

In Pursuit of Letters: A History of the Bray Schools for Enslaved Children in Colonial Virginia

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The pursuit of literacy is a central theme in the history of African Americans in the United States. In the Western tradition, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others have observed, people of African descent have been written out of “culture” because they have been identified with oral traditions. In that setting, literacy signifies both reason and civilization. Performance in print earned the laurel of humanity. Consequently, for well over 200 years, the African-American literary tradition has been defined as one in which books talked and a few slave authors achieved, at once, voice and significance by making a book talk back by writing.¹

Overlooked by that tradition are those literate slaves who did not make the book talk back. Largely ignored are the stories of how they learned to read and/or write. As such, this essay is not a history of enslaved Africans and/or African Americans who were lettered, slaves such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, or Frederick Douglass. Rather, it is a history of how otherwise unlettered enslaved blacks achieved literacy. Building on Carter G. Woodson’s seminal study of slave education from the colonial period to the Civil War, E. Jennifer Monaghan’s recent work on reading and writing in early America, and others, this essay celebrates the life of enslaved African Americans like Isaac Bee,

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¹Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Preface: Talking Book,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed., Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), xxviii. For a fuller account of the talking book, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127–69 and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3–79. For a wider discussion of the early African-American belletristic tradition, see Robert B. Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil. A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); and William L. Andrews’ *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

a literate, unlettered Virginia-born man and, more specifically, how he gained that knowledge of letters.

His story—though scattered and fragmented—compared to that of Equiano and others, offers us a constructive narrative that can be used to examine at least *one aspect* of what can only be characterized as the African-American literacy tradition; a tradition that lies at the intersection of black literacy and orality. For in reconstructing the story of how Isaac Bee learned to read and write, particularly from the Bible, one can better understand both the richness and depth (perhaps even the very roots) of certain black religious traditions, such as slave spirituals, which were more than likely shaped and reshaped by numerous unlettered slaves like Bee.² These early considerations and examples of literacy in the colonial African-American past may indeed explain how it came to be that eighteenth and nineteenth century enslaved African Americans found inspiration and solace in the laudable figures of the Old Testament.³

²Antonio T. Bly, "Literacy and Orality" in *World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States*, Volume 1, ed. Martha B. Katz-Hyman and Kym S. Rice (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 11–15.

³The historiography on slave education in colonial America is limited. Carter G. Woodson's *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* is perhaps the earliest known comprehensive account. Originally published in 1919, Woodson examined how slaves achieved literacy, and how those efforts changed over time and space. Following in Woodson's footsteps, subsequent historians have revealed more about slave efforts to gain knowledge of letters in early America: Thad Tate, for example, the Bray school in Williamsburg, Virginia and Jennifer Oast, the Bray school in Williamsburg and Fredericksburg, Virginia, as well as two failed schemes to start similar schools in York Town and Norfolk, Virginia. Arguably, the most extensive account of the work of the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray is John C. Van Horne's *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery*. In that edited collection of letters between the Bible society and its associates overseas, Van Horne offers an exhaustive picture of the Bray schools not only in Virginia, but also throughout British North America. Specifically, he focused on the success of the school in Philadelphia. Jeffrey H. Richards's recent study of Samuel Davies and his work among the enslaved in Piedmont, Virginia demonstrated yet another aspect to Woodson's narrative. Significantly, Richards expands upon George W. Pilcher's earlier work on Samuel Davies. In a similar fashion, E. Jennifer Monaghan's *Reading and Writing in Colonial America* contributes to the scholarship in this field. In that extensive study of education in British North America, Monaghan has added to the historical discourse concerning slave literacy by revealing that enslaved African Americans (very similar to white slaveholders) learned how to read and write separately and that in turn may explain why some slaveholders were open to instructing their slaves in reading. The same could not be substantiated when it came to slaves learning how to write.

In contrast, this essay builds on this body of scholarship in several ways. First, it reveals the stories of several unofficial Bray schools in colonial Virginia. Second, it offers a more extensive profile of the African-American children who attended those Bray schools and a biography of Isaac Bee, himself a Bray school scholar. Third, it establishes the African-American literacy tradition as a useful framework to acknowledge the uncelebrated lives of African Americans who were literate but unlettered, thus, complicating the current emphasis on African-American belle letters. Finally, in establishing the African-American literacy tradition, it contributes to current scholarship about slave re-

Bee's story began not at birth but when his name first appeared in the written record. For the reader, the mulatto lad's story began at a school in Williamsburg started by the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray. Founded in 1724, the England-based group used religion to ameliorate the plight of people of African descent in the New World. In keeping with Isaiah's injunction, to "seek ye out the book of the LORD, and read," the Associates of the Late Dr. Thomas Bray es-

ligious culture, more specifically the rich symbolism of slave spirituals, such as Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and others who have written thoughtfully about slave music and culture. Surely, through unlettered slaves' readings of the Bible, many more enslaved African Americans discovered Moses, Jacob, and Daniel. For references within this note see, Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior 1861* (Washington, DC, 1919; reprint, New York: A & B Publishers Group, 1998); Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1965; reprint 1985); John C. Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy and the Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Jennifer Bridges Oast, "Education Eighteenth-Century Black Children: The Bray Schools" (master thesis, College of William and Mary, 2000); E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy," *Proceeds of the American Antiquarian Society* 108 (1998): 309-42; Jeffrey H. Richards, "Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 4 (2003): 333-78; George W. Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 64 (1966): 293-300; Pilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971); E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

For earlier accounts of slave education in colonial America, see C. E. Pierre, "The Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Part among Negroes in the Colonies," *Journal of Negro History* 1 (1916): 349-60; James B Lawrence, "Religious Education of the Negro in the Colony of Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 14 (1930): 41-57; Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (1931): 168-239; Mary F. Goodwin, "Christianizing and Educating the Negro in Colonial Virginia," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 1 (September 1932): 171-212; Edgar L Pennington, "Thomas Brays Associates and Their Work Among Negroes," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Association* 48 (1938): 311-403; Jerome W. Jones, "The Established Virginia Church and the Conversions of Negroes and Indians," *Journal of Negro History* 46 (1961): 12-23; and Carlos Antonio Brossard, "Indians, Economic Development and African Literacy in Colonial Virginia before 1660: A Study in Afro-American Literacy before Absolute Bondage" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1976).

For the more contemporary interpretations on slavery literacy in the field see, Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Christopher M. Span and James D. Anderson, "The Quest for 'Book Learning': African American Education in Slavery and Freedom," in *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby Jr., Delores P. Aldridge and Angela Hornsby (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 295-311; and, Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979; reprint, 1988).

established a series of schools that provided Christian instruction to slaves through letters.⁴ Similar to the Society for the Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) and the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.)—philanthropic Bible societies also started by Thomas Bray—reading represented a central part of their mission.

The idea for the school in Williamsburg came from Philadelphia's most celebrated adopted son, Benjamin Franklin. In 1757, John Waring, an English minister and trustee of the late Henry Wheatley's estate, sent an inquiry to Franklin as to whether any of the beneficiaries of the estate were alive and living in Philadelphia. The Anglican minister also had a second purpose in mind, one involving many more people. As the Secretary of the Associates, he wanted to know if there were any enslaved Africans and/or African Americans in need of instruction and conversion to Christianity. The Associates hoped to follow the successful example of the Reverend Griffith Jones of England, who, a few years earlier, dispatched "itinerant Schoolmasters" throughout Wales to teach "persons of all Ages to read," and to provide instruction in "religious knowledge" to all eager to learn. Waring was curious if similar efforts would work with "black Children" in the colonies. Like previous proponents of educating slaves, notably Morgan Godwyn and the Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, he thought it was somewhat futile to teach Africans recently imported to the colonies. He noted that they were "strangers to our Language," and commented further that "Little Good I fear can be done with them." The same was not true for the colonies' growing Creole population. Waring queried in his missive to Franklin, "Might Not the black Children born in the Providence be taught to read & instructed?" If enslaved African Americans could be taught, Waring deduced it would "have a very good effect upon their [morals?] & make them faithful & honest in their Masters Service."⁵

Franklin concurred. But before he agreed, he consulted the "Commissary & other Clergy in the Neighbourhood."⁶ At the time, Reverend Robert Jenney, the rector of Christ Church, served as the Commissary of the Bishop of London in Pennsylvania. He also conferred with William Sturgeon, a minister and schoolmaster, and perhaps the ablest of the men amid these discussions considering the Associates' plan. Since 1746, Sturgeon worked for the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in Philadelphia. His primary duty was to teach

⁴*Isaiah* 34:16 (*King James* version).

⁵Rev. John Waring to Benjamin Franklin, 24 January 1757 in John C. Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery*, 122–23. For a fuller account of Morgan Godwyn and Edmund Gibson's efforts to instruct African Americans in Virginia, see Antonio T. Bly, "Breaking with Tradition: Slave Literacy in Early Virginia, 1680–1780," (PhD dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2006), 82–147.

