

An old Virginia plantation, a new owner and a family legacy unveiled

By Joe Heim



GRETNA, Va. — There was so much Fredrick Miller didn't know about the handsome house here on Riceville Road.

He grew up just a half-mile away and rode past it on his school bus every day. It was hard to miss. The home's Gothic revival gables, six chimneys, diamond-paned windows and sweeping lawn were as distinctive a sight as was to be seen in this rural southern Virginia community. But Miller, 56, an Air Force veteran who now lives in California, didn't give it much thought. He didn't know it had once been a plantation or that 58 people had once been enslaved there. He never

considered that its past had anything to do with him.

Two years ago, when his sister called to say the estate was for sale, he jumped on it. He'd been looking, pulled home to the place he left at 18. His roots were deep in this part of Pittsylvania County, and he wanted a place where his vast extended family, many of whom still live nearby, could gather.

The handsome house set on a rise had a name, it turned out. Sharswood. And Sharswood had a history. And its history had everything to do with Miller.

Slavery wasn't something people talked much about in this part of Virginia when Miller was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. And other than a few brief mentions in school, it wasn't taught much, either.

The only time he remembers the subject coming up was when Alex Haley's miniseries, "Roots," was broadcast in 1977.

"For a lot of us, that was our first experience with what really happened during slavery," he said. "It just wasn't discussed."

Miller assumed his ancestors had been enslaved. But where and when and by whom were questions that were left unasked and unanswered.

"People didn't want to talk about this stuff because it was too painful," said Dexter Miller, 60, a cousin of Fredrick's who lives in Java. "They would say, 'This is grown folks' business.' And that's how some of the history was lost."

[Teaching America's truth: How slavery is taught in America's schools](#)

Another cousin, Marian Keyes, who taught first in segregated schools and later in integrated schools from 1959 to 1990, said that for a long time there was little teaching about slavery in Pittsylvania County.

"We weren't really allowed to even talk about it back then," said Keyes, who turns 90 this year and lives in Chatham. "We weren't even allowed to do much about the Civil War and all of that kind of stuff, really."

Even outside of school, when she was growing up, Keyes said, the subject of slavery was avoided.

“I just thought everything was normal,” she said, “because that was the way of life.”

But the unspoken history left a gulf.

It wasn't until after Fredrick Miller bought Sharswood in May 2020 that its past started coming into focus. That's when his sister, Karen Dixon-Rexroth and their cousins Sonya Womack-Miranda and Dexter Miller doubled down on researching their family history.

What neither Fredrick Miller nor his sister knew at the time was that the property had once been a 2,000-acre plantation, whose owners before and during the Civil War were Charles Edwin Miller and Nathaniel Crenshaw Miller.

Miller.

Fredrick Miller and so many members of his extended family were born and grew up in the shadow of Sharswood — and perhaps it was a clue to a deeper connection. It wasn't uncommon after emancipation for formerly enslaved people to take the last names of their enslavers. But establishing the link required more research.

[More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation.](#)

His sister and cousins scoured genealogy sites and contacted Karice Luck-Brimmer, who works in community outreach with [Virginia Humanities](#) in Pittsylvania County and researches local African American genealogy. They pored over court and real estate records, examined census data and revisited family tales passed down over generations.

As the puzzle pieces connected, a clearer picture emerged. Sarah Miller, great-grandmother to Fredrick, Karen and Dexter, and great-great-grandmother to Sonya, died in 1949 at 81. From her death certificate, they learned that Sarah's parents were Violet and David Miller.

The 1860 Census does not list enslaved people by name, only by gender and age. In the 1870 Census, however, Violet and David Miller lived just a short distance from Sharswood. Between the many documents that the descendants of Sarah Miller have obtained, the fragments of family oral history they've sewn together and the proximity of the family to the plantation, they are certain that Violet and David Miller were among those enslaved at Sharswood.

