



The Maryland State Archives Presents:

BENEATH THE UNDERGROUND: THE FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

AND COMMUNITIES IN ANTEBELLUM MARYLAND

An Archives of Maryland Electronic Publication



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Beneath the Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad, as traditionally understood, was a loose organization of abolitionists, anti-slavery societies, and vigilance committees based in the Northern states that provided aid to escaped slaves once they had escaped the Southern slave states. The Underground Railroad, however, was only able to offer very limited support to fleeing slaves while they were still in the South. While still in the South, fleeing slaves had to operate beneath the Underground Railroad, and rely on their own sources of aid and information to escape, with only the hope of further assistance once in the free states. This story of slave flight, and how the geography, laws, and communities of Maryland as a slave state aided or hindered escape, is the story Beneath the Underground: the Flight to Freedom seeks to reclaim.

What's New

[New Maps for Carroll, Cecil, Harford, Howard, Kent, Montgomery, Talbot, and Washington Counties added 2/3/04](#)

[Remaining District Maps for all Maryland Counties Added 2/18/04](#)

Flight in Focus

[Emmanuel Episcopal Church](#)

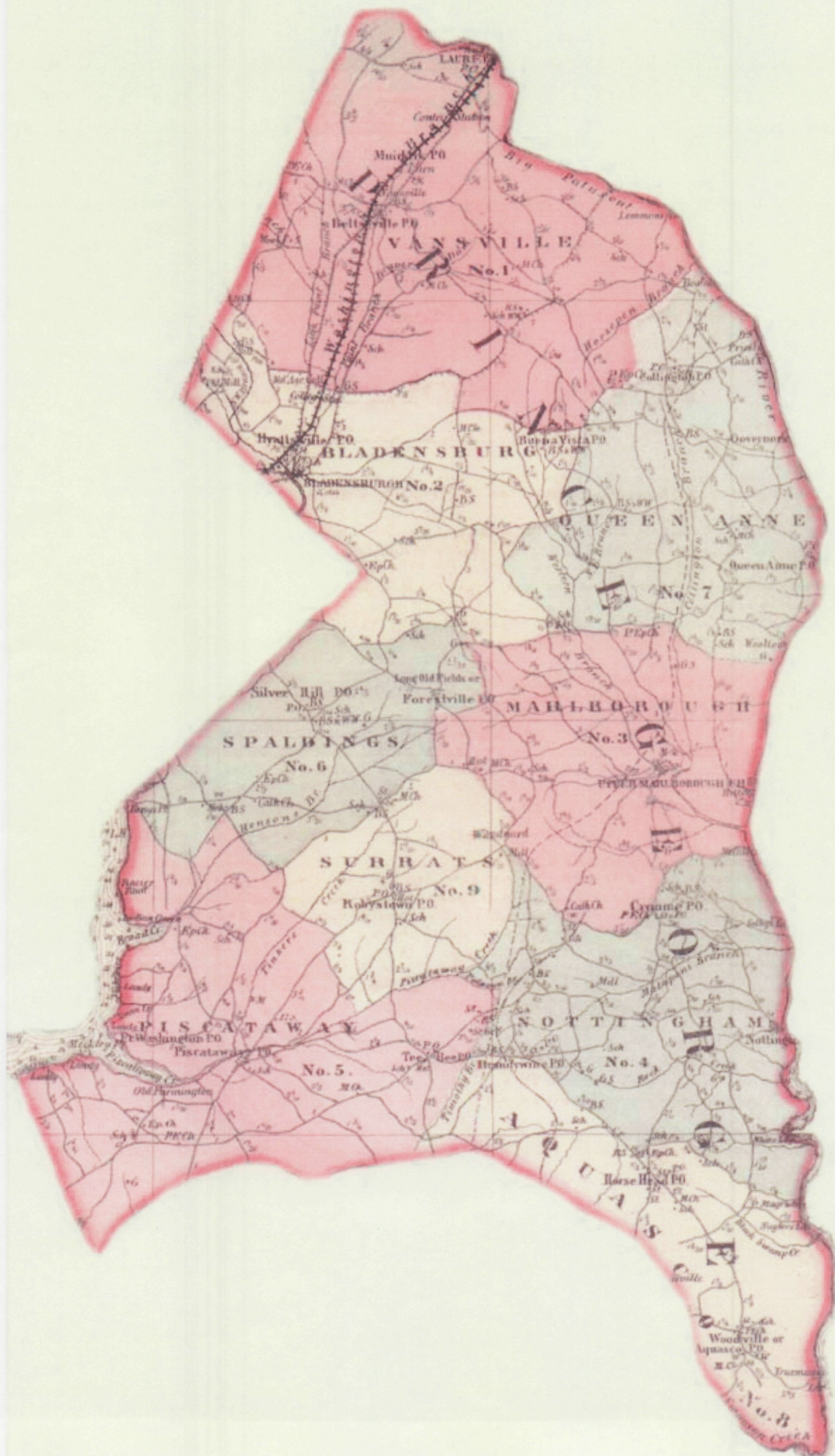
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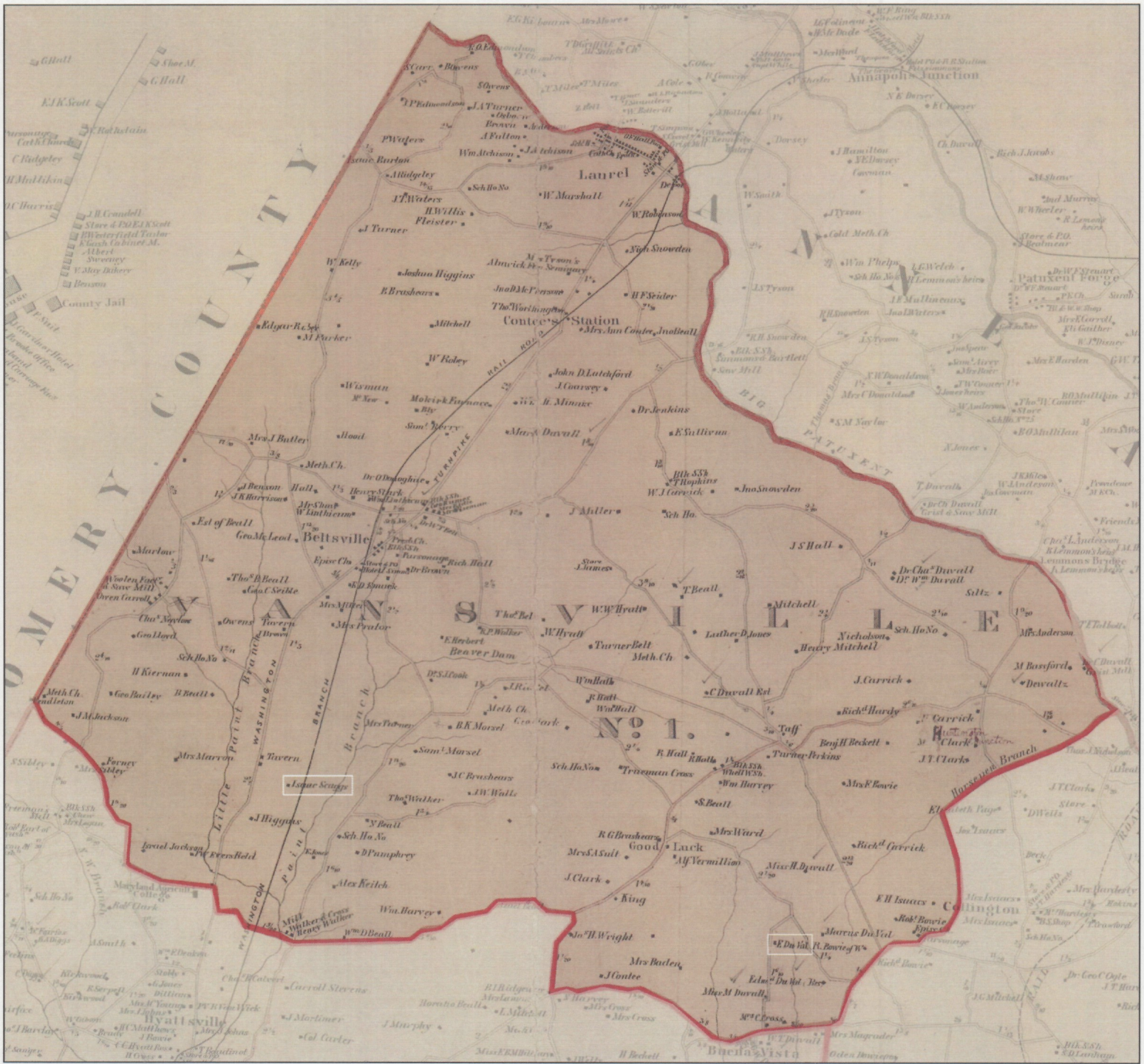
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Isaac Scaggs

Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)

Adam Smith (b. circa 1827 - d. ?)