⁶*Ibid.*, 122.

catechism to the city's African Americans.⁷ That following January, 1758, Franklin responded. After contemplating the Associates' proposal, he confessed he thought it "fit to make of a Tryal of a School for Negro Children in Philadelphia." He also informed Sturgeon that he thought he would be the best "Person under whose Care it would be more likely to succeed."⁸

Still, Franklin had some reservations. A slaveholder himself, Franklin knew all too well that most in the colony did not share his moderate views on educating enslaved blacks. Always one to proceed with caution, Franklin expressed some concerns about how the school would be received in a town where most property holders owned at least one slave and only a handful catered to their slave's intellectual or moral improvement.⁹ "At present," Franklin explained, "few or none give their Negro Children any Schooling, partly from a Prejudice that Reading & Knowledge in a Slave are both useless and dangerous; and partly from an Unwillingness. . . to have their Children mix'd with Slaves in Education."¹⁰

According to Gary B. Nash's study of slavery in colonial Pennsylvania, Franklin gave the Associates an accurate report. Starting in the late 1750s, slaveholding in the colony expanded rapidly. By the late 1760s, slaves numbered about 1,400, roughly a twelfth of Philadelphia's population.¹¹ Possibly aware of the dynamics of these changing demographics, Franklin offered the Associates a modified proposal; one that would be more acceptable to the colony's landed and slaveholding elite. Perhaps, Franklin advised, "A separate School for Blacks, under the Care of One, of whom People should have an Opinion that he would be careful to imbue the Minds of their young Slaves with good Principles, might probably have a Number of Blacks sent to it."¹²

By February, Franklin amended this plan even further. After consulting with Sturgeon and probably with the rector and the vestrymen of Christ Church, he wrote the Associates to inform them of his new

⁷[Enclosure: Rev. William Sturgeon to Benjamin Franklin], 22 August 1757, in Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy*, 125.

⁸Benjamin Franklin to Rev. William Sturgeon, 3 January 1758, in Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy*, 124.

⁹David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 27–54. For a more comprehensive account about servitude in British North America, see Aaron S. Fogelman, "From Slaves, Convicts, and Servants to Free Passengers: The Transformation of Immigration in the Era of the American Revolution," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (June 1998): 43–76.

¹⁰Benjamin Franklin to Rev. William Sturgeon, 3 January 1758, in Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy*, 124.

¹¹Gary B. Nash, "Slaves and Slave Owners in Colonial Pennsylvania," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (1973): 223–56, esp. 237.

¹²Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, 3 January 1758, in Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy*, 124.

recommendations. "I am of Opinion," he proposed, "that for 30£ a Year, Sterling, a good Master might be procur'd that would teach 40 Negro Children to read; I think he could scarce do this Duty to a greater Number without an Assistant." Franklin also recommended that in addition to "Reading" and Christianity, the scholars should be taught "some useful Things." To that end, he suggested a mistress "might be best to begin with, who could teach both Boys & Girls to read, & the Girls to knit, sew & mark." "A good one," he noted, "might be had, I believe, for about 20£ Sterling, that would well instruct in this Way about 30 Scholars."¹³ The Associates approved Franklin's plan "to make a Trial of a School [but] for three Years," and requested from the post master a recommendation of "a proper Master or Mistress." By that March, their plan was on foot.¹⁴

On November 20, 1758, the Bray school in Philadelphia opened its door to thirty-six scholars. William Sturgeon served as the trustee. Following Franklin's advice, the Associates employed a schoolmistress at a starting salary of 20£. Her commission they made plain. As mistress, her charge was to teach "the Boys to read, the Girls to read, sow, knit, and mark; and to attend at Church with them every Wednesday and Friday; and that all her Endeavours are to be directed towards making them Christians." In other words, the children were to learn proper religious instruction in how to "say the Creed and the Lords Prayer, and other Parts of our Catechism." With these considerations out of the way, so began the school in Pennsylvania.¹⁵

Not even two years passed before the school proved itself a success. Franklin's wife Deborah certainly believed so. In 1759, after hearing the "Negro Children catechised at Church," she enrolled their slave Othello. The Associates were also impressed, so much so they elected Franklin a member and sought his advice in their efforts to start up other schools.¹⁶

Franklin welcomed the appointment and in short time proved a most useful member. Sometime in January, as the Associates contemplated expanding their missionary efforts in the colonies, Franklin played a significant role in determining where additional schools for

¹³ Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, 17 February 1758, in Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy*, 125–26. This is significant considering that most embroidery lessons may have included the use of samplers, it stands to reason that some slave girls who attended the Bray schools probably acquired rudimentary skills in forming letters in addition to learning how to read. According to E. Jennifer Monaghan's account, "embroidering a sampler was clearly the apex of the sewing curriculum." See Monaghan, *Reading and Writing in Colonial America*, 260.

¹⁴ Monaghan, *Reading and Writing*, 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135–36. Once again, as embroidering represented a form of penmanship, it seems likely that some of the female scholars learned how to write and read.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137 and 143.

enslaved children could be established. Possibly reflecting upon his close network of friends in the printing business, he judged “New York, Williamsburgh in Virginia, & Newport in Rhode Island” the “Most proper Places” for a possible Bray school. In Virginia, Franklin recommended William Hunter Esq., a postmaster and business partner, and “Rev. Dr. Dawson,” the President of William & Mary College “& the Minister of the Church at Williamsburgh,” as suitable candidates for the school’s trustees.¹⁷

The Associates were elated. Presuming a favorable response, they sent the trustees a parcel of books for school purposes. The parcel included five copies of Reverend Thomas Bacon’s *Four Sermons, upon the Great and Indispensable Duty of All Christian Masters to Bring Up Their Negro Slaves in the Knowledge and Fear of God* (1750) and five copies of Bacon’s *Two Sermons, Preached to a Congregation of Black Slaves* (1749). The box also included fifty copies of “Childs first Book,” an ABC primer, forty copies of Henry Dixon’s *The English Instructor* (1728), a colonial spelling book, and twenty copies of the *Book of Common Prayer* that contained the church’s catechism.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Hunter and Dawson approved. Rector of Bruton Parish, Dawson probably used the interval before worship services to encourage masters to enroll slaves, “Some of Each Sex.”¹⁹ The colony’s postmaster, William Hunter, may have also used his position to recruit others. To secure the services of a schoolmistress, the trustees circulated notices. Judging from extant records, many applied for the job. Of those who had sought the position, only two appeared in the letters that have survived. The first was a woman of Scottish descent by the name of Mrs. Thompson and the second Anne Wager, who was hired for the post. Of the former candidate, little is known. Although she failed to get the job, Mrs. Thompson later served as the Governess for the Reverend John

¹⁷Ibid., 144. By Wetherell’s account, most, if not all, of the early printers in British North America were either connected to Franklin by marriage or patronage or were once trained by the master printer. For a fuller account of Franklin and his interconnected circle of family, friends, and business partners in the printing business, see Charles Wetherell, “Brokers of the Word: An Essay in the Social History of the Early American Press, 1639–1783” (PhD dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 1982).

¹⁸Wetherell, 146; Monaghan, *Reading and Writing*, 259.

¹⁹Monaghan, *Reading and Writing*, 144–45. According to Philip Fithian, Virginians used Sundays as an occasion to preach and inform the public of current events. Philip Fithian, *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Plantation, 1773–1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 167. For a fuller account of the colony’s oral culture and the significance of public places such as churches and courthouse and the circulation of information see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1999), chaps. 5 and 6.

Blair, Jr. and for the Page family. Of Anne Wager, a good deal more is known largely because of her work as the Bray schoolteacher.²⁰

Wager was the widow of William Wager of James City County, who had died in 1748, leaving her with two young children to support. She earned a living as a private tutor for well-to-do Virginian families for more than a decade when the position at the Bray school opened up. Among her qualifications was two years' experience as the tutor for the children of Carter Burwell. Well connected to leading Virginians, Wager was a strong candidate for the post. The trustees appointed her schoolmistress in 1760, and she stayed on for fourteen years until her death in 1774.²¹

Having employed Wager, Hunter and Dawson turned their attention to procuring a building to hold classes. Securing a space was no small matter. Supplying the new school with books and paying for the schoolmistress' salary covered the Associates' end of the enterprise. Without an endowment to build a schoolhouse, as was the case of the Boyle legacy that underwrote the building of the Brafferton School for Native Americans, the trustees thought leasing a space a more sensible option. According to the extant accounts of the school's expenses, classes were held in several different locations. For the first five years, they were held in at least three different buildings owned by one Colonel Dudley Diggs, a York County grandee. Years later, the classes were held in at least two different houses owned by John Blair, Jr., another Virginia Burgess and the Deputy Auditor General.²²

²⁰Monaghan, *Reading and Writing*, 144 and 148.

