelity. In between family visits and his work on the Calvert farms, Adam continued to raise money for his family by cultivating his provision grounds and taking extra work.<sup>38</sup> These earnings enabled him to enhance Emily's living quarters at Mount Hebron and Woodlawn. He provided gifts of ribbon, stockings, and produce to Miranda. She later asked for eggs, celery and a "good slip of that grape vine."<sup>39</sup>

Adam could not protect Miranda from sale in the wake of John Brown's Raid in Harper's Ferry in December 1859, an event



that frightened area slaveholders. In October 1860, Miranda planned to visit her mother as she had just borne twins, Robert Francis and Nellie Arnold. She never made the trip, as her owner asked to meet with her. Letters from Reverend Samuel Clark, a Methodist preacher from Georgetown and Miranda's employer, kept her mother informed of the developments between October 26 and November 10. Adam learned of Miranda's sale in late October. With Clark's solid recommendation, the family scrambled and pled with their owners to find a new owner for Miranda. There was little chance. By November 10, the Hillearys sold Miranda to a notorious slave trader for \$1,000. With tensions mounting, it was difficult to find a local buyer able to meet that price. During her two-month detention in an Alexandria slave pen, Miranda never saw a single member of her family. When she arrived in New Orleans, she wrote bitterly of her disappointment that her family but especially her father never visited. They did not see her again until October 1866.<sup>40</sup>

As the tensions erupted into the Civil War, Adam and Emily knew that freedom was near at hand. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, only applied in states disloyal to the Union. Maryland remained loyal, and, therefore, retained slavery until the new state constitution abolished it in



November 1864.<sup>41</sup> Enslaved people, the Plummers included, could not wait and took matters into their own hands. Emily encouraged nineteen-year-old Henry to run away on his own, and he soon joined the U.S. Navy. With five children in tow, Emily ran away from the Thompsons one evening in early October 1863. Still considered a fugitive slave, she knew that she and her children could be picked up by any number of authorities - slave catchers, the U.S. military and her owners. On her way to Riversdale, she employed a guide who, instead of taking them closer to Riversdale, only took them further away. The family ended up in the Baltimore jail for two months, where the wardens employed Emily as a cook. Colonel Thompson tried to claim them as his slaves, but could not pay their jail fees and in effect forfeited them. As a result, the jail did not keep her and Adam picked his family up. Reunited, with the exception of the three oldest children, the Plummers began to taste the sweetness of freedom. They had no worries that Henry and Elias would return to them, though they feared that they had forever lost Miranda.<sup>42</sup>

In an effort that involved and ultimately benefited the extended family, the Plummers brought Miranda back to Prince George's County in October 1866. Adam and Emily asked their son Henry to travel to New Orleans to look for Miranda. They needed



\$250 for round trip passage for himself and one-way passage for Miranda. Savings of \$129 covered part of the fares, and Adam borrowed the remainder from family and friends, the largest loan of \$50 from George Kent with others much smaller amounts, including a \$5 loan from his sister Betsey Plummer. Adam sent Henry with a note that identified him and his purpose: "Oct. 11, 1866. . . Adam F. Plummer gives his son, Henry V. Plummer permission to go L.A. New Orleans in Jefferson City on Napolion Avenue, between Fchoupitoulas and Jersey, for his eldest sister, Sarah Miranda Plummer."<sup>43</sup> When he found her, Henry learned that Miranda had married in November 1863, borne her first child Thomas Benjamin Howard in September 1864, and lost her husband and nearly her child during a smallpox epidemic in June 1865. At least two weeks earlier than expected, Miranda and Henry surprised everyone and returned with her child. Upon her arrival, Miranda began a revival and converted several family members and friends to the Baptist faith. After a year of attending services in Washington, they established the First Baptist Church of Bladensburg (later known as St. Paul's).<sup>44</sup>