MSA SC 5496-1288

Fled from slavery, Prince George's County, Maryland, 1857

Biography:

Adam Smith was a slave on the farm of Isaac Scaggs living near Beltsville in Prince George's County, Maryland. Adam described Scaggs as "a real country ruffian, member of no church and a great drinker and gambler. . . ." He owned eight adult and nine young slaves, including Adam's wife [Maria Smith](#) and their children Dall, Lem, Bill "Shug," and Ben. On March 4, 1854, Isaac Birch committed twenty-seven year old Adam to the D.C. slave jail as a runaway slave, and ten days later, he was released to Isaac Scaggs.¹ Neither the fear of getting caught nor the slave jail tempered Adam's determination to escape from slavery. He ran away three years later, on August 22, 1857, and he did not return. "Adam left because he 'didn't like the treatment'- twice he had been placed on the auction block."² Adam would never be placed on another auction block. With William Still's assistance, he escaped to Philadelphia along with two other slaves. About a week after Adam's disappearance, Isaac Scaggs placed another ad for runaway slaves claiming that Adam had enticed Maria Smith and her children to run away. There is strong reason to believe that Adam's mother, living in Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C., aided his escape. Adam found refuge in Philadelphia and then returned later to take his family with him to freedom.

1. (DC Department of Corrections Collection). Adam Smith, 1854, MSA SC 3170, M 9597.

2. William Still. *Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.* Philadelphia, PA: Porter and Coales Publishers, 1872, page 414.

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Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)

Benjamin Duckett (b. circa 1831 - d. ?)

MSA SC 5496-8398

Fled from slavery, Prince George's County, Maryland, 1856

Biography:

Born at Marietta, a plantation and manor house in northern central Prince George's County, Benjamin Duckett was enslaved by the Duval Family. Benjamin Duval (d. 1801) built Marietta upon a 150 acre tract purchased from part of a larger survey known as "Darnall's Grove." [Gabriel Duval \(1752-1844\)](#), Benjamin Duval's son, purchased the property from his father in 1784. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Gabriel Duval established himself as a country gentleman among the economic elite in the county. As an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court (1811-1835), Duval resided in Washington, D.C. for several weeks each year. Likewise, his duties on the Circuit Court saw him travel widely throughout Maryland and Delaware. He also conducted a private practice from a small law office on his plantation. Duval, like many Maryland elites, bred race horses, and traveled to competitions around the state. Gabriel Duval moved in the highest social circles, and James Madison spent a day and night at Marietta while on a country jaunt during his presidency (1809-1817). Official duties and visitors aside, life at Marietta was centered on families. Foremost in this way were the planter's family: the Duvals. Yet, the [slave quarters](#) at Marietta were home to numerous families as well. The total number of slaves at Marietta during the Antebellum years fluctuated between thirty-five and fifty. Along with Gabriel, other Duvals living at Marietta during the nineteenth century held African Americans there. Included among these slaveholders were Gabriel's son, Edmund (d. 1831), Gabriel's sister Delila, and his orphaned grandchildren, Marcus, Edmund, Mary, and Gabriella, who came to live with him and his wife Jane (d. 1834) in 1832. Life at Marietta remained active throughout the Antebellum Era (Click [here](#) to read a memoir of life at Marietta from the mid-nineteenth century).

Not only was Prince George's County the largest slaveholding county in the state, but Marietta's district during the Antebellum Era (Bladensburg, District No. 2), and its contiguous districts (especially Marlborough, District 3, and Queen Anne, District No. 7) held the majority of the county's slaves. It is likely, through a variety of characteristics and practices including the proliferation of a local slave trade which saw enslaved persons sold to nearby purchasers, that Marietta's blacks knew the people and environs around them. In the 1850's, in addition to the population on Marietta Plantation specifically, there were a number of large slave holders nearby. John Contee to the west held twenty-one enslaved persons. Future Maryland Governor [Oden Bowie](#) to the south, operated sizeable plantations with forty-seven slaves. Other plantations within five miles of Marietta included Bowieville to the south with fifty-four slaves, and Belair to the east with thirty-four slaves. The seventy-three enslaved blacks of then-former Governor [Samuel Sprigg](#) (to the west), the one-hundred twenty-three of planter Mordecai Plummer (to the south), and Charles Hill, Sr's one-hundred ninety-eight black slaves (also to the west), lived only seven miles from those enslaved at Marietta. In contrast to the large numbers of enslaved blacks held in Prince George's County, the free black population was miniscule. Yet slightly more than ten miles from Marietta was the large and growing free black community of Washington, D.C. Between 1830 and 1860, the enslaved population of the nation's capital fell from 2,330 to 1,774, while its free black number grew from 3,129 to 9,209.

