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FROM SLAVE SHIP TO HARVARD: AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES H. JOHNSTON

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

IN TRACING AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY OVER SIX generations, James H. Johnston's *From Slave Ship to Harvard: Yarrow Mamout and the History of an African American Family* (Fordham University Press,

2012) provides fresh insight into the complex history of slavery and race in Maryland. Senior editor Donald A. Yerxa interviewed Johnston, an attorney and journalist, in November 2012.

Donald A. Yerxa: Would you provide our readers with a summary of what you are doing in this book?

James H. Johnston: *From Slave Ship to Harvard* is the true story of six generations of an African-American family, the Yarrows and their in-laws the Turners. The book follows them from arrival on a slave ship in 1752 to Harvard in 1923 up to today. To my knowledge, no one has been able to associate a modern African-American family with a specific slave ship on a certain date until now.

But the book is more than this. The face on the cover of the book belongs to Yarrow Mamout as painted by the early American portrait painter Charles Willson Peale. It is the face of a man who survived the horrors of a slave ship. Of the 9.4 million men, women, and children carried on those ships, there are only two portraits by major artists: Peale's and a portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo by the British painter William Hoare, a student of Thomas Gainsborough. Both men were Fulani Muslims who came to Maryland twenty-two years apart.

By looking at this one family's narrative over a 275-year period (1736-2011) the book provides a case study of race in America.

Yerxa: Who was Yarrow Mamout, and how did the famous artist Peale come to paint his portrait?

Johnston: Yarrow Mamout was an educated Fulani Muslim. He could read and write in Arabic, as proved by a copy of his signature on a deed at the National Archives. He was born in Futa Jallon, a region that lies now in Guinea and Senegal. Yarrow and Mamout (or Mamadou) are both given names. He treated Yarrow as a surname, though, and referred to his son as Aquilla Yarrow.

How Yarrow ended up being sold into slavery in Africa is not known, but he came to America with a sister. The fact that brother and sister came together could mean that they were captured in one of the wars with non-Muslims. There seem to have been other Muslims on the same ship. If so, it was even more likely that they all were taken prisoner in war. Yarrow was sixteen; his sister was younger.

The ship carrying them, the *Elijah*, came to Annapolis, Maryland, and they were sold on board on June 4, 1752. A tobacco planter named Samuel Beall

bought Yarrow; someone else purchased the sister. Yarrow was a body servant for Beall and later for his son. Forty-four years later, Yarrow was freed. The

men.

Charles Willson Peale learned of Yarrow when the artist was in town to get a portrait of President James Monroe for Peale's museum in Philadelphia. Peale also wanted to explore whether the government might buy the museum. Peale's in-laws in Georgetown told him about the ex-slave. They pointed out how unusual he was for a black man, owning a house and lot and bank stock. They also told Peale that Yarrow might be 140 years old. Peale himself was getting up in years, and this tidbit piqued his scientific side. Moreover, although he had once owned slaves, the artist's views on race had evolved to be almost modern. He believed that blacks could achieve just as much as whites if they had equal opportunity. Peale spent two days, working at Yarrow's house in Georgetown in late January 1819 and talking to his subject. It wasn't a commissioned painting: Peale took it back to Philadelphia with him. Today, the portrait is at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Yerxa: It is very interesting to see how the lives of this remarkably resilient family intersected with some of the larger themes and major events in the history of slavery, antislavery, and American race relations. Would you speak to this?

Johnston: At least three things account for these intersections. First, the Yarrows and Turners lived in Maryland, and it was in Maryland and adjacent Virginia that many significant events in black history took place. John Newton is an example. He captained slave ships to the two colonies around the time Yarrow came, although he didn't captain the *Elijah*. The tobacco plantations in those colonies were prime destinations in the slave trade. But Newton lost his stomach for the sordid business and quit. He entered the ministry and became the religious force behind the movement in England to abolish slaving. He also penned the hymn "Amazing Grace," which is associated with equal rights around the world.

Second, other important figures in black history, like the slave Josiah Henson, lived in the Washington area in Yarrow's time. Henson is famous because he wrote an autobiography that Harriet Beecher Stowe used to write the novel *Uncle Tom*. And when John Brown seized weapons at Harpers Ferry, which was

Bealls were a prominent family in Maryland, and this gave Yarrow the opportunity, as a body servant, to be acquainted with many important men of his day.

Although Yarrow lived with the Bealls in both the Washington, D.C., area and near Sharpsburg in western Maryland, he didn't achieve fame until he was a free man living in Georgetown (a separate city from Washington then). He earned money for himself even as a slave, and, a few years after being freed, acquired a home in Georgetown. Yarrow saved more than enough to buy the house and put the rest of the money to work. He had the savvy to buy bank stock—an incredible undertaking for a black man who had come to America on a slave ship—and to make secured loans to white business-

then a part of Virginia, and called for a slave revolt, Yarrow's in-laws, the Turners, were living a few miles away in Maryland. Thus, with so many important events in black history happening almost at their doorsteps, it was only natural that those events would touch and concern the family.

