

At Virginia's Liberia Plantation, growing interest in lives of its slaves



Linneall Naylor, left, who has discovered she is a descendant of a Liberia Plantation slave, talks with her daughter, Tammaria Henry, during a recent visit. (Victoria St. Martin/The Washington Post)

By [Victoria St. Martin](#) February 15

Peeking out on a wooded street in Manassas, the stately brick and white-trimmed mansion looks as though it has a story to tell.

Built in 1825, the Liberia Plantation house quietly stands as though watching guard. At the time of the Civil War, it was one of Prince William County's

largest slave-holding estates. But curators are beginning to unravel the untold stories of slavery that are spun into the fabric of this part of Northern Virginia.

For years, experts say, tours of Colonial plantations glossed over the stories and contributions of enslaved people. Over the past decade, driven by historical research, queries from the public and what one expert calls a new appreciation of the history of the African diaspora, plantations such as Liberia have begun to afford the accounts of slave life and culture a more central role that runs counter to the often romanticized depictions of plantation life.

For some, this emphasis on slave life is even reflected in discussions about such topics as the names of plantations.

At the Liberia Plantation, for example, scholars and historians have engaged in an extended debate about whether the name is a reference to the nation of Liberia, where African Americans settled in 1820, or a nod to the Libra sign of the zodiac.

The name was what first caught visitor Masaley Kargbo's eye.

Kargbo, a 32-year-old high school teacher, wanted to see whether there was a connection to the country, so she signed up for a weekend tour.

"My family is from Sierra Leone, and you don't find too many plantations named after another country," said Kargbo, who lives in Hyattsville, Md., and teaches at H.D. Woodson High School in the District. "I came to find out if there was truly a connection and what the historical meaning is behind the name."

The plantation's original owner, William James Weir, was a registered member of the American Colonization Society. The group thought slaves should be freed and sent to Liberia, which was largely founded by emancipated slaves, said Lisa Sievel-Otten, a historian who works for the City of Manassas.

“We suspect he named his house after his belief in this society,” she said.

The other theory is that the house was named after a zodiac sign, because Weir’s in-laws often nicknamed homes in that fashion.

Little is known about the lives of slaves at [Liberia Plantation](#). By 1860, Weir owned 80 slaves on the nearly 2,000-acre plantation.

The rest is a lot of guesswork.

It’s believed that slaves made a lot of the intricate woodwork inside the Liberia house. And the basement might have housed slave quarters, said Doug Horhota, a city program coordinator who conducts tours, pointing out the two warming ovens that once sat on either side of the basement.

Prince William historians do know that one of Weir’s slaves, Samuel Naylor, bought his freedom and 50 acres just before the Civil War. Historians say it was not uncommon for slaves to be paid a small stipend and later use that money to purchase their freedom. Local historians said the Weir family later gave Naylor’s wife, Nellie, an additional 10 acres adjacent to his after the war.

Linneall Naylor, 46, of Lake Ridge, Va., said she began researching her family history two years ago and discovered that she is the great-great-great granddaughter of Samuel Naylor.

“No one talked about it – it was such a touchy subject, especially for African Americans,” she said. “Slavery was such a hardship for families, and a lot of people moved to get away from the memories.”

But Naylor, who said Samuel Naylor was born into slavery in 1799, embraces the past and often visits Liberia Plantation.

“I was intrigued by it because there’s something standing there that you can relate to and visit,” she said. “I’m very fortunate to have that. You pick up on the energy and vibe of my ancestors.”

Derek H. Alderman, head geography professor at the University of Tennessee, whose research examines [how plantations tours include the history of African Americans](#), said public interest in slavery is growing.

“Many tourists do want to hear the slavery narrative,” he said. “They want to hear about the lives of the enslaved, and some of them actually come to the plantation seeking that narrative and seeking that story, and when they don’t receive it they can actually leave quite dissatisfied. “Many seek out a larger, sometimes very uncomfortable story because they’re trying to learn from the past and not just celebrate the past,” Alderman added.

Horhota said City of Manassas Museum employees have been sharing the history of African American lives at Liberia for a decade. He thinks that telling the full story of plantation life is mandatory.

“I think if we run away from our history, we forget what our history is,” he said. “You don’t have to oversell it or undersell it, but you need to share it.”

The next [Black History Month tour at Liberia Plantation](#) is Saturday , but Naylor said African American history should be celebrated every day.

“It should be celebrated all year around,” she said. “For me, it’s a 24-hour thing. And you don’t just have to learn about African American history — it’s about every culture’s history. I want people to explore that every day with open minds and hearts.”

The whole scene just seems eerie to Naylor’s daughter, 24-year-old Tammara Henry.

“It’s kind of creepy,” Henry said. “But it’s a humbling experience. To think they had to share a room and sleep on each other like sardines, it makes you think about how blessed we really are.”

During a recent visit with Henry, Naylor even whispered, "Hello," as she walked up the plantation house's steps. When asked to whom she was speaking, she said: "Oh, just my relatives."