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Slavery at White Haven

I never was an Abolitionest, [n]ot even what could be called anti slavery, but I try to judge farely & honestly and it become patent to my mind early in the rebellion that the North & South could never live at peace with each other except as one nation, and that without Slavery. As anxious as I am to see peace reestablished I would not therefore be willing to see any settlemen[t] until this question is forever settled.¹

—Ulysses S. Grant, 1863

Thus wrote Ulysses S. Grant to his friend and political ally, Senator Elihu Washburne, in August 1863. A national resolution to the issue of slavery would, in Grant's view, restore peace and reunite the North and South. In addition, it would resolve differences of a more personal nature between families divided over the slavery question. Grant understood the tensions such families felt, because he found himself in a similar situation. Growing up in Ohio, Grant was under the domineering tutelage of his abolitionist father, Jesse Root Grant. In 1848 he married Julia Dent, the daughter of a Missouri slaveholder and a slave owner herself. As Grant saw it, the abolition of slavery would not only reestablish peace in the nation, but in the personal lives of its citizens, his included.

The end of slavery would also mean a new life for the African Americans held in bondage throughout the country. Slaves at White Haven, the home of Grant's wife's family, lived and labored with Grant between 1854 and 1859, when he farmed the land for his father-in-law, Colonel Frederick Dent. The interpretation of slavery at White Haven, now known as Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, provides insight into Grant's subsequent treatment of African Americans, as well as an understanding of slave life on a 19th-century Missouri farm.

According to historian Lorenzo J. Greene, most slaveholders in Missouri owned few slaves—those who owned 10 were considered rich.² In the city of St. Louis, slavery was said to exist “only in name,” where a large contingent of freed men and women were available to work as house servants and unskilled laborers. Colonel Dent's plantation of over 1,000 acres was only 12 miles distant from the city, but its rural setting was conducive to the perpetuation of slavery, where hired hands were scarce unless they were a neighbor's slaves. By 1850, a total of 30 African Americans lived and worked in bondage at White Haven and in the Dent home in the city of St. Louis.³

According to Emma Dent Casey, Julia's youngest sister, there were 18 slave cabins located on the Dent plantation, a short distance behind the main house. During Grant's ownership of the property in 1867, he instructed his caretaker, William Elrod, to tear down a number of cabins on the property, presumably all that remained of the former slaves' homes.⁴ Today that portion of the original estate is part of a suburban home development, and no evidence has been found of these cabins. Archeological artifacts discovered in the winter and summer kitchens provide some clues as to the lives of the white and African-American residents of White Haven. Evidence suggests that one or more slaves may have lived in the winter kitchen, located in the basement of the main house. Remains of animal bones indicate that slaves were eating the poorer cuts of meat from slaughtered pigs and cattle.⁵ Julia recalled that her father bought kegs of herring for the slaves, and that they were provided with everything that the farm produced, fruits, meat, poultry and vegetables.⁶

The responsibility for planting, nurturing and harvesting these crops fell mainly on the slaves. Although Colonel Dent owned some of the best farm machinery available, the tasks of operating the machinery and gathering the harvest were left to the field hands. In 1858, Grant wrote his sister Mary that there were “three negro men, two hired by the year and one of Mr. Dents, which, with my own help, I think, will enable me to do farming pretty well, with assistance in harvest.”⁷ Dan, one of the slaves given to Julia by her father, and other slaves were there to help Grant cut the logs and build his cabin, Hardscrabble. They also helped him cut and load the wood which Grant sold in St. Louis.⁸

One of the individuals who worked with Grant was William Jones, a mulatto, about 35 years old in 1859. Grant purchased William Jones from Frederick Dent. When and why Grant purchased him is unknown at present, the only known record of his existence being the manumission paper Grant filed in St. Louis Circuit Court on March 29, 1859. Grant's emancipation of William Jones occurred about the time the Grants were preparing to move to Galena, in the free state of Illinois. Grant's willingness to free Jones contrasts with Julia's decision to hire out the four slaves she owned. Where Jones went after leaving White Haven is a matter of speculation. Years later, as Ulysses and Julia were returning home from their around-the-world tour, Julia met Henrietta, one of Emma's former slaves, in San Francisco. She was introduced as Mrs. Jones, but Julia did not indicate in her memoirs if she was the wife of William Jones.⁹

Maintenance of family and personal integrity was difficult for African-American slaves in any period or location, and White Haven was no exception. Slave census records do not record names which would allow us to track the stability or movement of slaves on the farm.

At White Haven, we have the unique opportunity to examine 19th-century Missouri farm life on a slave plantation. The National Park Service continues to research archeological, historical, genealogical, social, and cultural evidence to learn more about the lives of those individuals who lived and worked at White Haven. Such research will help us fulfill the dictates of the enabling legislation for Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, "to preserve and interpret . . . a key property associated with the life of General and later President Ulysses S. Grant and the life of First Lady Julia Dent Grant, knowledge of which is essential to understanding, in the context of mid-19th-century American history, his rise to greatness, his heroic deeds and public service, and her partnership in them."

Notes

¹ Ulysses S. Grant to Elihu B. Washburne, August 30, 1863, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, (Carbondale, 1982), vol. 9, p. 218.


- ² Lorenzo J. Greene, et al. *Missouri's Black Heritage*, (Columbia, MO, 1993), p. 28.
- ³ Fifth Census of the United States, 1830 Population Schedules—Missouri, p. 326; 1850 Federal Census, pp. 507, 583.
- ⁴ Emma Dent Casey, p. 2; LeRoy H. Fischer, Ed., "Grant's Letters to His Missouri Farm Tenants", p. 28.
- ⁵ James E. Price, *Description of the Artifactual and Ecofactual Archeological Specimens Recovered from the Winter Kitchen at the Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site*, February, 1996, pp. 1-3, 5.
- ⁶ Julia Dent Grant, p. 34.
- ⁷ Ulysses S. Grant to Mary Grant, March 21, 1858, *Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 340-1.
- ⁸ Walter B. Stevens, *Grant in St. Louis*, (St. Louis, 1916), p. 26.
- ⁹ Ulysses S. Grant, March 29, 1959, *Papers*, vol. 1, p. 347; Julia Dent Grant, p. 42, 311.

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Copy of the manumission paper freeing William Jones in 1859.

I know all persons by these presents, that I Ulysses S. Grant of the City & County of St. Louis in the State of Missouri, for direct good and valuable considerations hereunto moving, do hereby emancipate and set free from Slavery my Negro man William, sometimes called William Jones of Mulatto Complexion, aged about thirty five years, and about five feet seven inches in height and being the same slave purchased by me of Frederick Dent - And I do hereby manumit, emancipate & set free said William from Slavery forever.

In testimony Whereof I hereunto set my hand & seal at St. Louis this day of March A.D. 1859

U. S. Grant 

W. S. Hillier