David Greenleaf and the Bladensburg Freedman's School

Marlin Stewart
BSOS Summer Research Initiative 2023

Introduction

Charles Benedict Calvert founded University of Maryland as the Maryland Agricultural College in 1856. The University of Maryland was founded by enslavers, funded by slavery, and built on a landscape of enslavement. David Greenleaf was one of the many people enslaved by John Eversfield, whose land neighbored the Maryland Agricultural College. Primary source documents, such as census records, letters, and wills uncover details about Greenleaf's life. David Greenleaf was enslaved on the Eversfield plantation, which neighbored the Maryland Agricultural College. It is on this plantation that Greenleaf and his family received their freedom after Maryland abolished slavery on November 1, 1864. From its founders to the enslavers who owned neighboring land, slavery had and continues to have a direct connection to the University of Maryland. The 1856 Project seeks to identify how the University of Maryland's story is linked to the history of slavery and racism in the United States.

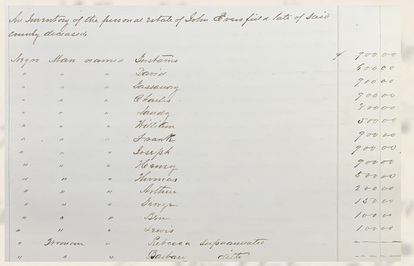

Figure 1. Inventory of John Eversfield – Maryland State Archives

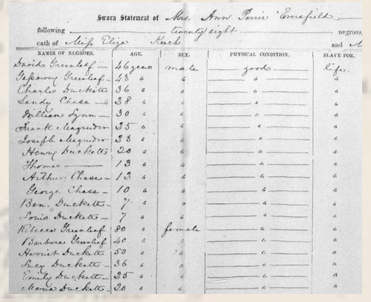

Figure 2. 1864 Slave Statistics

Who Was David Greenleaf?

David Greenleaf is listed on the inventory conducted upon the death of John Eversfield in 1858, alongside his mother, Rebecca Greenleaf, and siblings, Gassaway and Barbara. This dehumanizing document only lists David's race, gender, and name, alongside his price and the price of other items owned by Eversfield. Greenleaf again appears in the Maryland Slave Statistic, created by Maryland's enslavers to document how many people they enslaved when slavery was abolished in Maryland on November 1, 1864. This document reveals that Greenleaf was 46 when he became a free man. The 1870 Federal Census shows David Greenleaf living in Bladensburg with his wife and two year old daughter, both named Lucy. The Census also shows that Greenleaf and his wife, like many formerly enslaved, were unable to read or write. Despite his own lack of formal education, by 1870, Greenleaf was a member of the board of trustees for the Bladensburg Freedman's School. In the 1880 Census, Greenleaf's daughter, now twelve, was listed as "attending school" at the Bladensburg School.

The Bladensburg Freedman's School

The 1870 letter that lists David Greenleaf as a trustee of the Bladensburg Freedman's School tells a fascinating story about education for freedmen post emancipation. The Freedman's Bureau, started after the Civil War, sought to provide formerly enslaved people with an education. Despite a community eager for education, it took over a year before African Americans had a place dedicated to learning. The community struggled to secure land, materials, and time to devote to their education. Teacher Sallie Cadwallader, one of many White northerners who traveled South to help start freedman schools, wrote about the struggles she faced maintaining the Bladensburg school. She noted that student attendance shrunk in spring and summer, and that local whites, who she described as "Rebels", often took advantage of African Americans in the area. She tried to convince the community to move away for better opportunities. Cadwallader was eventually replaced by an African American schoolteacher, Henrietta E. Fletcher. In 1869, Fletcher requested that the Bureau send materials for blinds for the schoolhouse windows, as she feared for the safety of her and her students.

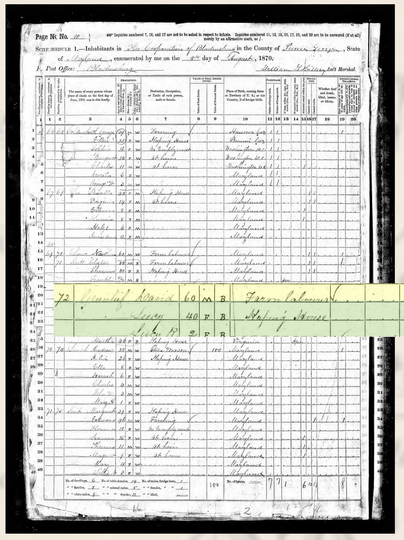

Figure 4. 1870 Federal Census – Ancestry.com

Figure 3. Freedmen's School with students and teachers – National Museum of African American History and Culture

Conclusion

The story of David Greenleaf and the Bladensburg Freedman's School explains how important education was to the newly freed post emancipation. Greenleaf became a free man well into his 40s. For much of his life, he was denied many opportunities, including learning how to read or write. Greenleaf, being unable to read or write, but became in his community as a trustee of the Bladensburg school. Understanding the importance of education, he ensured that his daughter and other African Americans received the opportunities he was denied.

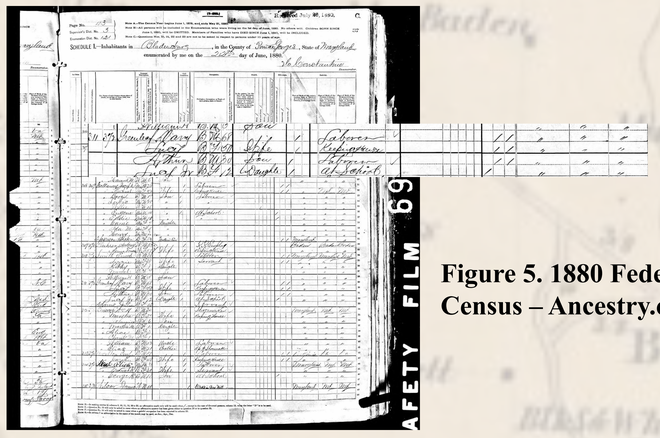

Figure 5. 1880 Federal Census – Ancestry.com

Future Research

The 1870 and 1880 Census Records reveal that David Greenleaf at least two children, Lucy and Arthur. Future research should focus on identifying possible descendants of David Greenleaf. If descendants can be identified, it might be possible to conduct an oral history project to reveal more details about the Greenleafs and their lives post emancipation.

Select Bibliography

Franklin, J. H., & Higginbotham, E. B. (2011). *From slavery to freedom: a history of African Americans* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Knowing our history : African American slavery & the University of Maryland. (2009).

Acknowledgements

Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, Douglas McElrath, Dr. Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman, Dr. Christopher Bonner, The 1856 Project Team, BSOS SRI, Myia Elum, Michaela Benton, Partick Grey