²¹"Anne Wager: Biography," in *Freeing Religion: Resource Book*, comp. and ed. Julie Ritcher, Anne Willis, Martha Katz-Hyman, Michael Lord, Christy S. Matthews, Ann Parker, Kelly Ray, Lorena S. Walsh and Christopher Wyckoff (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 402–3; Monaghan, *Reading and Writing*, 153.

²²[Enclosure: The Associates of the late Revd. Doctor Bray in Acct. with Ro. C. Nicholas for the Negro School in Williamsburg], 27 December 1766, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 253–54; [Enclosure: Account of The Associates of Dr. Bray], 17 November 1774, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 325; Mary A. Stephenson, *Notes on the Negro School in Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1963), 4.

To judge from an earlier, yet unsuccessful, scheme to convert Native Americans in the Chesapeake to Christianity, religious instruction included literacy lessons as early as 1619. For a fuller account of efforts to instruct Native Americans in Colonial Virginia, see Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia, Volume 1* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 344–45, 362–73; Karen A Stuart, "'So Good a Work': The Brafferton School, 1690–1777," (PhD dissertation, College of William and Mary, 1984), 2–11; Terri Keffer, "The Education of the Native American in Colonial, with Particular Regard to the Brafferton School," *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* 21 (Fall 2000): 20–21. For an account outside Virginia, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write*, chaps. 2 and 6. Also see E. Jennifer Monaghan, "'She loved to read in good Books': Literacy and the Indians of Martha's Vineyard, 1643–1725," *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (1990): 493–521.

Finding a place was the least of the new school's problems. From the beginning, the trustees had a difficult time realizing the Associates' pious mission. Though they agreed to provide the students with books and other reading materials, Wager judged her stipend short in supply. While it is likely racial prejudice toward the school and gender bias were factors, there may have been other reasons the schoolmistress felt her stipend was not enough. Indeed, except for the colony's few parish schools, provisions for education were negligible.²³ Parents who could employed the services of a tutor. Before reaching their majority, sons of well-to-do families were sent to England for additional instruction. Before taking the position as the Bray school's mistress, Wager received £10 annually for schooling only a few children in such genteel settings. Conceivably, she may have thought her charge to instruct thirty was less than reasonable and asked for more money. Whatever her reasons, the trustees agreed; judging the "Allowance . . . not Sufficient," they gave her "the whole Sum as a Salary." By contrast, in Philadelphia and New York, £20 sterling proved an acceptable sum for the rent and the schoolmistress's salary.²⁴

To make up the loss, Dawson proposed to raise £20 sterling "by Subscription for the Payment of the House Rent." Nothing became of this initiative, however, and Dawson would die soon after proposing the idea. He died on November 29, 1760, and it does not appear that he had a chance to post a newspaper notice. With his passing went any plans for raising the funds to pay the rent for the school as Hunter, for his part, considered Dawson's plan to be both "petty" and "trifling." And he was unwilling to support it any further. Rather than encourage support through a public notice, Hunter recommended that the allowance for the school be increased to £30. What's more, in the wake of Dawson's passing, he nominated Robert Carter Nicholas, the grandson of Robert "King" Carter, as the school's new trustee.²⁵

²³Lyon G. Tyler, "Education in Colonial Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (April 1897): 219–23; Guy Fred Wells, *Parish Education in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Columbia University, 1923), 70–89; Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 70–84; and, Barbara Lynn Doggett, "Parish Apprenticeship in Colonial: A Study of Northumberland County, 1680–1695 and 1750–1765" (master thesis, College of William and Mary, 1981).

²⁴William Hunter to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 153; Richter et al., *Freeing Religion*, 402–3.

To judge from Franklin's initial correspondence with the Associates, a schoolmaster would generally receive £10 more than a mistress. In this context, Wager's demand for an increase in pay represents an instance of a woman insisting on equal pay for equal work and achieving it. In effect, she received a salary that was equal to that of her male counterparts in New York and Philadelphia.

²⁵William Hunter to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1761 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 153.

While the Associates elected Nicholas a trustee, they expressed doubts as to Hunter's proposal of raising Wager's pay. In Philadelphia and New York, they noted, the schoolmaster received "no more than 20£ Sterling per Ann. for 30 Children." Not "competent Judges what Salaries may be Sufficient," Waring asked the trustee why that pay was not sufficient in Williamsburg. Instead of pursuing the matter any further, however (which may have brought an end to their work in Virginia while it was still in its infancy), they deferred to what they called the "prudence" and "discretion" of the Williamsburg managers and raised the allowance. Their hope was that Virginians would agree to contribute the extra £10.²⁶

For that concession, the Associates expected one in return. Waring wanted more children attending the school so he asked Hunter to increase the number of scholars "to 30 agreeable to their first proposal, & to the Number instructed in their other Schools." In addition to pressing the trustee, Waring sent him another parcel of books. Before Hunter could comply with the "request," he died, leaving to Robert Carter Nicholas the matter of improving the school.²⁷

The son of two wealthy families in Virginia, Nicholas seemed an ideal choice for a trustee. After graduating from William and Mary, he became a respected Burgess. A grandee in his own right, Nicholas was also a devout Anglican.²⁸ Like Franklin, he initially expressed some doubts about the whole enterprise. Blacks, he suspected, were incapable of learning. But because the school promised to "promote Christianity," Nicholas set aside his reservations and prepared to advance the Society's plan.²⁹

In April 1762, the Associates tried to relieve the new trustee of his anxiety. "You say You have no very sanguine Expectations that the School will not answer our Design," Waring wrote Nicholas, "I hope good Sir, that in a Little time You will find Reason to alter your Opinion. We have a School at Philadelphia & another at New York, in both which the Success hath exceeded our most Sanguine Expectations." If you "will be so good as to visit the School once a week," he advised

²⁶Rev. John Waring to William Hunter, 1 June 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 157; Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 1 June 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 159.

²⁷Rev. John Waring to William Hunter, 1 June 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 157; Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 1 June 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 159. Besides recommending Nicholas as a trustee, Hunter also named Reverend William Yates as a prospective trustee for the school. Yates succeeded Dawson as both rector of the Bruton Parish and the President of the College of William and Mary.

²⁸[Biography: Robert Carter Nicholas], in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 344.

²⁹Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17 September 1761, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 164.

the indifferent trustee, "You will find that it will produce very good Effect . . . But this I ought to retract, because I am perswaded [sic] it is what You have already done."³⁰

Two months into his work, Nicholas still seemed ever doubtful. "I must own to you that I am afraid the School will not answer the sanguine Expectations [of] its pious Founders," he told Waring, "but we will endeavour to give it a fair Trial." Despite his apprehensions, the Williamsburg dignitary did make a fair trial as trustee. He "had the Number of Children augmented to thirty as desired" by the Associates.³¹

By that September, Nicholas' opinion changed. Evidently, while Waring was somewhat judicious to recommend a visit, it appears that he may have been right not to "retract" his suggestion. Sometime before the end of the month, Nicholas visited the school. In all likelihood, he took Waring's advice. Whatever the case, those visits succeeded in changing his mind. "We [Reverend William Yates (the school's new trustee) and myself] can only say in general," Nicholas wrote Waring, "that at a late Visitation of the School we were pretty much pleased with the Scholars' Performances, as they rather exceeded our Expectations."³²

Despite this new revelation, Nicholas remained still somewhat reserved. So Benjamin Franklin concluded after meeting with him on a visit to Williamsburg in June 1763, where he was to settle his accounts with the executors of William Hunter's estate. "He appears a very sensible & a very conscientious Man," Franklin reported to his overseas friends, "and will do his best in the Affair, but is sometimes a little diffident as to the final Success; in making sincere good Christians of the Scholars."³³

Apparently, Nicholas's doubts were not groundless. Many slaveholders, as he told it, sent their slave children for reasons that had nothing to do with the pious designs of the Society's founder. "We fear that People who have sent or would send their little Negroes to School," he told Waring, "would not do it upon the Principles which they ought." Instead, some used the school as a nursery, enrolling their children "to keep them out of mischief." Others took their slaves "Home again so

³⁰Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 4 April 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 171.

³¹Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 23 June 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 174.

³²Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 4 April 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 171; Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 184.

