

Slavery in Staunton and Augusta County, Virginia

Slavery began in Virginia in 1619 when a ship unloaded the first slaves from Africa. Slaves were typically from Sierra Leone, Togo, Benin, Senegal, and Nigeria in Africa. When settlers pushed across the Blue Ridge and into the Shenandoah Valley, many brought slaves to help farm the land. As the century passed, farmers became more dependent on slaves for farm work. Slavery also produced great profits when owners sold slaves or lent them to others for a fee.

Slaves were used mostly as farm laborers. Land owners such as the Crawford, Walker, Harmon, and McChesney families kept and worked close to fifty slaves. They also loaned their slaves to other farmers. In 1860, 251 slaves worked in flour mills. Distilleries used 118 slaves while sawmills employed 115. A total of 490,865 slaves in all were on the 1860 census. At the same time, free blacks numbered 58,042 and were often restricted by the same laws applying to slaves.

The buying and selling of slaves was big business. They were considered property and thus real estate. Joseph Smith, for example, was worth \$64,000 in real estate. He owned 46 slaves. According to the *Staunton Spectator* in 1863, a 21-year-old male slave was worth \$2,305. A slave woman and child brought \$1,500 while boy of thirteen cost \$2,410 on the auction block.

Many laws were passed to prevent slaves from obtaining freedom, traveling, or gathering in large groups. Slaves were not permitted to attend church with their masters nor go to school. They could not vote, marry, or stay together as a family. Freed slaves had to leave the state or be enslaved again.

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