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Uncovering the Families Enslaved to the Peters in Montgomery County, Maryland: 1790 & 1807

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

The patriarch of the Peter family in Maryland was Robert Peter (July 22, 1726-November 15, 1806), a Scottish immigrant, tobacco merchant, and the first mayor of Georgetown, D.C., after its incorporation in 1789. Regarded by early historians and residents of Georgetown as one of the wealthiest men in Maryland during the colonial and early American periods, Robert Peter enslaved hundreds of people in Montgomery County, Maryland, during his lifetime.¹

¹ See Hugh T. Taggart, "Old Georgetown," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 1908, vol. 11 (1908), 120-224; Richard K. MacMaster, "Georgetown and the Tobacco Trade, 1751-1783," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D. C.* (1966-1968), 1-33; Eleanor M. V. Cook, "Georgetown: Jewel

No historical assessment or compilation of Robert Peter's slaveholdings exists. Historical analysis of Robert Peter is focused on Peter's position as a Scottish "Tobacco Lord" and his role in developing Georgetown into one of Maryland's, and then the District of Columbia's, busiest and most profitable port towns. Missing from this narrative is an in-depth assessment of how Peter acquired his wealth and how much of that wealth was used to purchase and enslave hundreds of people, a pattern continued by his descendants. This project stemmed from an analysis of Martha Custis Peter's patrimony list of enslaved and their connection to the Peters of Tudor Place.²

This dataset seeks to name the men, women, and children enslaved to Robert Peter over a period of about twenty years. Our goals are twofold: first and foremost, we want to acknowledge the humanity of the people named and bring awareness to their existence. Second, we seek to lay the foundation for the dataset's expansion, with additional research and analysis already underway. Ultimately, we want to tell the stories of the people enslaved to Robert Peter and his descendants and to amplify enslaved peoples' individual experiences.

For the purposes of this data article, we have omitted an in-depth analysis of Robert Peter's life and his wealth-building. We mention his monetary wealth and landholdings only to provide context for how enslaved people were dispersed across Georgetown and Montgomery County, Maryland. Additional research is needed to better define how Peter and his descendants built and maintained their wealth.³

This dataset is compiled from two sources: the first is an entry in Robert Peter's account and tobacco book titled "Account of Negroes the property of Robert Peter at his different places, taken 10th November 1790," abbreviated to "Robert Peter Account, 1790." The second source is titled "List, names of enslaved people divided by quarters" abbreviated to "Draft Robert Peter List, 1807." Both sources are part of the Peter Family Papers at The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. The 1790 account was possibly created to record Robert Peter's slaveholdings while he served a one-year term as the first mayor of Georgetown. The undated list is believed to be the list of Robert Peter's enslaved people at his home in Georgetown and his plantations in Montgomery County, taken in 1807 after his death in late 1806. We explain how we came to this conclusion in the "Methodology" section of this article.

of Montgomery County, Part II," *The Montgomery County Story* 42, no. 1 (February 1999), 61-76; and Grace Dunlop Ecker, *A Portrait of Old Georgetown* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1951).

² See Salomé A. Ayers-Sánchez, Dylan Bails, Camilia Bell, Summer Matthes, Victorianna Mejia, Briana Pineda, Zoe Rivera, "From Paper to Personhood: Enslaved, Free, and Disabled Black Experiences from the Peter Daybook, Georgetown, D.C., 1796-1799," *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 5, no. 1 (2024): 65-73, <https://doi.org/10.25971/v87g-a240>; Mark Auslander, "Enslaved Labor and Building the Smithsonian: Reading the Stones," *Southern Spaces*, December 12, 2012, <https://southernspaces.org/2012/enslaved-labor-and-building-smithsonian-reading-stones/>.

³ According to Ecker, Robert Peter immigrated to Maryland in approximately 1747 as a factor for John Glassford and Company in Bladensburg. See Ecker, *Portrait of Old Georgetown*, 14.

The 1790 account does not appear to be a static document. Rather, the account was amended through at least 1794. Notations were made to indicate childbirths, deaths, and sales, as well as Robert Peter's purchase of Becky (00135), the wife of Fortune (00112), who was the patriarch of a large family. The notations were made in different hands than the original creator of the record; whose hand is yet to be determined. In contrast, the 1807 list appears to have no alterations and was written in one hand.

We have chosen not to identify either of these sources as inventories, as no monetary values or sale prices were assigned to the enslaved, save one: in the 1790 account, Jack (00026) was sold to Thomas Beall for £100.

Our dataset features 254 uniquely named enslaved people, and 31 fields; roughly 98 percent of the individuals are named. Those who are not named were children and a woman identified as Hurdle's mother (00040). Based on our two sources, Robert Peter appears to have listed families together at different farms, with parents named first, then children. Parallels between the 1790 account and 1807 list show that many children in the 1790 account had, by 1807, become the patriarchs and matriarchs of their own families. The families had grown; the 1790 account records 131 enslaved people, and the 1807 list records 207 enslaved people. At this point in our research, we estimate that 85 people appear in both lists.