Third, since I intended the book to be a case study, I wanted to keep race always in the narrative. For example, on June 4, 1752, when Yarrow Mamout first set foot on Maryland soil as a slave, the colony's legislature was taking up a bill to make it more difficult for slaves to be freed. Then eighty years later, in reaction to Nat Turner's slave revolt in Virginia, the Maryland legislature passed a law requiring sheriffs to prepare a survey of free blacks in order to keep an eye on them. Because of this law, the names of Yarrow's son, Aquilla, and his wife, Mary Turner, appear on a list of free blacks in Washington County, Maryland. In 1860 the family was affected again by the Maryland legislature's animus against African Americans. With John Brown's raid fresh in mind, the legislature ended manumissions, the grant of freedom to slaves, once and for all. It had been trying to do this ever since the day Yarrow arrived. Interestingly enough, many free black families, including the Turners, quickly bought freedom for their loved ones before the law took effect. Racism bedeviled the family into the 20th century, although not always for the worse. When Harvard graduate and World War II veteran Robert Turner Ford wanted to use the GI bill to finance an advanced degree, he could not gain admission to a still-segregated University of Maryland. He went to Columbia University instead, thus earning a graduate degree from his second Ivy League school.

Yerxa: What role did the Georgetown-Maryland locus of this family play in all this?

Johnston: In addition to being the center for other significant events in black history, the fact that the family was living in Georgetown and nearby Maryland brought it into contact with influential people. Yarrow's image and story are preserved because Peale and others met him when they were in Washington on business. Moreover, the Beall family that owned Yarrow was extremely well connected and helped both him and his son.

The fact that African Americans were treated better in the Washington area and western Maryland than in Virginia and the Deep South was also a factor. Ex-slaves testified to this. Prominent men in western Maryland were members of the American Colonization Society, which believed in buying freedom for slaves and sending them to a colony in Africa. Abraham Lincoln held similar views until, as president during the Civil War, he realized that the idea was neither practical nor right.

Of course, the terrors of slavery were always around. "Georgia-men" prowled the banks of the Potomac River, which divides Virginia from Maryland. They were bounty hunters who made money by returning captured slaves to their owners in Virginia. They would also buy slaves in Maryland and

march them off to the cotton plantations in the Deep South, hence the name Georgia-men.

Yerxa: How well do the lives of Yarrow Mamout and his descendants represent the complex relationships between blacks and whites in the border state of Maryland?

Johnston: The Yarrows and Turners were—and are—extraordinary individuals, and for this reason may have enjoyed better-than-average relationships with their white peers. Yarrow seemed to be *de facto* leader of the free black community in Georgetown. At least, he was said to lead it in annual Christmas caroling at the homes of the wealthy there. His niece

The difficulties of researching individual African Americans before the Civil War are enormous.

lived in Frederick, Maryland, and occupied a similar position there, where a diarist referred to her husband's relative as "president" of the local African-American community. The same is true of Yarrow's daughter-in-law, Mary Turner. She was also called by her married name, Polly Yarrow, and the community of Yarrowsburg, Maryland, which is white, gets its name from her because she was the midwife.

Still, my research uncovered many instances of interdependency at all levels between whites and blacks in Maryland. A black minister who founded congregations in western Maryland and rode circuit there wrote about how he turned to prominent white men for help whenever racism threatened. Even today, both races there talk about a long history of good race relations. One white woman remembered a conversation between her father and Alvin Harris, a black man who bought a bus and drove black children in the rural community to a segregated high school sixteen miles away. "You and me are just alike," Harris told her father. "We love our kids and want them to have a better life."

Yerxa: What prompted you to write the book?

Johnston: I was attracted initially by the art. The first portrait of Yarrow that I saw was painted by James Alexander Simpson of Georgetown in 1822. It is not as good as the Peale portrait. But seeing it caused me to google "Yarrow Mamout" and discover the Peale. I consulted an art historian who told me that portraits of blacks prior to the Civil War were rare and thought I might have stumbled onto something worth writing about. The story just kept getting better and better as I researched. It wasn't until several years later, when I came across Yarrow's in-laws the Turners and learned that Robert Turner Ford had gone to Harvard, that I realized I had to write a book. One of Ford's nieces, Cynthia Richardson, said to me: "We never thought of ourselves as

special." But of course as the book demonstrates, the family is more than special; it is unique.

Yerxa: You note that your book is a history of a family and race in America, but you also allude to the fact that it could have been written as a detective story about your research. How did you go about researching the book? What were the biggest challenges you faced during your research?

Johnston: The difficulties of researching individual African Americans before the Civil War are enormous. The old slave codes generally prohibited blacks, whether slave or free, from being taught to read and write, and so for the most part they didn't record their own history.

Fortunately for me, since Yarrow and his family were too talented to be ignored, they came to the attention of those who were writing about blacks. In 1816 David Bailles Warden, a Frenchman, published a book in Paris, *A Chorographical Description*, intending to explain to Europeans what the new American capital was like. One of the topics he covered was the role of African Americans in Washington, leading him to write about Yarrow Mamout. Warden even quoted for his readers a sample of Yarrow's engaging, poetic pattern of speech. A few years later, Peale did more than just paint the portrait. He also investigated Yarrow's life and recorded his findings in his diary.

I paired this kind of information with government records, like censuses and manumissions, to build connections and a chronology. And then there are wills, inventories of estates, and estate sales of slave owners that usually contain the names and dispositions of slaves. Oral histories also proved important even though I was researching people who died almost 200 years ago. These oral histories of black men and women came from both races. Stories about Yarrow's son and daughter-in-law have been handed down through the generations of white families in Yarrowsburg whereas the black families there had never heard of them.

Yerxa: What do you wish readers would take away from your book?

Johnston: I want the book to give readers a better understanding of the country's racial history. In some respects, the story of this family is no different from those of European immigrants to America. Both races struggled to adapt and to build a better life for themselves and their children. But success was vastly more difficult for people from Africa. Race plagued this country for generation after generation. Gradually, it has become less limiting thanks to constitutional protections, the law, and changed attitudes. I hope the book furthers this change in attitudes.