

Given the difficult conditions that free blacks faced in Loudoun County, it is worth asking why so many remained before the Civil War and Emancipation. After all, even independent African American farmers and artisans faced extreme discrimination, arbitrary acts of violence, and barriers to advancement that are too many to enumerate. Maryland was still a slavery state, but Pennsylvania and other free states were only a few days' journey away for those who wished to leave Loudoun.

In fact, many free African Americans apparently did head North in search of a better life, and yet many stayed. Why? An attachment to the land, family and community ties, jobs and perhaps a suspicion that things were not all that much better up North may be part of the answer. Also, while few free African Americans got rich in Loudoun, there were noteworthy exceptions. Bazil Newman was one of them. His extraordinary rise as a respected boatman, farmer, and entrepreneur was due to a combination of business acumen and excellent people skills. It is quite possible that he and his family used their riverboats to help the enslaved to escape across the Potomac.

Interestingly, although Virginia law prohibited interracial marriage, Bazil Newman and several members of his family co-habited and had children with whites, and some of the Newman clan passed themselves off as whites in the census. Interracial procreation was not uncommon in Loudoun. The 1860 census showed that one quarter of the enslaved and one half of the free black population were classified as "mulatto."

BAZIL NEWMAN, 1779-1852*

Bronwen Souders

*[Amended from *The Essence of a People II, African Americans Who Made Their World Anew in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Beyond*, edited by Kendra Hamilton, published in Leesburg, Virginia, by the Black History Committee of the Friends of Thomas Balch Library, 2002, pp. 3-6.]

The extended Newman family lived the full range of the African American experience in 18th and 19th century Loudoun County. Some were enslaved; others were free. Several married across the color line; some listed their families as white in the public record. One of the more intriguing members of this clan was Bazil Newman, a farmer, businessman, and possibly a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Bazil Newman was born in Loudoun County in November 1779. By 1820, he headed a free household that included three children -- two boys and a girl -- under the age of ten; an unnamed white woman, apparently their mother; and a male slave older than 45. He eventually had three sons: Basil, Benjamin, and Robert. By 1836, he had begun living with another white woman "in quality of a wife," as he would later say in his will, by whom he appears to have had a daughter, Sophy, in 1840. In so doing, he followed the lead of four other free Newman men of his generation who had also taken white wives. With few exceptions, the Newman family lived in the Furnace

Mountain area of the county, across the Potomac River from present-day Point of Rocks. Several members of the family worked on the river as boatmen.

In the aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831, the Virginia General Assembly targeted free black entrepreneurs like Newman. In 1834, for example, free persons of color were prohibited from selling goods or working as barbers, among other restrictions. Two years later, the assemblymen enacted legislation that “forced boatmen, long suspected of aiding runaways and shipping stolen goods, to obtain certificates from ‘respectable white persons,’ to verify that their shipping manifests were accurate.” [Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, p.290]

In spite of this persecution, the Newmans persevered. Tax records as late as the early 1850s described several members of the family working as “boatmen” or “ferryman.” Both Basil and his younger brother, Hezekiah -- a bachelor who lived with his older brother for much of his life -- pursued the occupation. Census records indicate numerous other Newmans living along the shores of the Potomac.

At Edwards Ferry, a Potomac River crossing established in 1791 where Goose Creek enters the river, one William Shreve, a white man, built a warehouse in late 1839, on or near land Newman had purchased in 1835. Shreve immediately placed several ads in Leesburg’s weekly *Genius of Liberty*, “soliciting a share of the public favor” and advertising “Basil Newman, well known as an old and experienced boatman, [who] will attend at the warehouse to receive and forward goods.”

By spring of the following year, Newman himself had placed numerous ads informing the public that he had purchased Shreve’s “commodious warehouse.” He added that he had a “superior BOAT, and may always be found at his post and the most careful attention will be given to all Merchandize and Flour or Grain entrusted to his care.” Very few black entrepreneurs advertised in this paper during its period of publication.

We will probably never know with certainty if Newman was a conductor of the Underground Railroad. If one wished to make an argument to that effect, however, one might note that Newman was well positioned to assist slaves fleeing north to freedom: he was an experienced waterman, owned his own boat, and possessed a keen knowledge of the river at all seasons and in all weather. Certainly some Loudoun slaves managed to make the trip north. Philadelphia abolitionists recorded names of Loudoun slaves in that city. In fact, a memoir by a white Loudoun resident refers to an (unsuccessful) plot in 1855 to entice a group of enslaved workers in Loudoun to flee northward via the suspected “Underground Railroad” link from Edwards Ferry to Pennsylvania:

It afterwards came to be known that the ferryman at Edward’s Ferry, on the Potomac, was the underground agent of these organized thieves, at the ferry, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was a part of the route which received, on certain boats, fugitives brought over the river by the ferryman.

[Mason Graham Ellzey, *The Cause We Lost and the Land We Love*, memoir ca. 1910, typed copy at Virginia Historical Society, Mss5:1EL599:1, pp. 6-7.]

A few months before his death in July 1852, Bazil made out his will, leaving his 67-acre farm to Cornelia E. Harris, who “has lived with me for the past sixteen years . . . and who has been to me a faithful bosom companion and obedient housekeeper.” At her death the farm was to go to his three sons. This and another property he owned at Edwards Ferry was valued at \$1,000. Son Benjamin and Benjamin’s wife, Eliza, who eventually acquired some of the land, had a son, Benjamin Jr., who in 1870 was earning a living as a “boatman,” continuing the family tradition.

The accounting of Bazil Newman’s estate shows that a generous \$62.52 was spent for his coffin, grave, tombstone, and for “enclosing the graveyard.” The gravesite is visible at the 13th hole of the River Creek Golf Course, part of a gated community three miles northeast of Leesburg.

[The contribution of Pastor Michelle Thomas to this article is appreciated.]

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