

Adam Francis Plummer

A Case Study of Slavery in Prince George's County

From the age of ten Adam Francis Plummer was a slave at Riversdale plantation, which was owned by George H. Calvert, Lord Baltimore. His life was as difficult as most slaves, but Plummer still managed to accomplish things many slaves could not. An ex-slave, John Bowser, taught him to read; this provided Plummer with skills that not only enabled him to teach his children to read but also to keep a diary from 1841 until his death in 1905. His diary, an example of *first person voice*, provides insight into the daily life of a slave in Prince George's County.

Adam Francis Plummer was born in 1819 at George H. Calvert's Goodwood plantation. In 1829 the Calverts moved to Riversdale Plantation where Plummer lived until 1870, six years after emancipation. When George H. Calvert died his son Charles Benedict Calvert took over Riversdale. Over time Plummer was given more and more responsibility as well as certain privileges. Calvert allowed Plummer to use three acres of land and a mule, gave Plummer permission to sell whatever produce he grew, and to keep the money he earned. Plummer was also an artisan: working as both a carpenter and a shoemaker. Sometimes Plummer used these skills to work for others and Calvert allowed him to keep these wages as well. He did this work in addition to fulfilling his responsibilities as a field slave. Plummer used his diary to keep track of his jobs and wages.

In 1841 Adam Francis Plummer married Emily Saunders who was a slave at Three Sisters plantation in Lanham, Maryland. Their wedding was held at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. The marriage was considered legal and they were granted a marriage license. Both of these things were unusual because slave marriages generally occurred on plantations and they were not legal in the eyes of the law. Over the years Adam and Emily Plummer had nine children. Because he and his wife lived on separate plantations, Plummer was granted yet another privilege; he obtained permission to visit his wife weekly. In order to see his wife from Saturday night until early Monday morning he had to travel the eight miles from Riversdale to Three Sisters. Again, he was allowed to do this as long as it did not interfere with his duties as a field slave.

In spite of these advantages the Plummers did not escape the harshness of slavery. In 1845 they made a plan to escape, intending to take their children with them and head north to a

free state. They believed that they could use their marriage license as proof that they were free since it was very unusual for slaves to have a marriage recognized by the law. Unfortunately, Mrs. Plummer's aunt told her owner about the plan. As immediate punishment Mrs. Plummer was sent to work in the fields – other punishments would come later. In 1849 Mrs. Plummer and her four children were put up for sale. She was too sick to go; however, two years later she was sold to Meridan Hill in Washington, D.C. Three of her children were sent there as well while two of them remained at Three Sisters. Calvert loaned a wagon to Adam Plummer so that he could help his wife move to Meridan Hill. Four years later, in 1855, Mrs. Plummer and her children were moved to Mt. Hebron in Howard County, Maryland. Now Plummer could see his wife only twice a year.

At Mt. Hebron Mrs. Plummer lived in a dilapidated shack with dirt floors, and she was beaten when her master felt that she was not following his orders. Meanwhile, the Plummer's eldest daughter, Sarah Miranda Plummer, tried to escape from Three Sisters when the same aunt who betrayed her mother betrayed her as well. As a result in 1860 she was sold to a slave owner in New Orleans. The Plummer family was now truly separated and it became hard for them to believe that things would get better. Indeed, things did get worse. When the *Emancipation Proclamation* was enacted in 1863, Emily Plummer and her children went to Baltimore. They did not understand was that the proclamation did not free slaves in Maryland. So they were arrested and jailed as runaways.

In the end the family was reunited. Emily and her children were released from jail and placed into Adam Plummer's custody and they all returned to Riversdale. Although slaves in Maryland were set free in 1864, Adam Plummer decided to stay at Riversdale and work as a foreman. With the money from this job along with his savings he sent his son, Henry Vinton Plummer, to New Orleans to find Sarah Plummer. Because her father taught her to read and write, Sarah wrote her family, keeping them up-to-date on her whereabouts. On October 19, 1866 Henry and Sarah returned to Riversdale. Now they were all together again. Eventually the family moved into their own house. Built by Adam Plummer on ten acres of land he purchased, they all moved into Mt. Rose in 1870. Emily Plummer died there in 1876 and Adam Plummer in 1905.