By 1868, the Plummers established an independent homestead, after purchasing ten acres of land near Riversdale. In size, this farm fell short of the ideal of "forty acres and a mule"



for most freedpeople. Yet, the Plummers fared considerably better than most black farmers who had little choice but to pay rent or a share of their crops to landowners. Within this system, most African-American farmers went into such debt that they could not break free of their contracts. The Plummers had a few things in their favor. Adam managed the Calvert plantation successfully and thereby knew the markets and stores in the area. In addition, his household members could secure work and contribute their wages to support the purchase. In addition, his large extended family was a continual means of support<sup>45</sup> Still, the family needed to scrimp to meet the terms of the seller, devised to place the Plummers in debt: "I will sell you the land you spoke to me about for \$1,000 one half cash and the balance in 6 & 12 months. If you want it you had better let me know at once! As there is another person after it."<sup>46</sup> With the help of his family and friends, on July 14, 1868, Adam paid the first payment of \$344.75 and promptly followed with \$160.25 on September 26, 1868. Within little more than a year, Adam managed to convey the final payment with interest.<sup>47</sup> As few other freedpeople, Adam succeeded in meeting the terms of a usurious land speculator. He had borrowed money from family and friends, but returned all of it by 1872. Dubbed





"Mount Rose" because Adam had planted hundreds of rose bushes, the homestead served as a home for the family and became a symbol of their triumph over slavery.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout their lives, Adam and Emily placed their families at the center of their lives. Despite their painful separations, they managed to maintain contact and raise their children as best they could. Though their efforts could not diminish the power of their owners, they created a strong network of family and friends who proved a constant support in slavery and freedom. Their personal qualities - Adam's work ethic and fidelity and Emily's courageous defense of her children - improved their living conditions and protected their children from cruel punishments inflicted by their owners. In doing so, a large group of family and friends sustained them. These relationships, more than the earning abilities of each family member, enabled them to build their homestead and become leaders in a strong, vibrant community after emancipation.



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<sup>1</sup> The literature on enslaved families is vast; the work that has most influenced this characterization is Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz looks at how enslaved parents dealt with their owners' authority over enslaved children, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). For a different approach to the topic, see Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to say how Adam learned to read and write. In some cases, enslaved people enlisted the cooperation of a member of their owners' family or a cooperative white person, such as a minister. More often, they learned from other enslaved people. Any of these means is plausible, in Adam's case. There is no evidence of recriminations by his owner, George B. Calvert, who certainly knew of Adam's skills and probably embraced them. After all, literacy was a distinct advantage when haggling at markets. See Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Nellie A. Plummer's reminiscence is *Out of the Depths or The Triumph of the Cross* (reprint edition: New York: G.K. Hall, 1997); she reprints many of her parents' letter in this book, but she also turned over several letters to Carter Woodson that he used in *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860* ed. by Carter Woodson (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1926) 523-528. Most of the letters in the Woodson anthology do not appear in Plummer's book.

<sup>5</sup> On the emergence of a stable African-American population in the Chesapeake, see Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 68-73.



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<sup>6</sup> For Adam Plummer's account of his grandfather's activities in the Revolution, see *The Plummer Diary*, Anacostia Community Museum, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Law Calcott used the legal records to determine the fate of Nellie Beckett's children with George Calvert. She found that they received their freedom and lived in Maryland. Nellie Arnold Plummer related that Calvert sent the children to Pennsylvania. It is possible that the two versions of the story can be reconciled, but it is clear that Calvert's children with Nellie Beckett received their freedom. See Calcott, ed., *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert: 1795-1821* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 378-384 and Plummer, *Out of the Depths* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997), 11.

<sup>8</sup> *The Plummer Diary*, 27; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 386-387.

<sup>9</sup> On the migration of enslaved people, whether by family transfer or sale, to the Deep South, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 266; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slavery* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003), 226-230.

<sup>10</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 11-12, 19-20

<sup>11</sup> *The Plummer Diary*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> For a particularly insightful portrayal on the provision grounds, see Dylan Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 45-78.

<sup>13</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 20, 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 20, 28-29; Paul Sluby and Stanton L. Wormley, comp., *Black Marriage Records in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Columbian Harmony Society, 1988), 94.



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<sup>15</sup> Adam recalls his wedding day in *The Plummer Diary*, 159, 169. Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *The Plummer Diary*, 12, 14.

<sup>19</sup> For Adam's version of these events see *The Plummer Diary*, 12; Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 32-34.

<sup>20</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> On the public auction, see *The Plummer Diary*, 12. On January 6, 1853, *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.) reported on an agonized mother whose grief-stricken outburst at an auction managed to prevent the sale of her deaf eighteen-year-old son to a slave trader, though her daughter was sold to Georgia. See also Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> There is a discrepancy in Nellie Plummer's account of the retention of Miranda. She incorrectly states that four children went with Emily to the Thompsons. The Hillearys held onto Miranda and Elias Plummer; Emily had only three other children at that time, *Out of the Depths*, 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> A little frustrated with her son, Emily asked why he didn't answer his father. According to Nellie Plummer, the obedient boy responded: "Mother, you told me not to answer **anybody** but you!" [Emphasis, Plummer's] Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 35-36.

