

Tracking the sordid path of an 1800s slave owner – February 11, 2024

There is no telling what you will find searching through old Carroll County records. Recently the name Bernard M. Campbell popped up in books dating to the 1850s and early 1860s. Following Campbell's name led to a dark and tragic part of Maryland's history. First, however, the story requires a bit of background.

By the early 1800s, Maryland was moving away from its tobacco-based economy toward one based on growing grains like wheat and corn. While tobacco demanded nearly year-round attention, grain could be planted in the spring and harvested in the fall. The need for labor on large farms slowly decreased as a result, including the need for enslaved labor.

Meanwhile, in the Deep South, the demand for workers in the cotton and sugar cane fields was expanding rapidly. The United States no longer allowed importation of slaves from Africa or elsewhere, but there were no laws against interstate movement of enslaved people from slave states in the Upper South like Maryland and Virginia to Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana in the Deep South.

After some research, Bernard M. Campbell's role in this larger picture of Black history began to take shape even though his name only appeared a few times in Carroll County records — a chattel and bond record book covering 1864-1869, a minute book of the Carroll County commissioners from 1861 to 1868, and land transactions in 1858 and 1864. Each entry involving Campbell seemed to raise a red flag.

Campbell's freeing of two Black men appeared in a Carroll County chattel and bond book in 1864. Both men had enlisted in the United States Colored Troops in 1863 and their military records showed they were enslaved when they entered the army. Campbell had been their owner, but only for a few years. In 1863, the U.S. government was paying enslavers like Campbell up to \$300 for each man allowed to enlist. It appeared Bernard Campbell hoped to capitalize on this arrangement and pocket \$600. What he originally paid for each man is unknown. Neither of them came from Carroll County.

In the 1860 Carroll County census there was no record of Bernard M. Campbell's existence although an 1858 deed showed he bought over 300 acres in the Freedom District in southeastern Carroll that year. His name did not appear on a well-known 1862 county map showing large land owners.

Another piece of the Campbell puzzle was his advertisement in the Baltimore Sun in March 1859 offering a \$100 reward for apprehension of a runaway slave named Henry Philips "who left my farm on the 10th near Marriottsville, Carroll co." Clearly Campbell was referring to his land in the Freedom District. Now it was obvious he had at least one enslaved person living there.

Campbell's name also appeared in tax records kept by the Carroll County commissioners in a minute book from 1862. He was assessed for "18 negroes @ \$200 each" for a total of \$3,600 plus the value of his land. Those 18 enslaved persons (of unknown age, sex, or other identity) apparently lived on his "farm" or he would not have owed taxes on them. Now the pieces of the Campbell puzzle began to fit together nicely. The solution lay in the 1850 census for Ward 13 in

Baltimore City where B.M. Campbell listed his occupation as “slave dealer.” The 1850 Baltimore City slave census showed him holding 35 persons in bondage. In the 1860 slave census he had 50.

The question now became — how did Bernard M. Campbell fit into the larger picture of Maryland’s role in exporting slaves to the South? The evidence began appearing everywhere in Baltimore newspapers and other records starting in the 1840s when Bernard and his brother Walter arrived from Georgia. They bought and sold enslaved people in Baltimore and advertised to purchase slaves on the Eastern Shore and in Southern Maryland with the help of agents in those areas. Their business was relatively small until 1848 when they bought the property of Hope H. Slatter, for many years Baltimore’s largest and most notorious slave dealer. One Campbell ad in the Baltimore Sun said, “Persons having slaves to sell will hereafter find us located at the extensive establishment formerly owned by Hope H. Slatter. We have purchased his entire possessions on Pratt Street, No. 244, at which all who have slaves to sell will be sure to get the highest price, when the negroes are young and likely.” By the 1850s and 1860s B.M. Campbell was the largest slave dealer in Maryland, and that was when his name began appearing in Carroll County records.

Enslavers might sell men, women, and children to Campbell for any number of reasons — perhaps they were in debt and needed cash; perhaps they found a slave difficult to manage; perhaps they had more enslaved workers than they needed. George Jacobs, an enslaver living in the Woolery District in Carroll County, reportedly sold someone because he blamed the man for a horse breaking its leg. Although it surely was an accident, Jacobs took the man to Baltimore and sold him. Slave dealers stood ready with cash to buy another human being no matter the reason.

Ship manifests in the Library of Congress, New Orleans, and elsewhere contain the names of thousands of enslaved Marylanders sent by Baltimore slave dealers to be sold in New Orleans to owners of cotton and sugar cane plantations. Residents of the city could watch as Campbell moved shackled people from confinement in his pen onto waiting ships. If Campbell couldn’t find buyers for everyone in a shipment, he moved them 80 miles north of New Orleans where they were kept until the next sale. Was this how he used his 300-acre “farm” in Carroll County? Did he move people back and forth between his slave pen in Baltimore and his farm near Liberty Road? That was a direct route into the city.

When the Civil War began, slave shipments ended, but Campbell and other dealers still maintained jails/pens in Baltimore City where they kept men, women, and children, charging owners twenty-five cents per day per person for board. In his newly-released book “Flee North,” Scott Shane wrote, “The Baltimore slave jails had become grim savings banks for enslavers, preserving the cash value of people whom slaveholders believed might flee in the chaos and uncertainty [of the war].”

On July 27, 1863, Col. Wm. Birney of the Union Army and several other officers threw open the doors of Baltimore’s slave jails. The 26 men, one boy, 29 women and three infants Bernard M.

Campbell was holding were freed and the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper published Birney's report of the horrible conditions in which they were found.

Campbell sold his Carroll County property in 1864 to a neighbor, James F. Purvis, another slave dealer. He tried as late as 1867 to get money for the two men he freed who had enlisted in the U.S. Colored Troops, but likely never did. Whether Carroll County ever collected the taxes Campbell owed on his land and 18 enslaved individuals is unknown. By 1870 he lived in northern Virginia.

A contemporary of Hope Slatter and Bernard M. Campbell, quoted in "Flee North," wrote: "Although slaveholders themselves, and feeling no objections to buy or sell slaves for their own use and convenience, yet, strange as it may seem, they stand aloof from the man who makes it his business to traffic in them, and look down upon him as it were with abhorrence."

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Image 1: Credit: The Baltimore Sun Caption: Bernard M. Campbell advertisement for runaway Henry Philips published in the Baltimore Sun March 11, 1859.

Image 2: Credit: 1862 Martenet Map of Carroll County Caption: Arrow points to approximate location of B.M. Campbell's Carroll County land southeast of Eldersburg which he bought in 1858. Liberty Road runs east-west nearby.

Image 3: Credit: The Baltimore Sun Caption: Advertisement for the business of Bernard and Walter Campbell with an endorsement from its previous owner, the notorious slave trader Hope H. Slatter.