³³Benjamin Franklin to Rev. John Waring, June 27, 1763, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 198–99.

soon as they began to read” and before they were “made acquainted with the Principles of Christianity.” Such self-serving behavior, Nicholas believed, defeated the very purpose of their instruction.³⁴

To remedy the situation, Nicholas thought “a Set of Rules” was needed. So that the enslaved scholars would profit. He proposed, “Every Owner, before a Negro Child is admitted into the school, must consent that such Child shall continue there for the Space of three Years at least.” He also insisted that the children appear at school “properly clothed & kept in a cleanly Manner.” Possibly anticipating some objections, he proposed an inexpensive “one uniform” garment “by which they might be distinguished.” A “decent Appearance of the Scholars,” he explained, “especial when they go to Church” would “very likely to make a favourable Impression.”³⁵

Nicholas also proposed rules for the schoolmistress. Wager could only admit scholars approved by the Trustees. In addition, she must keep regular hours, opening the school at “seven O Clock in the Winter half Year & at six in the Summer half Year.” In keeping with the Associates’ goals, “she shall make it her principal Care to teach them to read the Bible, to instruct them in the Principles of the Christian Religion according to the Doctrine of the Church of England, shall explain the Church Catechism to them by some good Exposition, which, together with the Catechism, they shall publicly repeat in Church.” Moreover, her lessons were to go beyond foreswearing lying, cursing, swearing, stealing, and profaning the Sabbath. In other words, Wager should teach the enslaved children in school to submit and to be “faithful & obedient . . . to be diligent in their Business, & quiet & peaceable to all Men.” On Sundays, she would conduct “them from her School House, where they are all to be first assembled, in a decent & orderly Manner to Church. . . where she shall take Care that the Scholars, so soon as they are able to use them, do carry their Bibles & Prayer Books to Church with them.”³⁶

The Associates approved. “It gives Us uncommon pleasure to find ourselves,” they wrote Nicholas, to be “assisted by Gentlemen who seem animate with a truly christian zeal.”³⁷ Nicholas received this praise warmly and reciprocated, “It gives me great Pleasure to find that my former Letter had met with so thorough an Approbation.” Still, the

³⁴Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 184–86.

³⁵Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 187; [Enclosure: Regulations], in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 190.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 190–91.

³⁷Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, March 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 204.

Williamsburg's trustee tempered his pleasure with characteristic caution. "However I must endeavour," he continued, "to enforce them by Degrees; I assure you, Sir, however strange it may appear, 'tis a very difficult Business I engage in."³⁸

As for the school itself, Nicholas had little to add. Except for a few changes, the school continued as before. The classes were full; students attended regularly. Most finished after three years. At divine service, several of the enslaved schoolchildren showed up with their own Bibles and hymnbooks or Books of Common Prayer.³⁹

In December of 1764, Nicholas sent the Associates a list of the students enrolled. Nineteen were boys and fourteen were girls. Among that lot were Mr. Blair's John, Dolly, Elizabeth, Catherine, Fanny, Johanna, and Isaac. Like his previous list, Nicholas noted the children's owners and their ages. Notably, it is here where Isaac Bee's story begins. According to that roster, he began attending the school at age 7 (see Plate 1).

The following December, Nicholas sent the Associates an account of the school's expenses. Judging from that record, it appears that the location of the school had changed. By that time, Bee probably had learned his letters along with the Lord's Prayer. Every Sunday, he attended the Bruton Parish for service with the other Bray scholars. Daily, the African-American scholars were diligent in their work.

While the students were hard at work, the school's finances were precarious at best. Indeed, the slave children under Nicholas's care would be overshadowed by the correspondence he would send Waring of the financial health of the school in December of 1765. That correspondence would forever change the relationship he would have with Waring and the Associates of the Late Thomas Bray.⁴⁰

A year later, Nicholas sent the Society a letter that, in addition to making them aware of his recent appointment as the colony's Treasurer, revealed that the school was in financial trouble. "That we may not be confused," he explained, "I propose beginning a new Acct. & have therefore drawn on you for £37.10.8 Sterling the exact Balance which will be due to me the first Proximo."⁴¹

³⁸Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 21 December 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 222–23.

³⁹Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 21 December 1764 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 223; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 13 September 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 236; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 27 December 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241–42.

⁴⁰[Enclosure,] 27 December 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241–42.

⁴¹Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 27 December 1766, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 252.

A List of Negro Children who are at the Charity School in Williamsburg Nov. 1765

| | |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Mr. Campbell's young & Mary</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Mr. Davenport's William</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Hain's Jenny</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Doct^r Carter's Nancy</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Blair's John, Dolly, Elizabeth Catherine, Fanny, Isaac & Johanna</i> | <i>7</i> |
| <i>Mr. Burwell's Joseph & Davy</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Mr. Crenshaw's Molly</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Col^o Johnson's Squire</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Col^o Chismell's Remond & Johnny</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Mr. Charlton's Nancy & Davy</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Mr. Gwynne's Phillis</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Orr's Gitt & Jack James & Mal</i> | <i>4</i> |
| <i>Mr. Thompson's Charles</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Pinnaw's Elizabeth</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Thompson's Betty</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Ashby's Harry & John</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Mr. Vohis's Sal</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Watson's Sylvia</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Mr. Randall's Phi Roger & Sam</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>in all</i> | <i>34</i> |

Plate 1. List of Bray Scholars. November 1765. Bray Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford University. Isaac Bee is among those listed fifth from the top.

His explanation for the sudden change cited inflation and ever rising prices. "You may perhaps be surprised at the Difference of the Value of our Current Money," he wrote, "it is owing to the fluctuating State of our Exchange, which is now 25 per cent & I suppose will be considerably lower."⁴² Presumably, this change in exchange rates was caused by a slump in tobacco prices that occurred shortly after the Seven Years War. Probably still reeling from the Proclamation of 1763 and the Stamp Act crisis; Virginians' outrage only intensified when the crown elected to enforce the Navigation Acts to augment postwar debts. Despite it all, in the winter of 1767–1768, Nicholas drew "£30

⁴²Ibid.

Sterling” for the school Allowance and reminded the Associates it was not enough to “defray the Expenses of the present Year.”⁴³

The Associates were incensed. Though the school had from the very beginning given them more trouble than they would confess, by 1768, they were no longer acquiescent. “The Associates are thankful to You,” Waring wrote, “but when they first began this charitable work at Williamsburgh They did not intend to allow more than 20£ Sterling a year for its Support, & were in hopes that if that Salary were not sufficient, what was further wanting wou’d have been supplied by the charitable Contribution of the Inhabitants.” But, to the surprise of the Society, “They now find, by an Increase of Salary, & the Addition of Rent, your School stands them in more than 30£ Sterling whereas no other School costs us more than 20£ Sterling, Books excepted.” Rather than see the good work among enslaved African Americans end, Waring reminded Nicholas, the Associates “resolved to allow no more than 25£ Sterling.” In their judgment, Waring declared, the burden rested on the shoulders of the slaveholders whose responsibility it was to instruct them “in the way of Salvation, as his own Children.” Feeling personally insulted, Waring leveled an additional criticism toward Virginia’s slaveholders. “How can Gentlemen on Your Side of the Water,” he inquired, “expect that We on this shou’d Subscribe two, three, or four Guineas a Year apiece, as I have for many Years, to promote the Instruction of the Slaves of those masters, who themselves will contribute Nothing.”⁴⁴

Almost a year would pass before Nicholas responded. That February, over a year before Lord North would repeal almost all of the Townsend duties, a less than conciliatory Nicholas wrote back to Waring.⁴⁵ Put off that the Associates were not happy with his conduct,

⁴³Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 December 1767, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 263; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 39–74.

⁴⁴Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 20 April 1768, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 266–67. The hard line the Associates took with the Williamsburg trustees in private was not reflected in their public accounts. In Williamsburg, Waring, like any good public relations person, projected a positive image of cooperation between the Associates and the slaveholders in the in Virginia. See Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 35.

⁴⁵Following the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend duties of 1767 on paper, paint, lead, glass, and tea deepen the conflict between Great Britain and her North American subjects. Intend to generate revenue of the Crown; it united the colonists further in their push toward independence. As Pauline Maier pointed out in her study of the American Revolution, the Townshend Acts marked a pivotal moment in the burgeoning crisis and set the stage in Massachusetts for violence and bloodshed. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 113–57.

Nicholas conceded nothing. Quite the contrary, he judged both his actions and service honorable. True to form, he reminded Waring that he had his doubts: "When I first engaged in this Business. . . I could not but cordially comment the pious Designs of its Authors." And yet, despite his reservations, Nicholas chided Waring of how he braved "many Difficulties," in order to make considerable progress in the school he had been entrusted. Among those difficulties were the slave owners who made few efforts to instruct their children. "The Regulations which I formerly drew up & transmitted to you," he went on, "I was in hopes of carrying into Execution, but have been disappointed in several Respects," as most masters did not think much of his trespass of their authority.⁴⁶ Another difficulty, Nicholas confessed, was the Associates' unreasonable expectation as to the school's expenses. From the beginning of their endeavor, he noted, they accepted that they were "not competent Judges" of the school's account and therefore referred "that Matter entirely" to the trustees. But in truth they did not. Instead, they whined. Imagine "my Surprize," Nicholas wrote mockingly, "to find you complaining that I had advanced the Salary to £25 Sterling without proper Authority. . . My first Bills were only for £25 Sterling. . . [that is] when our Exchange was at 55, 60 & 40 per Cent but, when Exchange fell to 25 per Cent, you see that £30 Sterling yield not enough to pay the Salary & Rent."⁴⁷

The Associates were not moved. When Waring wrote back, he continued his assault. "Must it not greatly Surprize Us to find that Gentlemen possessed of opulent Fortunes, as many of the Inhabitants of Williamsburgh are," Waring observed, "have so little Generosity and publick Spirit as to refuse to contribute even in small Degree to the Support of an Institution calculated purely for their benefit?" Rather than honor their responsibility, he admonished Nicholas, they "choose to be beholden to the Benevolence of Strangers to instruct their Children, the young Negroes than to do it at their own Expence?" Astonished "that any persons descended from Britons. . . sho'd so far deviate from the Principles & Practice of their Progenitors," Waring reminded the trustee, that the burden of instructing slaves belonged primarily to the

⁴⁶Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 275–76. Considering the unfolding political crisis of the day as Virginians became more defiant and less differential, Nicholas's efforts to enforce his set of rules made have rubbed some slaveholders the wrong way who, in turn, projected their feeling toward Parliament onto him. For a useful account of these concerns, see Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (July 1974): 345–68.