As a boy growing into a man, Benjamin Duckett had known others around who resisted enslavement by running away. Successful or not, these acts of flight were examples to others. During Duckett's childhood, for example, one of Gabriel Duval's slaves, "Joe" fled. Again, his success is not known (though he had relatives in both Frederick City and Baltimore City, two prime points along the exodus out of Maryland). During his early teen years, transition at Marietta threatened the stability of Benjamin Duckett's family. Gabriel Duval died in 1844. After his death, the great body of his enslaved property passed to his grandsons, Marcus and Edmund B. Duval. Benjamin Duckett, his father, and perhaps a few of his five siblings, went to Edmund. Benjamin's mother, other siblings and kin went to Marcus. Legal designations notwithstanding, it is unlikely that any great physical distance was imposed on the family. Following the division of the traditional enslaved community at Marietta, resistance through flight continued. Young Benjamin doubtlessly knew many who ran, as both the Duval brothers experienced runaways, particularly Edmund, whose slave Randolph Jackson (b. 1834), used his familiarity with the region to attempt flight three times, 1853, 1855, and 1857!

At some point, probably between 1849 and 1856, Edmund Duval sold Benjamin to Zachariah Berry of Washington. The Berrys were prominent land holders in the county and Washington, D.C., and perhaps elsewhere. In 1849, Zachariah Berry's

father, Washington Berry of Washington County, District of Columbia, purchased a tract of land from Richard C. Bowie. To this he later added an adjoining tract, "Riley's Discovery," purchased from Edmund Duval. Located in the Queen Anne's District of Prince George's County, along the road leading from "the Brick Church" (modern-day Church Road), in the middle of the region called, "the Forest of Prince George's County," just across from the estate known as Bowieville, Zachariah Berry began organizing his father's operation at the newly acquired plantation called "Bellmont." The plantation became Zachariah's property outright at the moment of his father's death in 1856. At the time Berry began building his operation at Belmont, 11,510 enslaved blacks were held in Prince George's County. By far the largest slaveholding county in the state, Prince George's County accounted for thirteen percent of slaves held statewide (20 counties, plus Baltimore City). Belmont was located in the Queen Anne's District, No. 7 (created 1843). In 1850, a year after the Berrys purchased Belmont, sixteen thousand people lived in District 7, fully sixty-six percent were black, of those ninety-one percent were enslaved. Some of the largest holders of District 7 lived within walking distance of Belmont.

The details of Benjamin Duckett's life with Zachariah Berry are unclear. It is possible, for example, that he may have spent time, not only at the developing Belmont, but also at the other family plantations in Prince George's County, and perhaps even at the properties held in Washington County, as the norther portion of the District of Columbia was called. The Duval family held at least three plantations, including "Bellevue" on the Potomac River. Washington Berry received through a bill of sale executed in March 1855 from his son, Zachariah, nearly one dozen black slaves, including a twenty year old man named "Ben," along with farm animals, agricultural concerns, and household items. Perhaps this was Benjamin Duckett, who would return to Zachariah's ownership following Washington's death the next year. Whatever actual scenario unfolded, as Zachariah Berry attempted to solidify his Belmont operations with laborers purchased from nearby sources, he did a poor job securing his slaves. Numerous flight attempts from Belmont occurred throughout the 1850s. Hannah Dikes fled during June 1854. Before that month ended, at least two more of Berry's bondpeople, this time "Dick" and "Betsy," fled together. These two had familial connections to other plantations in Prince George's County, as well as others in Calvert County. The following spring and summer saw more escape attempts. Luke Carroll, an middle-aged enslaved man purchased from the estate of a local planter earlier in the decade, fled. So did Dinah Young, a women in her twenties who had experience in Baltimore and a husband in Calvert County. Luke Williams, who also fled Berry's plantation during Summer 1855, had kinfolk not only in Prince George's County but also in urban areas such as Annapolis, Baltimore, and even Philadelphia. Luke, in fact, was at least a two-time offender, having fled once before in 1851.