More clues continue to emerge. An entry in the Virginia Slave Births Index uncovered this month by Luck-Brimmer shows that a boy named Samuel was born to Violet in Pittsylvania County on May 9, 1864. N.C. Miller is listed as the enslaver. In the 1870 Census record for Violet and David Miller, Samuel, age 5, is listed as a member of the household. Sarah, his youngest sister, also is listed as a member of the household. She would have been 2, although no age is given for her in the record.

The newly discovered document “hands-down places them on the plantation,” Womack-Miranda said after seeing the entry. “It can never be disputed.”

For Fredrick Miller, the 10.5-acre-estate he’d purchased for \$225,000 ended up not being just a future gathering spot for the family, but also its first traceable point in the United States — an astonishing revelation for him. It also left him thinking about family history and the absence of that history for many people like him.

“You’ve got to know where you come from,” he said in a phone interview from his California home. “You’ve got to know where you come from. It’s unfortunate that a lot of us don’t.”

In an undated photo of Sarah that family members have shared with one another, the mother of seven wears wire-rimmed glasses and faces the camera with a somber expression. When he looks at the photo of his great-grandmother, Fredrick Miller sees sadness in her face. But, he hopes, maybe this purchase has brought some redemption.

With Sharswood in his hands, her family is reclaiming its past.

“I just hope that somehow she’s looking down from heaven and finally cracking a beautiful smile,” he said.

On a recent mid-December day, the oaks and walnuts that tower nearby had shed all of their leaves. A dry spell had turned the winter grass browner still. But Sharswood still shone, with its bright white paint accented with black shutters and a green metal roof. Immaculate.

Designed by the famed New York architect Alexander Jackson Davis and built in the middle of the 19th century, Sharswood signaled success.

Even with the additions and paint jobs over the years, it’s not hard to envision how the house looked before the Civil War, when it was the hub of one of the largest tobacco plantations in Pittsylvania County. And it’s not hard to envision the enslaved men, women and children who toiled to harvest that tobacco and enrich the plantation’s owners.

Approximately 550,000 people in Virginia were enslaved at the outset of the Civil War — roughly a third of the commonwealth’s population — Virginia Museum of History & Culture figures show.

In Pittsylvania County, closer to half of the population was not free. Those enslaved at Sharswood in 1860 ranged in age from 1 to 72, according to Census figures. Thirty-five were 12 or older and considered adults on the census count. There were 23 children. Of the 58 total, 31 were female.

There were 12 houses for enslaved people on the plantation, determined Doug Sanford, a retired professor of historic preservation at the University of Mary Washington, who has been [documenting former homes of the enslaved](#) across Virginia with Dennis Pogue, an associate research professor at the University of Maryland and retired archaeologist.

The census numbers are a small window into the plantation’s life. But not much more.

For many Black Americans, slavery is a brick wall that prevents them from finding out more about their past before emancipation. Census records before the Civil War rarely provided names of enslaved people. Some owners kept records that included first names and the prices they paid to buy an enslaved person or what they received for selling one, but personal details are scarce. Separations of families made the kinship trails even more difficult to follow.

[Take this quiz on the history of U.S. slavery](#)

Even when slavery ended, the details of the people subjected to it and of their daily lives were not easy to come by. After emancipation, there often was a reluctance among those who had endured slavery to share their story with their children and grandchildren, said Leslie Harris, a professor and historian at Northwestern University who has written extensively about slavery in the United States.

“The generation closer to these experiences clearly were dealing with a traumatic memory, and they didn’t want to rehearse that memory,” Harris said. “[Toni Morrison](#) has this line in her book ‘Beloved’ where she says ‘This is not a story to pass down.’ So, for that generation, they didn’t want to pass down that trauma.”

But for subsequent generations, Harris said, “It’s not that it’s not troubling to learn these histories, but our curiosity and our desire to understand is enough removed from that to have us ask different questions of the record.”

The dilapidated cabin behind the main house at Sharswood isn’t visible from the road. A humble structure with a central chimney dividing two rooms, it feels almost hidden. But Sarah Miller’s descendants have focused their attention on it.