⁴⁷Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 276.

slaveholders. At once cavalier and haughty, he declared, Virginia had “time enough for the Masters to get the better of old prejudices.” Frustrated and positive that their work in the Chesapeake was to little avail, Waring concluded the communiqué with an ultimatum: “If the Gentlemen at Williamsburg are willing to have the Negro School continue they may: but then They must engage to defray all Expenses above 25£ Sterling a Year. If these Terms, very easy to them. . . are *refused*, You are desired to put an End to the School at the End of this present Year 1769.”⁴⁸

While the two parties sparred over the school’s management, enslaved schoolchildren like Isaac Bee made a good report of himself. Like other Bray scholars, he learned the church’s Creed and Prayer. He also learned to spell, read, and recite parts, if not all, of the catechism. Each Sunday, alongside his peers, the enslaved child attended services at Bruton Parish. His owner, John Blair, was clearly impressed with his progress. In February, the President of the College of William and Mary enrolled Bee’s sister, Clara, possibly after her brother completed his lessons. Presumably, Clara was more precocious than her brother. As he had done when he enrolled her brother, Nicholas noted Clara’s age (four years old) when she was placed under Anne Wager’s care.⁴⁹

Around the same time Blair was enrolling Isaac’s sister, the residents of Williamsburg elected to keep the school open. His own reservations aside, Nicholas stayed on as a trustee. Ironically, instead of encouraging the well-to-do to pay a little, the mistress was made to pay. By reducing Wager’s salary, Nicholas solved the school’s financial crisis. Her charge nonetheless remained the same. And classes went on as before. That following year, things returned to normal. In January, Nicholas wrote the Associates in his usual manner: “with Regard to the poor Slaves in this Colony, I see very little prospect of our Wishes being accomplish’d.”⁵⁰

By 1772, the school’s prospects appeared to make a turn for the better. “Some few of the Inhabitants,” Nicholas explained, “do join me in contributing towards supporting the School.” But ever true to form, the trustee tempered his good news with his usual reluctance: it “is far

⁴⁸Rev. John Waring to Robert Carter Nicholas, 25 May 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 283–85.

⁴⁹[Enclosure: List of Negro Children], November 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241; [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 278.

⁵⁰Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 January 1770, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 288.

Table 1. Literacy Characteristics among Virginia Runaways as Reported by Their Owners, 1730–1776

| Periods | No. of ads examined | No. of literate runaways | Percentage literate |
|-----------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1736–1739 | 44 | – | – |
| 1740–1749 | 33 | 1 | 3.0 |
| 1750–1759 | 72 | 3 | 4.2 |
| 1760–1769 | 233 | 16 | 6.9 |
| 1770–1776 | 648 | 35 | 5.4 |

Source: Antonio T. Bly, “Pretends he can read”: Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730–1776. *Early American Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 267.

from being a general Disposition to promote its Success, the Reasons, which I at first foresaw & mention’d to you.”⁵¹

While all seemed well, it did not last. Two years later, Anne Wager died. According to Nicholas, although she continued to work faithfully with her scholars, she never truly recovered from an earlier sickness. Most likely, Wager had help. While the records are silent in that regard, it is reasonable to assume that the schoolmistress may have been aided by senior scholars who attended the school like Isaac Bee who could have just as easily assisted her in that work. Although we may never know this for certain, with her passing—as the school’s trustee predicted—died whatever hopes there were for continuing the school in town.⁵²

By the time, the Williamsburg school closed, a number of enslaved Virginians learned “the true Spelling of Words” and how to pronounce “& read distinctly.”⁵³ In its fourteen-year history, as many as four hundred scholars, if not more, received biblical instruction through letters. In all likelihood, they shared with one another, as well as others, the mystery of letters. Indeed, as Bly’s recent study of runaway notices demonstrated, increasing numbers of slaves were achieving literacy and perhaps using it to gain freedom (Table 1).

As theirs was a world in which their very ability to move about freely was limited, proscribed literally by words on papers, enslaved black Virginians more than likely understood the prophet Isaiah’s injunction to read more seriously, perhaps even intimately, than their white counterpoints had bargained. For reading held the promise of

⁵¹ Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 1 December 1772, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 310.

⁵² Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17 December 1771, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 305; Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 17 November 1774 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 324.

⁵³ [Enclosure: Regulations,] 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 190.

Table 2. Literacy Characteristics of Virginia Runaways as Reported by Their Owners, 1730–1776

| Periods | No. of notices | Percentage literate | Percentage read only | Percentage read and write |
|-----------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1740–1749 | 33 | 3% | – | 100% |
| 1750–1759 | 72 | 4.2% | 33% | 67% |
| 1760–1769 | 233 | 6.9% | 25% | 75% |
| 1770–1776 | 648 | 5.4% | 34% | 66% |

Source: *Virginia Gazette*, 1740–1776. Microfilm, Library of Congress.

writing and writing the opportunity for freedom. Although writing and reading were taught as separate skills in the eighteenth century, the number of literate runaways demonstrate (overwhelmingly one might add) that they mastered both. Presumably, after the school opened its doors, African Americans seized upon the opportunity to learn themselves how to write (Table 2).

That was certainly true of Isaac Bee, who according to Lewis Burwell seemed quite determined to write himself free. Indeed, years after he left the Bray school, Burwell so warned the public at large in a runaway notice he placed in the *Virginia Gazette* for the safe return of his bondservant:

MECKLENBURG, September 3, 1774. RUN away from the Subscriber, about two Months ago, a likely Mulatto Lad named ISAAC BEE, formerly the Property of the late President Blair, and is well known about Williamsburg, where I am informed he has been several Times seen since his Elopement. He is between eighteen and nineteen Years of Age, low of Stature, and thinks he has a Right to his Freedom, because his Father was a Freeman; and I suppose will endeavour to pass for one. He can read, but I do not know that he can write; however, he may easily get some One to forge a Pass for him. I cannot undertake to describe his Apparel, as he has a Variety, and it is probable he may have changed them. Whoever apprehends the said Slave and delivers him to me, or to Mrs. Burwell, in Williamsburg, shall have 40 s. All Masters of Vessels are forewarned from carrying him out of the Country. LEWIS BURWELL.⁵⁴

Jennifer Oast's study, which analyzed the rosters Nicholas sent from time to time, offers a more detailed account of other Bray scholars. The average age of most of the children was six; the median age seven. The sex ratio remained fairly even. In 1762, ten boys and fourteen girls attended; nineteen boys and fourteen girls in 1765. Four years later, the

⁵⁴*Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon)*, 8 September 1774.

school enrolled fifteen of each. Except for a few free blacks, twenty to thirty enslaved children attended at any given time.⁵⁵

Other insights are also discernible. For instance, it appears that many scholars were urban slaves who belonged to well-to-do families in or about the York and James City counties. That was the case of Peyton Randolph, the Speaker of the House of Burgesses, who owned almost thirty slaves. Between 1762 and 1774, he enrolled several of his slave children. Two years after the school opened, he sent Aggy, a seven-year-old enslaved girl. Impressed by her, the Speaker entrusted others to Wager's care. In 1765, he enrolled two more of his slave youth: Roger and Sam. In 1769, another slave child also named Sam attended the school.⁵⁶

Presumably, Randolph sent more. Considering their ages and the school's rosters, it is possible that several of Randolph's slave children attended the school in 1760. Three were girls (Aggy, Coy, and Sukey—who would have been enrolled at the age of eight) and two were boys (Dabney and Charles who would have been enrolled at the age of seven). If Randolph's Dimbo, a slave of Randolph's whose name appeared in the Bruton Parish register in 1750, attended the school in 1760, he would have been ten years old and perhaps the oldest of the Bray scholars.⁵⁷

While it is impossible to know for certain why the Speaker sent his slaves, it seems likely that he enrolled some out of a sincere sense of faith and/or personal responsibility. As early as the 1740s, as Philip D. Morgan and Anthony S. Parent's respective studies demonstrate, Virginian slaveholders likened themselves to the patriarchs of the Bible. In that role, biblical literacy instruction fell well within the purview of their newfound paternalism.⁵⁸ One of the best examples of this new emerging sense of responsibility comes from slaveholder William Byrd II when he sought to explain his "entire" family. "I have a large family," Byrd wrote in 1726, "Like one of the Patriarchs, I have my Flocks and my Herds, Bond-men and Bond-women, and every Soart of Trade

⁵⁵ Oast, "Educating Eighteenth-Century Black Students," 21–24.