At the time of his death in November 1806, Robert Peter owned dozens of tracts of land totaling over 15,000 acres in Montgomery County, Maryland and close to 70 town lots in Georgetown (situated within what was known as Peter's Square); his estate was valued at \$500,000, nearly \$12.8 million today.⁴ Within his landholdings were seven "quarters" where, according to the two documents, enslaved people lived and labored. The 1790 account references three quarters—Rock Creek, Conclusion, and Slashes—as well as "Town," referring to Georgetown.⁵ The 1807 list is divided again into "Town" and quarters, including the three named in 1790 and four additional quarters: Farm, Strife, Stoney Spring, and Blantyre.⁶ At present, we know nothing

⁴ CPI Calculator, OfficialData.org, officialdata.org/us/inflation/1806?amount=500000; 1804 Real Property Assessments, pp. 233, 250, 286, in Montgomery County Commissioners of the Tax (Assessment Record), 1798-1812, C1110-2, Maryland State Archives; Walter G. Peter, *Cadastral map of Peter's Square, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.* [?, 1814] Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/88693298/>; Philip Barton Key, "Observations on the Will of Robert Peter for the consideration of Gabriel DuVall Esqr., the Reference by Phil B. Key," in Legal Papers re: Robert Peter estate, circa 1808, Box 1, Folder 3, Dunlop Family Papers, MS 0316, H. Furlong Baldwin Library, Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁵ Due to the passage of the 1790 Residence Act, Rock Creek Quarter, Slashes Quarter, and Peter's Georgetown townhomes became part of the newly formed Washington County, District of Columbia. These quarters had previously been part of Montgomery County, Maryland.

⁶ Abstract etc., for making Executors accounts of Administration [of Robert Peter], in Letterbook, letters, newspaper articles, legal documents, plats and surveys, 1685-1805, Box 35, Peter Family Papers, RM-1186, Special Collections, George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. This document was used to standardize the spelling of the quarter names. "Stoney Spring" and "Blantyre" Quarters are misspelled throughout court and personal records; "Stoney Spring" has been transcribed as "Honey Spring" and "Money Spring," while "Blantyre" has been transcribed as "Ballentire/Ballentyre," and "Blantive/Blantyve."

about daily life at the quarters or the larger farms of which they may have been a part. We do know that the quarters were all situated within tracts of land in western and southern Montgomery County, and several of these land tracts appear to remain intact today based on a cursory view of modern land ownership.⁷

Most of the people named in the 1790 account were not listed with a specific quarter, although they were written in likely family groups. Robert Peter only denoted who had been moved from one quarter to another and typically only noted the relocation quarter, not the originating quarter. In contrast, the 1807 list clearly divided people into quarters, with family groups listed under each heading, separated by an underscore. Despite the lack of clarity regarding quarters in the 1790 account and based on parallels between both lists, we do not believe that families were generally moved between the quarters over the period between the creation of these lists.

In the 1790 account, twenty-two enslaved people were named specifically as being in “Town,” or enslaved in Georgetown, including carpenters Harry (00077) and Charles (00078). Given that Peter had townhouses constructed for his sons in Georgetown, the large number of enslaved people in “Town” on the 1790 list may have been a direct result of the need for skilled tradespeople at the time, as the buildings were completed by the mid-1790s.⁸ By comparison, in the 1807 list, eleven enslaved people were accounted for in Georgetown, only five of whom remained there from the earlier list. In 1807, Harry (00077) was no longer in Georgetown, but was enumerated at Strife Quarter, along with carpenters Jerry (00172), Sam (00243), and Dick (00238). Presently, we believe the carpenters lived at Strife Quarter in later years.

Five enslaved people named in this dataset were hired out or otherwise residing with other enslavers or hirers. In 1790, Hurdle (00039) and her unnamed mother (00040) were at R. Elliott’s, and Bett (00086) was at a Mr. Mockbee’s. In 1807, both Jack (00031) and Harry (00140) were at Mrs. C’s. We have not yet determined the full names or where these residences were located.

One manumission can be found in this dataset. The 1790 list indicates that Tobey (00069) was “sold to himself” in 1791.⁹

We acknowledge that “matching” individuals’ names over a seventeen-year period in this dataset may result in errors. We have had to make decisions to assign the same unique identifier to an individual or not based on contextual clues in the two lists and additional information we

⁷ Eleanor M. V. Cook’s “Montgomery County Original Land Grants/Patents, 1680-1799 (Prior to 1800),” held by the Montgomery County Historical Society, were used to place the tracts of land over a modern map. Property chains of title have not yet been performed to confirm the modern against the historic boundaries.

