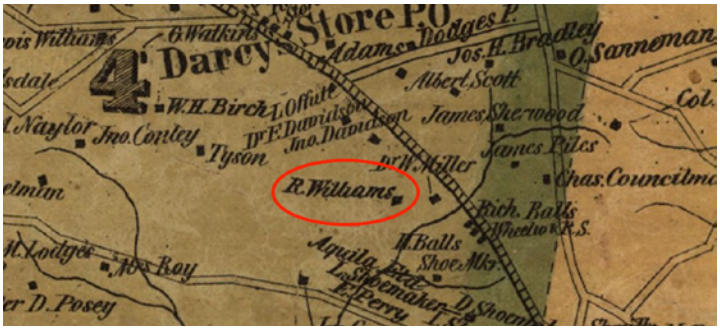
Somerset History: Slavery Roots

By L. Paige Whitley, *Cumberland Avenue*

In an 1852 oration, Frederick Douglass asked: *"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim."*

Protests for racial justice currently march across our nation, prompting a nationwide introspection on contemporary America and its roots in Slavery and its aftermath. Various quotes from ads and accounts I've uncovered during my research on local African-American history are echoing in my mind right now.

Somerset land was purchased in 1890 by U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists who worked at the Experimental Station for Animal Husbandry, a USDA farm set up around 1888 on what is now Norwood Park. Yet much earlier, in 1834, Richard Williams, then an administrator and collector for Judge Thomas Cramphin's five estates, purchased this land and farmed it for almost 50 years. Before 1865, Williams, like his close neighbors the Davidsons to the north, the Loughboroughs to the south, and the Bradleys to the east, **all** *enslaved Africans.*



Here are a few of the materials I've encountered:

- 1843 Runaway Ad: "Was Committed to Carroll County Jail … As a runaway, a colored boy who calls himself HENRY DAVIS, about 19 years of age, yellow complexion, 5' 4" high, a smart attractive fellow, with no particular mark. Had on a drab roundabout and pants, black fur hat pretty much worn … He says he belongs to RICHARD WILLIAMS, Montgomery Co., Md."
- In September 1852 Joseph Beall, Robert and Jeffrey were jailed in D.C. as runaways. They were released to Harriet Loughborough's future son-in-law, lawyer Joseph H. Bradley, Jr. Hamilton Loughborough wrote to his stepmother: "… I am sure that you do not desire to confound the innocent wife and offspring with … the guilty husband, or even to visit such a heavy punishment as **perpetual transportation** on the guilty husband himself." (One former enslaved Loughborough hand *was* sold to Louisiana.)
- In the 1867-68 Montgomery County Slave Statistics, on behalf of her brother Richard Williams, Arianna Williams listed the following enslaved people for potential remuneration: RUTH DAVIS (age 35) and her children Ann, Lloyd, William, Frank and Mary, the latter ranging in age between 3–14. After the war, the Davis family worked for the Bradley family, the farm now being the location of the Chevy Chase Club bounded by Bradley Lane and Wisconsin and Connecticut Avenues.
- Recounted in 1911 by Civil War veteran John Godfrey: "In 1862 I ran away from my owner (Roderick Magruder in P. G. County) and … I enlisted under the name of John Bowie. When I was mustered out in 1865 … I came to Washington … I worked on a farm for … John Davidson in Montgomery Co., Maryland … for three years."

- Local Justice of the Peace James Henry Loughborough to wife Margaret, 1903: "I have just returned from Rockville (and) have attended a magistrates trial in which I was Plaintiff vs. a negro who assaulted me with words and raised a stone to hit me; but did not hit. He will lie in jail until Nov. term of Court unless bailed out and then be tried, so I think, he will learn to behave … "

Racism is a vestige of "slavery unwilling to die," declared Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglass in 1968. It is my hope in sharing these bits of local history that we can embark on a journey of enlightenment, that we can come to grips with and accept our local roots steeped in slavery and racism, and that as we can move forward to truly build a democratic society.