

MARY

“Slave Mary was sentenced by the Court of Prince William to suffer death for arson.” That sentence, when found at the local court archives, was the beginning of my search to find out who Mary was and what recorded material was available about her. As luck would have it, enough information was found to give the following account of her life.

Mary was born in Prince William County in the year 1802. She was born into slavery and was considered the property of Thomas Fitzhugh. Not much is known about Thomas Fitzhugh other than he was single man who lived alone with upwards of three dozen slaves. Thomas hired-out many of his slaves and that often included Mary. At a very young age, she was sent out on short contracts as a house servant to many of the local people in the Dumfries area. This continued until she was sold to Mrs. Jane Baylor when Mary was about 10 years old. For the first time, she lived with a family, considered to be in the upper echelon of the community. She was with the Baylor family and considered their only house servant, until July 26, 1819, the day she was accused of arson.

Early in the afternoon on the twenty-sixth, Georgianna, the eleven year old daughter of Jane Baylor, was playing in the yard when she saw smoke coming from one of the rooms on the second floor of her house. She started shouting fire and with that her mother went running to the house to find the fire. They were met in the house by Mary, and the three of them quickly put out the fire.

In a deposition given by Georgianna, she stated that she had seen Mary in the house at various times that day and was the only person in the house at the time of the fire. None of the other slaves were ever in the residence.

Mrs. Baylor stated at the trial, that she questioned Mary about the fire, and she steadfastly denied she had anything to do with it. It was after many denials that she told Mary, if she would just confess and tell the truth about the fire no punishment would be given to her. At this time Mary reluctantly said she had started the fire but would not tell more. At this point Mrs. Baylor had one of her older male slaves take Mary, along with a note, to the house of her brother William A. G. Dade. The note explained that Mary had attempted to burn the house, and she didn't know what to do about it but didn't want Mary at the house anymore.

Dade told Mary to stay in one of his slave quarters until this all got sorted out. This she did for three days, unrestrained, and made no attempt to escape. At the end of three days and after seeking the advice of others, Dade took Mary to a magistrate and she was charged with arson. During the trial, William Dade said that at some point, in the days between the time of the arson and charges, he questioned Mary as to why she set the fire. According to Dade, she stated that she thought if the house burned down, the family would move back to Dumfries. She also stated she didn't like the country and was much happier when she lived in town. It was also stated that Mrs. Baylor had been considering moving back to Dumfries for some time.

At the trial Mrs. Baylor and her brother William both testified as to the good character of the defendant and they did not want her punished more than the minimum. But under Virginia law at that time, the only punishment for this crime was death and, indeed that was to be the sentence. In a letter written to the governor, many men of the town signed a letter pleading for mercy, as no one wanted to see her put to death. This letter was signed by Jane A. A. Baylor (the mistress of the Slave), Wm. A. G. Dade (a witness at the trial), Philip Hanna (the attorney for the Commonwealth), Phil D. Dawe (clerk of the court), Peyton Norvill (deputy sheriff and the

arresting officer), and the following magistrates: Jno Gibson Jr., Barnaby Cannon, J. Lawson, John W. Tyler and John Macrae.

James Patton Preston, the Governor of Virginia, granting the request of the Dumfries residents changed the sentence to transportation outside the limits of the United States. He also ordered her to the state penitentiary in Richmond to await sale. She was at the penitentiary for about six months before being sold along with 16 others to a buyer at auction. It is not know what happened to Mary but she probably was either sent to a plantation in the Deep South or to one of the islands. In either case, the only thing is certain her life only got worse.

Ron Turner