What the family learned from ongoing research by Sanford and Pogue and by Jobie Hill, a preservation architect who started the [Saving Slave Houses](#) project in 2012, is that the cabin was built before 1800, probably as the main house on the property, and then was divided into a duplex before 1820. From then on, they said, it probably served as a kitchen and laundry for the main house and a living space for some who were enslaved at Sharswood.

Standing 50 feet from the 16-by-32-foot cabin in which her ancestors may have worked or lived, Womack-Miranda, 53, said the discovery of the connection has been life-altering.

“When I walk around here, I imagine my ancestors walking on the same ground, the same dirt,” she said. “As an African American, you feel like you have reached the point where you can say, ‘I’m connected to my ancestors, to my roots, to the very plantation [where] my ancestors were enslaved.’ It makes me feel whole as an African American.”

Karen Dixon-Rexroth says she, too, feels the presence of her ancestors all about the property.

But Dixon-Rexroth, 49, also has noticed the generational difference when it comes to discussing the history of the plantation. As she walked with her mother, Betty Miller-Dixon, across the backyard last month and toward the cabin, she sensed her mother’s reluctance.

“You don’t like to go there, do you, Mom?” she asked.

Miller-Dixon, 81, stopped and looked at the dwelling.

“You just wonder how they survived it,” said Miller-Dixon, whose father, Gideon Miller, was Sarah Miller’s youngest child. “I don’t want to dwell on something I can’t control, but it bothers me when I go even just to look in there.”

Thinking about what their ancestors may have endured in captivity is painful. Although the Miller men who owned the property never married, the descendants of those enslaved at Sharswood believe they had children with women on the property. They wonder about ancestors who would have had no say in that. That some of them are descendants of the enslaved and the enslaver is a real possibility. They have thought of all of that. And more.

“When I saw the cabin, a feeling came over me like I believe I’m home,” said Dexter Miller. “I could feel my ancestors, and it almost brought tears to my eyes. I can picture them sitting around the fireplace, and the stories they were telling. I’m in the presence of my ancestors hundreds of years ago who lived here and slept here and birthed here. But I also think about what happened around that big oak tree. Were my ancestors beaten there? Hanged there? That’s crept into my mind. You never know.”

Fredrick Miller thinks about what slavery has done not just to his family, but to all descendants of the enslaved.

“When people experience traumatic events, they get counseling for it. They go through a process and, you know, try to get through it,” he said. “Black folk went through that kind of stuff for hundreds of years. And then when it was over, they just said, ‘Okay, go out there and be normal.’ You know, how is that possible? We are a product of who we were hundreds of years ago. And so it’s unfortunate, because I think that we could have definitely progressed a lot further had we dealt with that stuff early on and dealt with it the right way.”

While they do not ignore the pain and privation suffered by their forebears, many in the family say the lessons they are taking from this reconnection, from this reclaiming, is that history is not fixed in place; it is always being written.

“I just imagine my ancestors walking here and how they may have felt inside that life has to be better than this,” Dixon-Rexroth said. “And now, all these years later, us having the property in our possession.”

In August, the Miller family held a huge two-day reunion on the grounds. More than 200 relatives came. Tents and chairs were set up in the yard. Tables overflowed with fried fish, grilled jerk chicken, banana pudding and corn pudding. A food truck served Italian ice. Children ran around or played in a moon bounce. There were board games, raffles, giveaways. A DJ set up on the front porch.

Fredrick Miller participates in a remembrance session at Sharswood during the family reunion in August. (Tonya Miller)

The Miller family reunions go back to at least 1965. Relatives told Fredrick Miller it was the best one they had attended.

Miller said that when he looked at the crowd that had gathered that weekend, he was proud that his relatives were reconnecting, not just with one another, but also with their past. The small cabin behind the house was something everyone wanted to see.

“I just sat back and was able to observe the excitement of the people who showed up,” Miller said. “It was just such a good feeling to talk to them about that place, and that’s something we’d been lacking.”

He still thinks about if he had not bought Sharswood and how the past almost slipped through the family’s fingers.

“That history would have definitely been lost,” he said. “Definitely.”