Perhaps emboldened and maybe even educated by earlier would-be fugitives, two slaves successfully escaped from Berry's plantation in the mid-1850s. Berry suffered the ignominy of not only losing two valuable slaves to flight, but having his loss recorded for posterity by William Still in his book *Underground Railroad*. One of those successful in getting free of Zach Berry was the twenty-five year-old Ben Duckett. When Duckett fled, September on 16, 1856, he was believed to have drawn on the kinship and friendship resources at his disposal on nearby plantations. His actual means and path to freedom has yet to be recovered, however. It is unknown if he went to Washington, D.C., Frederick City, or Baltimore. He may have traveled on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, or escaped on a ship on the Chesapeake. He may have gotten aboard an actual railroad, or contacted the Maryland-based agents of the Northern Underground Railroad for assistance. However he travelled, he reached Philadelphia in just under three weeks and was directed to William Still.

Another of Zach Berry's slaves, Jim Belle, was with his owner barely a year before he fled in July 1857. With a wife and mother-in-law, both presumably free, living in South Baltimore, as did other relatives and friends, and perhaps still other kinfolk living on the several Baltimore County plantations upon which he had been previously held, the options for assistance were considerable. How Jim made his way from Prince George's County to Philadelphia is not known with any specificity, and whether he actually knew Benjamin Duckett is also uncertain since their time on Berry's plantation overlapped by only a few weeks. Jim Belle's pursuers believed his family and friends in Northern Maryland were a resource. By whatever means, Jim reached freedom. At least three more of Berry's slaves, Frank Tyler (1858), Barbary Williams (1860), and Hagar Williams (1860) attempted to run from Berry through the close of the decade. Of them, at least the Williams Sisters had ties to several nearby plantations.

Details of Ben Duckett's life after reaching freedom evade historians. The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee's account books show that he was supplied with a small sum of money for continued passage northward. It was also standard practice of the Northern Underground Railroad to provide a list of contacts and letters of introduction to runaways. The late date during which he fled suggests that he headed for Canada, perhaps to St. Catherine's where hundreds of Maryland fugitives had gone before him. Zach Berry continued to advertise for Duckett's return through the end of the Antebellum Era, suggesting that his former owner also failed to discover Benjamin Duckett's final destination.

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Bladensburg



Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)

Susan (b. circa 1820 - d. ?)

MSA SC 5496-1448

Fled from slavery, Prince George's County, Maryland, 1841

Biography:

While pregnant, twenty-one year old Susan fled from slavery. Prior to July 1841, Susan lived in the Old Town section of Baltimore City, and likely enjoyed friendship and kinship connections there -- including, perhaps, a husband and father of her unborn child. Susan's owner, Jacob Schreck, sold the young woman to George W. Taylor, who immediately removed Susan to his farm near Bladensburg, Prince George's County, Maryland, some thirty-five miles to the southeast of Baltimore. On October 24, 2003, no more than ten weeks after her sale, the pregnant Susan fled from Taylor. Eye witness accounts place the woman back in Baltimore two days later, suggesting perhaps that she received assistance with her journey. No one matching her description was recorded in the Baltimore City Runaway Docket, which lists persons committed as runaway slaves.

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Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)

Thomas Berry (b. - d.)

MSA SC 5496-14839

Slaveholder, Prince George's County, Maryland

Biography:

Thomas Berry of Oxon Hill Plantation, on the Potomac in southeastern Prince George's County, utilized a sizeable enslaved labor force for much of the Antebellum Era. Given that other small to moderate holders resided in his neighborhood – in particular, [Dr. John Bayne](#) at Salubria Plantation – cross-plantation communities of the enslaved likely developed. In fact, the enslaved on one plantation came to know those on nearby plantations. Such connections were important for flight attempts. With Alexandria and Washington, D.C. nearby, and Baltimore or Frederick Town within reasonable distance, relatively minor assistance at the start of an attempt might be all the help would-be fugitives required. Many times, blacks for neighboring plantations fled together. Indeed, when Sam Tyler fled Salubria in December 1840, his owner, Bayne, suspected that he had run with one of Berry's Oxon Hill slaves, a man named Jacob Shaw.

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Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)

John H. Bayne (b. 1804 - d. 1870)

MSA SC 5496-10538

Slaveholder, Prince George's County, Maryland

Biography:

Dr. John H. Bayne, an influential slaveholder of Prince George's County during the nineteenth century, served as a state senator during the Civil War (1861 – 1865). One of most consistent roles Bayne played was to advocate for all Maryland slaveholders who witnessed their property literally walk away during the chaos of the conflict. Bayne frequently consulted the White House and Maryland's Governor to deal with the problem. In the end, however, neither Senator Bayne, nor his fellow slaveholders could stop self-emancipation efforts of enslaved Marylanders. Partially in recognition of this, Maryland lawmakers finally abolished slavery in the state with the Constitution of 1864.

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