

Joel Lane and the Enslaved People Who Lived on His Plantation

Black History is celebrated throughout the county in February. What better way to celebrate this occasion than by remembering and honoring the African Americans who lived and worked on Joel Lane's plantation as slaves.

No plantation diaries or personal letters have survived that might tell us about Joel Lane's enslaved people, what they did, or how they lived. Public documents, limited though they are, do provide some insight into their lives. The first evidence that Joel Lane owned slaves is found in Halifax County where he was born and lived until he and his family moved to this area, sometime around 1769. In 1763 Joel purchased from his father, Joseph, a young girl, Flora, who was about fourteen years old, for sixty pounds proclamation money. In 1765 Joel purchased from William Pullum four Negro slaves named Young Sam, Dick, Jack, and Stanter for one hundred twenty-nine pounds, twelve shillings and eight pence.

In the national census of 1790, Joel Lane is listed as having 27 slaves. But the census gives only the number of slaves owned. Lane's will and the inventory of his possessions taken after his death provide more detailed information. In his will, Lane lists thirty-two enslaved people. Sam and Jack were included in the list and may have been the men he bought in Halifax. Following Lane's death in 1795, the inventory of his moveable possessions included thirty-two enslaved. Sam was one of the Negroes listed. [Click here](#) for the names of all the enslaved who belonged to Joel Lane.

Slaves were held in bondage called "chattel slavery" that legally allowed an owner to pass ownership of an enslaved person to his heirs as he did his other possessions. Some 18th century wills provide details about the enslaved beyond their name, such as what they did, how old they were, and family relationships. Unfortunately, Lane did not provide that information or

why he left which slave to which heir. Only the slave's name and the family member that was to inherit the bondsman were recorded in his will.

Hinton, Gawtney and her future increase, and Jack, listed in his will, were not included in 1795 inventory taken after Lane's death. With no documentation accounting for this discrepancy, we can only wonder whether they were sold or died. A similar problem exists for Winter, Naney, and Will. Their names appear in Lane's inventory of possessions but are not listed in his will. They could be children born to his enslaved women or purchases he made after his will was written in 1794.

It is hard to accept that Joel Lane could have accumulated 32 enslaved people without leaving some public record of purchase or sale of these individuals, but little has come to light as yet. If he were like other planters of the 18th century, he purchased them one at a time, or in small groups, and possibly over a considerable period of time. Wake County's public records indicate that other men in the community bought slaves at estate sales, sheriff sales and from one another. And, of course, some enslaved people were inherited or born to enslaved women.

What work Lane's slaves engaged in is not a complete mystery. The implements used on the plantation give clues as to what kind of work was done. The presence of a loom, gear and bars, and "four pair of harnesses," suggest that the women on the plantation worked to produce woven materials. These materials were likely used to make clothing for the enslaved people. Six linen wheels, four cotton wheels and four woolen wheels were busy making thread for the loom. It is possible that Lane's slaves, like the slaves of his neighbor, John Craven, worked at spinning until the fodder and corn was gathered, and continued ". . . until Christmas in order to clothe themselves and the other Negroes on the Plantation."

It is also possible that, like the woman born in Nixonton in 1789, the Lane women worked at clothing the enslaved people. This unnamed woman is quoted as saying “My mother had a great deal of spinning, warping, weaving and quilting to do, and clothes to make for the Negroes. I commenced at five years old to help her.” Clothing 32 people, even modestly, would have required a great deal of labor including growing flax and shearing sheep. Once grown the fibers required further preparation before spinning and weaving could take place. A “hackle” listed in the inventory was used in preparing flax fibers. Although ready made fabrics and clothes were available for enslaved people, it is likely that some cloth was produced on the plantation because of the number of weaving implements found in Lane’s inventory. The number of spinning wheels and the possession of a loom suggests that there may have been a weaving house on his plantation.

The numerous hoes in the inventory and the amount of corn on hand indicate that many people worked in the fields raising corn. While field work occupied a large part of an enslaved person’s time, both young and old, there were other activities that occupied their time. Plantations owners tried to be as self sufficient as they could which required home manufacturing of soap and candles. Someone on Lane’s plantation made twelve barrels of soap and three dozen candles. Both products required time and skill in their production. Some of these items must have been used by the family and in Lane’s “ordinary or tavern.” It is very unlikely that any of those candles found their way into the slave quarters.

Listed in Lane’s inventory was a “parcel of leather the quality not known it being in Tan.” There were also “9 bed hides.” The leather “in Tan” would have been treated and ready for use. On other plantations leather of this kind would have been used for shoes for the slaves.

In some wills the occupations of slaves were noted. John Haywood, for instance, identified his cook, nurse maid, and a man who painted. Slaves whose occupations or “business” were identified were usually skilled in some way, not field hands. Although Joel Lane gave no hint as to what his enslaved people did, we can be sure that some of the women worked in the kitchen using the three butter churns and the numerous iron pots. It also appears that the cook prepared meals for the family and the tavern Lane ran towards the end of his life. Clothes would have been washed, not as often as today, but then some of the women would have used the “four flat irons” to finish the job.