⁵⁶ [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 188; [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], November 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241; and [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 16 February 1769 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 275. Also, see Julie Richter, "'The Speaker's' Men and Women: Randolph Slaves in Williamsburg," *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* 20 (2000): 47–51.

⁵⁷ John Vogt, ed., *Register for the Bruton Parish, Virginia, 1662–1792* (Athens, GA: New Papyrus Publishing Company, 2004), 33, 35, and, 36.

⁵⁸ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 284–96; Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of A Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 197–264.

amongst my own Servants.”⁵⁹ Like Byrd, Randolph may have also felt so inclined. Consider the slaves he had baptized at Bruton Parish. Of the twenty-eight slaves he owned at the time of his death, twenty-one were noted as being members of the Anglican Church. Fifteen—Effy, Charly, Lucy, Mars, Robin, Robert, Dimbo, Aggy, Coy, Sukey, Dabney, George, Lewis, Henry, and Charles—were children when they receive baptismal. Six—James, Humphrey, Sarah, Jane, Williams, and Robert—were adults.⁶⁰

If not for reasons of faith and conscience, Randolph may have done so at the behest of his children’s parents. As the church register suggests, almost a full third of the infants who belonged to Randolph recorded the names of their mothers that may demonstrate not only familial ties, but also the complex nature of master-slave relationships. It is also possible that Randolph may have observed the counsel of his older slaves.⁶¹ Whatever the case, some slave parents did have some say in the lives of their children. That was certainly the view of the school’s trustee. “The Children,” Nicholas explained to the Associates two years after the school opened, “we believe, have all been regularly baptized; indeed we think it is a pretty general Practice all over Virginia for Negro Parents to have their Children christened.”⁶²

Christiana Campbell, a tavern-keeper in town, also sent her slaves. In 1762, she enrolled three slave children in the Bray school. One was a boy named London, baptized in 1753. Though his age was listed as being seven, it is more likely, considering the parish register, that he was actually nine when enrolled. The other two were a boy and a girl: Shrophire and Aggy. Both were six when they started at the school. Three years later, Campbell enrolled two more: a girl named Mary and probably a boy by the name of Young. In 1769, Campbell’s Mary, Sally, and Sukey appeared on the school’s roster. Like Randolph, Campbell probably enrolled more of the slave children she owned, a number of whom may have attended in 1760. Similar to Randolph, her decision

⁵⁹William Bryd to Earl of Orrery, 5 July 1726 in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 32 (December 1924): 27.

⁶⁰For Randolph’s slaves baptized as adults, see Vogt, *Register*, 28, 33, 35, 36, 49, 53; Inventory and Appraisalment of the Estate of Peyton Randolph, 1 January 1776 in *Gunston Hall Probate Database*, <http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/RNDLPH76.PDF>. [accessed: 23 August 2009].

⁶¹Vogt, *Register*, 50, 54, 56, 58. To judge from the extant church registers, only few slaveholders noted the names of slave parents. In most cases, the owner’s name is only mentioned.

⁶²Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas to Rev. John Waring, 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 184.

may have been influenced by the adult slaves who helped her run the tavern, if not their parents.⁶³

That may also have been the case of Jane Vobe, owner of the King's Arm Tavern. Much like Campbell, Vobe probably thought of herself as a God-fearing, Anglican woman. Of the seven slaves she owned, three—Joe, John, and another boy whose name is lost because of damage to the record—were baptized at the Bruton parish. Judging from the church register, Nanny, Joe, and John's mother may have encouraged their mistress to have them baptized and sent to the school in town. While it is unclear if Vobe actually enrolled the two boys, she did enroll others. In 1765, she sent a male slave child by the name of Sal. Four years later, Vobe's slave, "Jack," appeared on the school's roster. The tavern-keeper may have also sent her slave boy Gowan to the school when it opened. If so, years later, Gowan would put his lessons to good use, starting one of the earliest known black Baptist churches in Virginia.⁶⁴

Besides the Williamsburg school, there was another in Fredericksburg. Though not as successful as its counterpart in James City County, enslaved African Americans there were nonetheless taught. Unfortunately, very little is known of those scholars partly because of the actions of a less-than-honest minister.⁶⁵

Encouraged by their successes in Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and in New York, the Associates set upon an ambitious plan of starting up more schools. In April 1762, they began sending out proposals and parcels of books along with letters of introduction. In Virginia, it appears that they had presumed too much. In York Town, for example, their efforts were futile. Though a shipment of books and letters were sent to William Nelson, a prominent merchant and planter, nothing came of the Society's efforts. For reasons still unknown, this fervent supporter of the Anglican Church failed to reply. Either he never received the Associates' communiqués or he chose not to reply.⁶⁶

In Norfolk, the Associates' plans came to the attention of Reverend Alexander Rhonnald. A schoolmaster and the rector of the Elizabeth

⁶³[Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 188; [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], November 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241; and [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 275; Vogt, 36. For a useful account of Christiana Campbell, see Richter et al. *Enslaving Virginia: Resource Book* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 610.

⁶⁴[Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 188; [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], November 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 241; and [Enclosure: List of Negro Children], 16 February 1769, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 275; Vogt, 39, 41, 50. It is important to note that if Gowan (whom by all accounts was literate) did not attend the school, he more than likely learned to read from one of the scholars sent by Vobe.

⁶⁵Oast, "Educating Eighteenth-Century Black Student," 38–47.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 32.

River Parish, Rhonnald not only declined their offer but also gave his reasons why he thought their plan would fail. Unlike Nicholas, who despite his doubts made efforts to educate and convert slaves, Rhonnald's reservations prevented him from opening a school. Judging from his response, he believed that few teachers in his parish were capable of instructing more than six pupils, far fewer than what the Associates expected. "If a Mistress must be had," he explained, "qualified with such Accomplishments. . . Such a One may be found Superannuated, who might instruct in some Measure about Five or Six, but there is not that Woman in this County Young or Old who could manage Thirty Negro Children, at one & the same Time." In addition, the stipend was much too low for him to entice a teacher to do the work. "Supposing that such a Mistress could be found," he wrote, "the Salary, if £20, is not much above half the Trouble. . . No Woman, however gracious, would undertake that Charge. I myself would be willing to add £5 of this Currency to the £20 Sterl., which will make it £30 a Year, but I can perceive none willing under £50 & a House found for that purpose."⁶⁷

Rhonnald also thought racial prejudices proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. Like other parsons in the colony who included African Americans in his covenant, Rhonnald incurred the scorn of his Virginian brethren who thought it improper to advance the well-being of slaves. The "worthies of the city," he recounted, used "Me with the most invidious Terms of Ill nature for my pains, & because I baptise more Negroes than other Brethren here & instruct them, from the Pulpit. . . I am vilified & branded by such as a Negro Parson." Not surprisingly, after considering his account, the Associates dropped their plans to start a school in Norfolk.⁶⁸

Undeterred, they pressed on. In 1763, an inquiry from the Associates came indirectly to the attention of James Marye, Jr., minister of St. Thomas parish in Orange County. Son of an Anglican priest, Marye, Jr. enjoyed a life of prestige. In 1754, for example, he attended William and Mary, where he prepared for the ministry. Before his formal ordination, the young man served for a time as a tutor for William Byrd III. After being confirm in England, Marye, Jr. returned home and become the rector of the St. Thomas Parish.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Rev. Alexander Rhonnald to Rev. John Waring, September 27, 1762 in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 180.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁹Though Marye was aware of the Associates' work in the Chesapeake as early as 1760, he was not directly approached by the Bible society until three years later. To judge from their correspondence, the London group probably thought Marye was a likely agent because of his work among slaves. By his own account, in addition to his mission to minister to the poor, the Orange County rector also baptized slave children "& many of the Adults likewise are desirous of Baptism." Rev. James Marye, Jr. to

Despite this privileged upbringing, it seems that the parson was a less-than-honest man, particularly in his dealings with the overseas missionary society. To judge from his letters with the Associates, he seemed given to exaggeration. In 1763, three years after assuming the post, Marye received a letter from the Associates. Like Rhonnald in Norfolk, Marye did not think a school for enslaved children could be established in Orange County because of sparse residency. "I gave you my Reasons for not Judging it proper to set up a School in my Parish for the Erudition of young Negroes," as he put it, "which were that the Planters live so remote for each other, that I could not place a School so that more than five or six perhaps would attend."⁷⁰

