

Slavery and Enslaved Persons: Petition of William Derry, c. 1740



Transcription

North Carolina Ss / To the Hon[ora]ble William Smith Esqr. Chief Justice of s[ai]d province and his assistants in Court now Sitting.

The humble Petition of William Derry a free Negro

Sheweth

That your petit[ione]r being a Slave to One Robert Coleman of the Isle of Wight

County in the Dominion of Virginia. The s[ai]d Robert by his last Will dated the Eight day of March 1715 gave your petit[ione]r (amongst other of his slaves) his freedom in these Words, viz. my Will and desire is that all my Negros shall have the priviledge to hire theirselves out to service and paying my Executors five hundred pounds of Tobacco each of them yearly and the rest of the profits for themselves

And made Christopher Reynolds and Anne his wife Exec[utor]s of the s[ai]d Will and dyed soon after, and your petit[ione]r Avers that he was one of the said Negros And that by Virtue of the said Will he enjoyed his freedom and paid and satisfied the s[ai]d Christopher the Tobacco Annually Mentioned in the said Will during the life of the said Christopher Reynolds. And that about four years last past the said Christopher died.

That one Godfrey Hunt of Nancemond County in Virginia marryd Anne the Exec[utor]s of Coleman and Widow of the said Christopher Reynolds and on the Nineteenth day of July in the year 1737 came in the night of the same day and in a Barbarous manner Seized on your petit[ione]r in his Own dwelling House Situated on the Black Creek in the Isle of Wight

Reflect & Discuss

Enslaved persons are rarely referred to by their last name in the historical records created by their oppressors. What is significant about the use of William's last name here?

What motivation could Robert have had for freeing his enslaved people only upon his death?

Consider how William Derry is considered free, but he is still required to grow and give tobacco to Christopher Reynolds as his price for freedom.

William lived as a free man for more than 20 years. Why do you think Godfrey Hunt involved himself?

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in Virginia and likewise Seized on and took away your petit[ione]rs goods and Chattells without lawfull precept or Other Course in Law and by force Carried your petit[ione]r to the dwelling House of William Taylor in the said County

Who under pretense of a Sale from the said Hunt hath ever since detained your petit[ione]r as a Slave and hath brought your petit[one]r as a slave into this Government and as such now claims him.

Your Petitioner humbly prays relief in the premises

and that he be reinstated in his freedom, he being

Willing to Comply with all just demands of Colemans

Executors and to give Caution therein as this Hon[ora]ble Court shall think fit

And he will pray

Thos Jones for the Petit[ione]r

This record is evidence of William's resistance to his enslavers, even within a system created to oppress him. Consider the path William took to bring his case to court. Discuss other methods of resistance.

The outcome of William Derry's petition is unknown. What might have happened to William? How could you find out more?