Enslavement records, 1990.0092.0001-2

Lydia's Pick

**Enslavement records: Charles C. Hill, Sr. & Jr. (enslavers), 1837. 1850**

In recognition of Black History Month, I would like to honor and celebrate the life of Mary Diggs, a woman about whom little is known or recorded but who surely lived a full and textured life. Born into enslavement in 1794, she endured this condition until Emancipation, when she was about 70-years-old.

Early in her life, at fifteen years of age, her circumstances changed abruptly and considerably. Her enslaver at the time, Thomas Fenwick, was a young, unmarried man in possession of eleven enslaved people (1800 census). In 1809 however, Fenwick sold 15-year-old Mary and a few others to Charles Clement Hill, Sr. — a large plantation owner who enslaved hundreds of people to labor on his vast holdings. Imagine the contrast between a relatively small farming operation and the Hill family's enormous enterprise. Whether the new circumstance provided any material improvements or hardships to Mary's life, we do not know.

While enslaved by Hill Sr., Mary had three children with a man named Jacob: Hannah (b. 1820), Jim (b. 1824), and Dick (b. 1827). Sadly, Dick died sometime before 1843. There was possibly a fourth child, Louisa (b. 1826). We know that Jacob and Mary were not wed, as such contracts among enslaved people were forbidden by law. Mary was grandmother to at least six children by Hannah whose first child was a daughter born in 1842, also named Mary.

In 1847, Mary's enslaver changed once again when Charles Clement Hill Sr. gave his son twenty-five enslaved people including Mary, her children, and her grandchildren. It does not appear that Jacob, her children's father, was a part of this transaction, assuming he too was enslaved.
Enslaved people were commonly known only by their given names and it is uncertain how Mary acquired her surname, "Diggs." Perhaps Fenwick was not her first enslaver and the surname speaks to one previous? That said, while enslaved, her son Jim also shared Mary’s surname as evidenced by an advertisement posted in the Baltimore Sun by Hill Jr. upon Jim’s self-emancipation attempt in 1861.

How do we come to know this framework of Mary’s life? Recently uploaded to the digital archives are two notebooks containing inventories listing the names of people enslaved by Charles Clement Hill Sr. and Charles Clement Hill Jr. - Mary is one of the hundreds listed. Beyond names, the Hills also recorded the parentage of those born into enslavement, as well as dates of birth, and sources of those purchased or traded. As appalling as the indignities are to which this data speaks, for Mary and too many others, these types of documents are the only ones that bear witness to their individual lives otherwise more commonly reduced to nameless tallies on census and tax forms.

Mary was more than her enslavement. She was a mother, a grandmother, and a namesake. She was a member of a community and a unique individual with a lifetime of experiences. As challenging as they are to navigate, I am grateful for these documents in our collection that allow us to celebrate the meaningful and relevant life of Mary Diggs and others like her.

Patricia’s Pick

Photograph: Sandy Spring Elementary School, 1959

Rare is the class photo where all eyes are open and looking forward, where smiles, forced or otherwise, grace every student’s face, and where askance ties, bows, and belts don’t distract. On all these points, this 1959 sixth-grade class photo from Sandy Spring Elementary School is an exceptional triumph indeed! I suspect equal credit is due to the photographer and their class teacher, Mr. Cornish.

Sandy Spring Elementary School was located on Brooke Road. It served as one of five schools for Black students built in the early 1950s when Montgomery County School Board consolidated as many as 31 one-, two-, and three-room schools scattered throughout the county. It should be noted that the consolidation of small schoolhouses into new, larger facilities for white Montgomery County students happened over twenty years prior to this.

A decade after construction, desegregation closed Sandy Spring Elementary in 1962, dispersing its students among Burtonsville, Colesville, Olney, and Sherwood Elementary Schools. The building became an annex for Sherwood High School, then a Special Education center, and finally a community center. Today the Ross Boddy Recreation

New to the Archives

Register: Sharp Street School Vaccinations, 1891

On a bitterly cold day in February 1891, 51 students from Sharp Street School braved temperatures in the teens to visit Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings’ office to receive smallpox vaccinations. Eighteen more ventured out the next day for the same purpose. Dr. Iddings received a total of $12.50 (equivalent to $386 today) for the service as well as payment by shoe repair for three Blair children. New to the digital archives is a record of the first of these vaccines administered in the afternoon of February 5th.

Sixty-nine vaccinations in two days is an astonishing number. Inequities in healthcare experienced by Black
Center occupies the space and pays homage to the original school's principal and pioneering educator.

Sandy Spring Elementary School may have been short-lived but the engaged faces of these sixth-grade students speak volumes to the quality of education its teachers provided. Did you or someone you know attend Sandy Spring Elementary School?

Community members were as much a reality in the 1890s as they are today; to have the majority of a student body in a segregated, 19th-century school unprotected against preventable disease is not surprising. So what prompted this sudden redress? We know that Sharp Street Church trustee, Remus Hill, visited the doctor a few weeks prior to organize the effort but our archives offer few other clues. Was new legislation the impetus or perhaps fears of an outbreak breaching community borders? Whatever the cause, it is sobering to think about how relatable Sharp Street School's efforts are today.

Words Matter

When viewing the Hill family notebooks in the museum's Digital Archives on Digital Maryland, you may notice varied word choice among the fields of description, specifically between the subject tags and the rest of the record.

When addressing institutionalized slavery, Sandy Spring Museum uses language that speaks to a forced circumstance rather than an inherent condition. Thus, we use "enslaved people" instead of "slaves." Likewise, we use "enslaver" rather than "owner" or "master" as the latter terms dehumanize and commodify those who were enslaved. We are by no means trailblazers, this shift in language has been widely adopted for some time.

Why then do we use the terms slaves and slaveholders as subject tags? It is because we employ Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) so that we may share our digital records on global platforms like Worldcat. As a controlled vocabulary, LCSH provides powerful information retrieval capabilities bringing together like materials across collections around the world. That said, it is not without repercussions.

LCSH are not static, they do change but the addition and revision process is long and onerous. As Celeste Brewer at Columbia University Libraries wrote, "...language is political, and the Library of Congress is, well, the Library of Congress."

Virtual Transcribe-a-thon

Explore the history of Sandy Spring through transcription. For more than 300 years, the Sandy Spring area has been home to generations of African and African American families. In honor of Black History Month, we seek your help in uncovering some of these family stories awaiting discovery by transcribing historic documents.

Monday, February 21
11:00 am - 3:00 pm