Though he thought a school would not realize any real success, Marye did believe a parochial library would be a benefit to the county. Ordained in England, he was undoubtedly aware of the Society's missionary work. On that basis, he asked the Associates to sponsor a library he wanted to start in his parish. "I have a convenient Room now fitted adjoining the Glebe House," he wrote presumptively, "for the Reception of what Books you will be pleased to send."⁷¹

The Associates took the bait and sent Marye books. But, there was another reason they underwrote his plans. Marye, in his correspondence, informed the Associates of a central location where another school might be established. As Mayre would write Waring, "There is a Town on the River to which all in these Parts trade, which makes it very flourishing & populous, where a negro-School might be place (I think) to great Advantage, which is about hundred & ten Miles distant from Williamsburg."⁷²

This exchange between Mayre and Waring, however, proved problematic. Although Fredericksburg was the town Mayre had in mind, the young parson neglected to mention that in his correspondence and once he received the free books for his parochial library, Marye lost all interest in assisting the Associates in the establishment of a school for slave children. Not surprisingly, Waring and the Associates were upset. Eventually, however, Marye apologized for his neglect and supplied the name. "You seem much disturbed that I neglected mentioning the Name of the Town," he wrote, "had I been certain that Evin's Map of Virginia, or Jefferson's & Fry's never fell in your Hands. . . [I would have told you the town I meant] is called Fredericksburg." What's more,

Rev. John Waring, 2 August 1760, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 149; John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 376.

⁷⁰Rev. James Marye., Jr. to Rev. John Waring, October 24, 1763, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 202.

⁷¹Ibid., 203.

⁷²Ibid.

after consulting his father and other town leaders, Marye retracted his earlier recommendation. "I acknowledge it was an Omission in me not to have mentioned the Name [of the town] in my last," he tried to explain to Waring, "I likewise inform you that being in the said Town since I wrote you, I made Inquiry what Number of small Negroes would be sent, should a School be set up there for the Purpose, & could not learn it would be possible to get above four or five or thereabouts."⁷³

Remarkably, all was not lost. In spite of his claims to the contrary, Marye misjudged the situation. If only to restore the family's honor, the elder Marye threw himself into establishing a Bray school, enlisting in that cause a number of leading men like Fielding Lewis, the brother-in-law of George Washington, a slave owner, and a Spotsylvania County Burgess. Understandably, the plan of the school resembled those established elsewhere. Lewis and Marye's father served as trustees; a mistress was hired at £20 pounds annually; a modest building was rented for classes; and on April of 1765, the Bray school in Fredericksburg opened its door.

Compared to its Williamsburg counterpart, the Fredericksburg school had a modest beginning. Rather than thirty or even twenty-five pupils, which marked the beginning of the school in Williamsburg, the new school started with sixteen slave children devoted to learning. "The School was opened [*blank in MS*] of April," Lewis emphatically reported, "and there are now Sixteen Children who constantly attend who have improv'd beyond my expectation."⁷⁴ "The minister of the parish his given me all the assistance he could," Lewis went on to report, "and has promised to call frequently and examine the Children; As they begin already to Read prittily [*sic*] there will be occasion for a few Testaments and Prayer Books. . . I shall in my next send you a Copy of the School Register wherein is enter'd the Ages of the Children and the time of their admittance."⁷⁵ Though no known roster survives, it is known that by 1766, Lewis succeeded in increasing the number of scholars by one to seventeen and that over the next several years the Fredericksburg school would teach between forty and fifty slaves to read.

By comparison, the Fredericksburg's school followed closely the example established in Williamsburg. "Mr. Nicholas," Lewis explained, "has furnish'd me with the Rules established at the School in Williamsburg which are so well calculated for the well Government of it, that I have establish'd the same in Fredericksburg." Considering those rules,

⁷³ Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, 25 September 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 218.

⁷⁴ Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, 14 September 1765, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 237.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

a fuller account of the school and its scholars can be discerned. In terms of the school's gender ratio, for example, there were probably equal numbers of scholars. In addition to learning how to read, the girls were taught how to knit, sew, and embroider. Irrespective of sex, all were taught to submit and obey their masters. In the winter, classes began at seven in the morning. In the summer months, they started at six. Most students went to the school for at least a term of three years. Students were also expected to attend dressed appropriately, most likely in a single cloth garment.⁷⁶

Like in Williamsburg, the school in Fredericksburg also experienced difficulty in realizing the pious design of its benefactors. Most notable were the school's problems with the indifferent slaveholders. "It gives me the greatest concern that so much Money should have been expended to so little purpose," Lewis wrote in 1772, "and [I] am of the Opinion that a School will never succeed in a small Town with us, as the Number of Negro's are few and many believe that the learning them to read is rather a disadvantage to the owners." Still, despite of the slaveholders' apathy, Lewis remained hopeful. Unlike Nicholas, he expressed no reservations about the Associates' plans. From the beginning, Lewis thought the school had promise. Whatever its shortcomings, the blamed laid primarily among the town's slaveholders.⁷⁷

He did, however, share Nicholas's conviction that slave masters enrolled their children for self-serving reasons. "I have the greatest reason to think that there will not soon be any greater Number," he wrote Waring in 1768, "for I observed that several have left the School as soon as they could read tolerably to attend in the Houses of the Proprietors, to take care of the Younger Negroes in the Family to which they belong." Like Nicholas, Lewis also came to believe that some of the town's slave owners used the school as a nursery.⁷⁸

Whatever the slaveholders' reasons, selfish or otherwise, enslaved blacks in Spotsylvania County and elsewhere did become literate. Some learned by attending the school in town; others learned from those who brought their lessons home. As a result, in the short time, the school was opened, their number of literate blacks in Virginia probably grew. If runaway notices are indeed a window into the culture and life of African Americans in the eighteenth century, as Windley, Wood, and Morgan's work suggest, then this study of literacy demonstrates

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, 1 February 1772, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 306.

⁷⁸Fielding Lewis to Rev. John Waring, 31 October 1768, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 273-74.

several things at once.⁷⁹ First, it illustrates that the rates of slave literacy grew significantly over time in the colonial experience prior to the American Revolution. Second, advances the argument that enslaved African Americans in Virginia did not settle on only learning to read, but had a strong and purposeful reason to learn how to write as well. Enslaved African Americans in Virginia demanded that they and their children obtain literacy in its fullest extent. If not encouraged by their owners, they did not wait; instead, they parleyed what few resources they had, be it a writing slate or dirt floor, and taught one another the useful art of penmanship (see Table 2). Third, they created a rich and complex culture that borrowed freely from the both the Old and the New Testament. Caught up in the throes of the First Great Awakening and shifting social and cultural demographics, enslaved black Virginians opened the mystifying talking book, decoded its many secrets, and passed that knowledge on to others—while forging new traditions that reflect their ability to read.⁸⁰

In addition to the schools established in Fredericksburg and Williamsburg, there were a number of unofficially sponsored Bray schools operating elsewhere in the colony. These unofficial schools had differing practices, however. For example, typically a schoolmaster as opposed to a schoolmistress ran the school, and the schoolmaster and the local churchwarden were usually one and the same. Unlike official schools, stewards in unofficial schools did not receive a stipend; notwithstanding, the books the Associates sent to anyone who expressed an interest in aiding them in their endeavor. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that sewing and knitting were taught to the female pupils because of the fact that a male ran the school. School buildings were probably obsolete as most, if not all, of the classes were probably taught within the parson's glebe or nearby.

Similarities did exist between the types of schools, however. Enslaved children of both sexes, for example, attended in near equal numbers. That certainly seems to be the case if we were to take into account extant church registers. Enslaved scholars were likely young children between the ages of three and ten, and as they had before, some slaveholders probably used the schools as a nursery.

Between the 1750s and 1760s, several such schools opened. James Marye, Jr., ran one, albeit reluctantly. Like other parsons in Virginia,

⁷⁹Lathan A. Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), xviii; Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 240; and, Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*.

⁸⁰Bly, "Breaking with Tradition," chaps. 1–3; and, Bly, "'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730–1776." *Early American Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 261–94.

he came to realize it was part of his duty to instruct slaves. As alluded to before, Marye's school developed by accident. In 1758, the Reverend Mungo Marshall died. Two years later, Marye, Jr. suddenly found himself serving in his place. Once at the church, he unexpectedly found a parcel of books the Associates sent Marshall. It would seem Marshall ran an unofficial Bray school of his own. As early as 1756, if not before, the late parson wrote to his friends in London, requesting "Some Books & pious Tracts to enable him more effectually to promote the Instruction of the Negroes," many of whom he found "destitute of any Principles of Religion." On December 15, 1756, they complied, sending "One Copy of each Book in [their] Store & 25 copies of the Several Catachetical Tracts, together with 25 of Mr. Bacons Six Sermons on the Conversion of the Negroes."⁸¹ Judging from that shipment, which included primers and spellers, there is little doubt Marshall used the books to teach the enslaved Virginia children to read. More than that, it also appears that Marshall's informal classes among the county's slaves progressed well. Before he passed away, he requested a second consignment.