Someone among the enslaved must have been an accomplished blacksmith or Lane would not have owned an anvil, bellows, vice and two small hammers, two grind stones and two pair of smiting tongs. Not all plantations had such a complete set of smithing tools. Lane’s neighbor, John Craven, planned to hire a blacksmith to serve his plantation’s needs.

Although Lane’s enslaved people were not listed in the General Assembly’s records as being employed in the initial clearing of streets and squares “. . . fixing on the place for the permanent seat of Government,” they must have been engaged in land clearing in and around the new city. Grubbing hoes used for removing stumps were distinct from weeding hoes that would have been used in crop production. A “whip saw” and a “hand saw” would have been used in the production of lumber. The “yoke of oxen” Lane had, not his fine bay horse, would have been used by his slaves in this work.

The most specific information we have of Joel Lane’s slaves is found in the records of orphan’s accounts. Lane’s young children, since they inherited property in slaves and land, had a guardian appointed to manage their property until they reached 21 years old. The only complete

existing orphan records are for Thomas and his slaves Jeffery and Jimboy. They show how Joel Lane's slaves continued to provide income and labor to his family following Lane's death.

It was the tradition for the slaves of orphans to be "hired out." Owners or guardians would take an enslaved person to the steps of the court house or market house in a city and contract out their labor for the following year on or about the first week of January. A note would be drawn stating the duration of the contract and what clothing would be provided for the slave. Jimboy, a Negro man was to receive for the spring "... one pair of trousers, one shirt of ozenabriggs, for the winter one dutch blanket one hat one jacket one pair of breeches of Negro Cotton one pair of good yarn stockings or boots and one pair of shoes suitable for the winter season one shirt of oznabriggs for the winter season." Jeffery, when he was hired out, was to receive new clothing including "... a new hatt, for the winter one new shirt, one new woolen jacket and breeches, one pare new woolen stocking or boots, one pare of double Sold Shoes and one New Dutch Blanket."

The clothing provided to the enslaved was limited and of coarse materials. The "ozenabriggs" fabric used for shirts was coarse linen made from the "tow" or short fibers of the flax plant. The "Negro Cotton" contained no cotton but was made of rough wool. All of these materials could have been grown on a plantation, or if the plantation was large and the slaveholder prosperous, the cloth or readymade clothing could have been purchased.

Nineteenth-century slave accounts report that enslaved people considered the hiring out process to be frightening and disruptive to family life. The person never knew who would hire him or how he might be treated. Several local men and relatives of Joel Lane hired his slaves. William Lane, Thomas's older brother, hired Jeffery in 1805 for 30 pounds 7shillings. Rhodham Atkins, who hired Jimboy in 1799, was a carpenter and builder who completed the new

statehouse in 1795. Although the hiring contracts stated the clothes the worker would be provided, it did not state where Jimboy would work or what he would do.

The prospect of an enslaved person being sold during the lifetime of his master and after the master's death was an unsettling aspect of slavery mentioned in many slave memoirs and other documents. On November 22, 1800 a deed was recorded for the sale of a slave belonging to Joel Lane. It covered the public sale of “. . . the estate of the late Mrs. Lane, relick of Joel Lane.” At that sale Cate and her two children, David and Montford, were sold to John Haywood for 555 Spanish milled dollars. Cate had been willed to Mrs. Lane as well as “. . . her future increase.” The slave code of North Carolina stated that children of enslaved women would also be enslaved, and belong to the mother's owner. Children could and often were separated from their mothers, so Cate was fortunate to be sold with her children to the same master. When John Haywood died Cate and the children were not in the inventory of his slaves. What happened to them is not known. Since Mrs. Lane's sale was a public sale, Old Ned, Young Ned, Jack, Old Rose, Vilot, Hasty, Arthur, and Suckey could have been purchases by anyone and the proceeds divided among Mrs. Lane's nine children.

The will of Grissy Lane Ryan, Joel Lane's youngest child, was recorded in the Wake County Court papers in the May Term, 1868. The last item or request in her will was to her cousin Jane C. Hinton. That request was “. . . to give my old man Servant 'Phil' a home and protection such as the money be able to do.” Grissy or Grizelle left Jane Hinton eight hundred dollars to carry out this request. It is unlikely that this Phil, who lived to see freedom, was the Phil listed as a slave of her father's. But it is possible that Montford, who was Grizzly's age, survived to see freedom.

Many public records were lost in the Wake County Court House fire in 1835 that could have provided some insight into how Joel Lane accumulated his enslaved people, or where they went after leaving his plantation. However, those records would not have provided insight into the personal content of everyday life of the enslaved. Public records would not reveal the bondman's view of slavery in 18th century Wake County. That information would have to wait for the slave narratives written in the 19th century.