<sup>24</sup> See the *Plummer Diary*, 169, where Adam notes the date of his marriage and 1851, and Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 38-39.

<sup>25</sup> Adam notes her birth and death, *The Plummer Diary*, 13; Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> *The Plummer Diary*, 137-38; Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 37-38.



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<sup>27</sup> Nellie Plummer transcribed three of the passes written by Adam's owner, Charles B. Calvert in *Out of the Depths*, 43. In a letter to Emily, he confessed that he got on the train "without Libity's." Adam Plummer to Emily Plummer either March 8, 1858 or April 3, 1859 in *The Mind of the Negro*, ed. Woodson, 524.

<sup>28</sup> Emily refers to some news received from William in Emily Plummer to Adam Plummer, July 2, 1856 in *The Mind of the Negro*, ed. Woodson, 523.

<sup>29</sup> Because of her sadness, Mrs. Thompson arranged for daguerrotypes for Emily and Adam. This was the only photograph ever taken of Emily Plummer. M.A.T. Thompson to Adam Plummer, March 2, 1856 in Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 43-44, 46.

<sup>30</sup> The Plummer Diary, 16-17.

<sup>31</sup> The Plummer Diary, 159.

<sup>32</sup> Emily Plummer to Adam Plummer, April 20, 1856, transcribed in Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Plummer to Emily Plummer, March 18, 1858, and April 3, 1859 in *The Mind of the Negro*, ed. Woodson, 524-525.

<sup>34</sup> Miss Hilleary learned that Adam taught Robert Arnold how to read. Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 48-54. Adam notes the deaths of Marjory and Rosa in The Plummer Diary, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 41-42.

<sup>38</sup> Adam took extra work from a neighbor in August 1859, see The Plummer Diary, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> For a list of gifts given to Emily and Miranda between 1852 and 1853, see The Plummer Diary, p. 12; Sarah Miranda Plummer to Adam Plummer, December 2, 1859 in *The Mind of the Negro*, ed. Woodson, 526.



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<sup>40</sup> While detained in the slave pen, Miranda never received any visits from her family. It is not entirely clear why no one from the family made it to see her, though it is certainly easy to imagine the obstacles. In her letter to her mother, Miranda claimed that her grandmother Nellie knew that she was in the pen. Upon her return to Riversdale, her mother said that she did not know she was in the pen for two months. Sarah Miranda Plummer to Emily Plummer, May 24, 1861, *Out of the Depths*, 74-75. This letter is also reprinted in *The Mind of the Negro*, ed. Woodson, 527-528. For Clark's letters, see transcripts in *Out of the Depths*, 72-73.

<sup>41</sup> For the leading account of emancipation in Maryland, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> In May 1862, Elias had run away from "Three Sisters" to take refuge with his aunt in the District of Columbia. Adam had seen a notice in the newspaper that Emily and the children were in the Baltimore jail. As soon as he could, he went to Baltimore; the wardens were ready to release Emily by that time. Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 80-85, 88.

<sup>43</sup> The pass is in the Plummer Diary, 17. He lists the loan amounts and the payment dates for each in The Plummer Diary, 7-8. This is reprinted in Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 89-110.

<sup>45</sup> In his diary he noted the wages received for work performed by Emily, July and Saunders in late December 1863. Although documentation is lacking in 1868, it is not difficult to presume that he was receiving wages earned by his wife and children then as well. Plummer Diary, 164.

<sup>46</sup> The Plummer Diary, 176.

<sup>47</sup> For receipts from the seller of B.F. Guy and legal fees for the mortgage transfer, see The Plummer Diary, 31, 178-183.



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<sup>48</sup> Nellie Plummer relates that Guy's neighbors had challenged him for selling land to a black family. He replied "Don't worry, they can't raise that money. In time, I'll take the land back," in Plummer, *Out of the Depths*, 106. Some white people were willing to do business with Adam, as George H. Calvert in 1876, *The Plummer Diary*, 103. After Adam's death, Elias filed a claim in Equity Court in dispute over a five-acre parcel with the rest of the family; the log cabin was razed by a new owner in 1922. *The Plummer Diary*, 20, 45, 56, 58.



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