But before it arrived, the rector died and Marye took his place. For almost four years, he ran what appeared to have been an unofficial Bray school in Orange County. Like his predecessor, Marye instructed a number of country-born slaves. "You must understand," he explained to Waring about the enslaved children in his charge, that in September "there are great Quantities of those Negroes imported here yearly from Africa, who have Languages peculiar to themselves, who are here many years before they understand English."⁸² Still, two years after he declined the Associates' offer to start an official school, the new parson boasted that he instructed several dozen slave children in literacy and Christianity. "As to the Number that attend Divine Service on Sundays it is greater at some Churches than others," he reported, "as they are placed nearer to where Quantities of the Negroes live, but in general there is about 30 or 40 and some Sundays I have seen 60 or more." Although it is unclear how many of the "60 or more" slaves he taught

⁸¹Rev. Mungo Marshall to Rev. John Waring, September 1756, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 121; [Minutes of the Associates of the Late Dr. Bray], 15 December 1756, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 121.

⁸²Rev. James Marye, Jr. to Rev. John Waring, 25 September 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 218. To judge from Philip D. Morgan's study of slavery in the Chesapeake, the rector of the St. Thomas Parish made an accurate report of the number of Africans in his parish. Although the number of Africans imported decreased, most of those who were brought into the colony went to counties in the Piedmont region. See Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 60–61. For a fuller account, see Philip D. Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls, "Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720–1790," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (April 1989): 217–23.

the rudiments of literacy, it nonetheless stands to reason that he did, proudly, teach some.⁸³

Jonathan Boucher also ran an unofficial Bray school. Like Marye, the Hanover pastor, who also wanted books to start a parochial library, was not open to the idea of opening a formal school. Supposedly, as the case had been in Orange County, geography and prejudice sharply discouraged such work. "I also told You before," Boucher wrote in 1762 to Waring, "how at a Loss I was to pitch upon a Situation for a School where it could be at all convenient to a competent Number of Children Except in a few little Town, the People Generally live dispers'd in scatter'd Plantations." Moreover, "I know not a Place in my Parish where I could fix a Mistress within 5 or 6 Miles or even 30 or 20 Children of a proper Age to be admitted."⁸⁴

Despite his reservations, Boucher did instruct enslaved children in a less formal way, and he went to great lengths to explain this in his correspondence to Waring. "Your Books," he told them, "will be of great Service to Me in some public Catechetical Lectures which I purpose soon to commence. I have baptiz'd upwards to 100 Negro Children, & betwixt 30 & 40 Adults."⁸⁵ By 1764, Boucher enlisted the aid of a literate enslaved black who lived nearby. "I have employ'd a very sensible, well-dispos'd Negro," he explained, "to endeavour at instructing his poor fellow Slaves in Reading & some Principles of Religion." Though he neglected to mention the name of the slave, Boucher did mention some demographic data about the school. By his account, twenty or thirty enslaved children regularly attended his informal King George Bray school.⁸⁶

But the school did not last long. In 1764, Boucher left his Hanover post and relocated to nearby Caroline County, where he continued his work among enslaved Virginians. In retrospect, the Hanover school exceeded his expectations. "I might Surprise You," he wrote Waring after moving, "were I to relate to You some of the Conversations I have had with Negroes to whom I had given Books. It must be a Comfort to the Associates . . . to have the Prayers & Blessing of many of these unfortunate People." No more than two years at his new post, Boucher baptized over 300 enslaved African Americans, and sought to replicate his success in his new locale. "The Method I take I hope They will think is not misapplying it," he explained to Waring in March of 1767, that "I generally find out an old Negro, or a conscientious Overseer, able

⁸³Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 60–61.

⁸⁴Rev. Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, 31 December 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 195.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 196.

⁸⁶Rev. Jonathan Boucher to John Waring, 28 April 1764, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 206.

to read, to whom I give Books, with an Injunction to Them to instruct such & such Slaves in their respective Neighbourhoods.”⁸⁷

By 1770, the unofficial school he opened in Caroline County may have closed when Boucher accepted yet another post at St. Anne’s Parish in Maryland. On the other hand, considering his “Method” for instructing slaves, it is possible that school continued to operate in his absence. Indeed, by his own account, Boucher always secured the services of a literate enslaved African American to aid him in his efforts and if this was the case at the school in Caroline County, it is possible the school most likely continued in this fashion.⁸⁸

Still, a question that lingers from this interrogation of the Bray schools and their existence in Virginia: What impact, if any, did these schools have on the lives of the enslaved children who attended them? Scant evidence makes it nearly impossible to answer this question, but the life of Isaac Bee, a scholar at the Williamsburg school, does offer some points of consideration to this important question. Bee was born in 1755, and he attended the Williamsburg school from 1765 to 1769. He was one of many enslaved Virginians who gain knowledge of letters before the American Revolution because of the efforts of the Associates of the Late Thomas Bray. In all likelihood, he may have sat next to Hannah, a slave girl owned by the school’s reluctant trustee. Like a number of slaves in Virginia, Bee was a mulatto. His father, John Insko Bee, was a free man; his mother a white indentured servant of John Blair, the nephew of the former Commissary, James Blair, and a prominent grandee in his own right. Like other mulattoes, the young lad was bound out. “If any woman servant,” the colony’s legislature made plain in 1705, had “a bastard child by a negro, or mulatto . . . the said child [will] be a servant, until it shall be of thirty one years of age.”⁸⁹ Though no record of his indenture has survived, Bee probably worked for Blair as a domestic, possibly as a waiter. It is also likely that he served Blair as a body servant or coachman. Either way, like almost every other Bray scholars in this time period it was clear that Bee was not freeborn. Records show that Bee was also baptized. If not after birth, he certainly received the sacrament after completing his term. As Nicholas’s rules explained, after each scholar received instruction, they were catechized and baptized as a member of the Anglican Church.⁹⁰

In any event, shortly after leaving the school, Isaac Bee became the property of Lewis Burwell, a resident of Mecklenburg County and the

⁸⁷ Rev. Jonathan Boucher to Rev. John Waring, 9 March 1767, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 255.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Law of Virginia, Volume 3* (Richmond, VA: Samuel Pleasants, Jr., 1819–1823), 453.

⁹⁰ [Enclosure: Regulations,] 30 September 1762, in Van Horne, *Religious Philanthropy*, 191.

grandson of John Blair. Life in the country, however, did not appeal to him. Far from it, Bee hated it, preferring instead the clamor of the city. Not long after the move, he took his leave of his new owner and headed home. Like other slaves whose family life was disrupted by the death of a master, Bee ran away. Two months later, Burwell placed an advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*.

Clearly, Bee had his reasons. Not yet thirty-one years old, as Burwell told it, the mulatto man believed he was entitled to his freedom. It seems likely that the Virginia man born into servitude may have been inspired to run by the politically charged times in which he lived. Like others who could read, Bee could have followed current events printed in the newspaper. Presumably, if he did not read it for himself, it also seems plausible that he got the news like most Virginians of his day; he heard it either in church on Sundays or near or about the courthouse where newspapers were read aloud. It is also possible that Bee's claim to his own freedom had nothing to do with the burgeoning political crisis. He may have thought himself free on religious grounds. According to Julie Richter's study of slavery in Virginia, besides attending the Bray school, Bee may have received schooling at home, presumably from his father who was not only a free man, but also a student of a Quaker named Fleming Bates. Like his father, Bee could have come to believe that slavery was immoral—a position increasingly adopted by Quakers at the time.⁹¹

Whatever his reasons, not long after he ran away, patrols captured Bee and returned him. Back in Burwell's possession, it appears that he decided to stay put. Between 1782 and 1785, his name appeared on Burwell's personal property tax lists. Several years prior, however, those same tax records indicate that the runaway became a father that may explain his reason to stay. In Mecklenburg County, Bee had a son and most likely a wife. The slave couple named him John, possibly after Bee's father, if not the apostle John.⁹² Nonetheless, after John was born, Bee faded from the written record. What became of him or his family is unknown. What is known is that within the community in which he and his family lived, Bee's ability to read and write set him apart from most enslaved Virginians and most likely served as an important resource in his daily affairs as slavery become more rigid and the life opportunities of free blacks become more circumscribed. Being literate would afford Bee opportunities in nineteenth-century Virginia that would be completely unavailable to illiterate blacks, enslaved or free, pursuing without delay both their freedom and letters.

⁹¹Richter et al., *Enslaving Virginia*, 605.

⁹²Ibid.