⁸ “Peter Houses, 2618-2620 K Street Northwest, Washington, District of Columbia, DC,” Historic American Buildings Survey, 1959, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/dc0320/>.

⁹ In 1794, Tobey, who referred to himself as Tobias, was formally manumitted by Robert Peter. See Robert Peter to Negro Tobias, Montgomery County Land Records Liber E, page 626, June 2, 1794, Maryland State Archives.

currently have, with the knowledge that we may have made mistakes. As our understanding of this community grows, we will be better positioned to identify individuals across time and space and correct any mistakes made in this dataset.

Dates of Data Collection

2023-2024

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Georgetown, Washington, D.C.
Montgomery County, Maryland

Temporal Coverage

1790-1807

Document Types

Register

Sources

"Account book, tobacco book, negros the property of Robert Peter taken November 1790, lots in the city of Washington, 1784-1797," Box 37, Peter Family Papers, RM-1186, Special Collections at The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, Fairfax County, Virginia.
[abbreviated in the dataset as Robert Peter Account, 1790]

"List, names of enslaved people divided by quarters [n.d.]," DA_004241, Box 18, Folder 14, Peter Family Papers, RM-1186. Special Collections at The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, Fairfax County, Virginia.
[abbreviated in the dataset as Draft Robert Peter List, 1807]

Methodology

Our first task in creating this dataset was to study both documents, as the first document, though clearly identified as a 1790 account of enslaved people belonging to Robert Peter, includes columns with uncommon headings (Fig. 1). Alongside "Name" and "No. [Number]," two columns are titled "How disposed of" and "Time." The "Time" column was not utilized by the account taker and was left blank. The "How disposed of" column was used infrequently to denote where enslaved people were sent, to other quarters or to another enslaver/hirer. The

space next to the enslaved persons' names and the "How disposed of" column were also used, if infrequently, to denote births, deaths, sales, and purchases of enslaved people.

Names	How disposed of	Time
Ned	/	
Betty	/	
John	/	
Ben	/	
Chauncy	/	
Christopher	/	
Heath	/	
Sammy	/	born 1791
Davy	/	
Sally	/	
James	/	
John	/	
Narrist	0	No such Child
Adam	/	
Abel	/	
Davy	/	
Sally	/	
Sally	/	born 1791
Davy Clarke	/	

Names	How disposed of	Time
Mill	/	
Abraham	/	Sent to Dick Creek Quarter
Mimma	/	Slaves
Bob	/	
Jack	/	Sold to Mr. Good Brice May 1794 - 200
Rachael	/	
My	/	
Sally	/	
Jack	/	
Tom	/	
Milly	/	
Norring	/	
Thomas	/	born 1791
Bitoy	/	Bel. from W. G. Peter
Murdle	/	
with her	/	
Mother	/	
M R Elliott	/	Removed to Dick Creek Qtr

Fig. 1: First and second pages of "Account of Negroes the Property of Robert Peter . . . taken 10th November 1790," Peter Family Papers, Special Collections at The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon.

Although the first document was clearly identified and dated, the same could not be said for the second document. We determined that the second document, presently identified by the holding institution as an undated list of enslaved people attributed to David Peter, one of Robert Peter's sons, is actually an unrecorded inventory of Robert Peter's own holdings in enslaved people likely taken in 1807 (Fig. 2), after his death in November 1806 but before January 1808, when another son, Robert Peter, Jr., purchased over one hundred enslaved people from his father's estate.¹⁰ In his will, recorded in October 1807, Robert Peter stated that all of the livestock and enslaved people not bequeathed to his heirs were to be sold to pay the debts of the estate. Among the enslaved individuals who Robert Peter, Jr., purchased from the estate was a uniquely named enslaved man, Pollidore, who also appears in the later list of enslaved people included in this dataset.¹¹ Although not included here, a review of documents associated with the enslaved

¹⁰ Estate, Inventory and Slave list owned by David Peter, undated, Box: 18, Folder: 14, Peter family papers, RM-1186, Special Collections at The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, https://archives.mountvernon.org/repositories/3/archival_objects/15202.

¹¹ Robert Peter, Jr., died in 1809, only a few years after his father. Pollidore was sold from Robert Peter, Jr.'s estate to John Linthicum on January 19, 1810, for \$85. See "Robert Peter [Jr.] Bought of the Estate of

people held by Robert Peter's sons indicates that only one individual was named Pol[l]idore. Linking Pollidore to the estates of both Robert Peter and Robert Peter, Jr. has given us greater confidence that the second source is indeed Robert Peter's undated inventory taken soon after his death, allowing us to link enslaved people between these two documents.

The image shows a handwritten list of names, organized into columns and numbered. The text is written in cursive and appears to be a historical document. The list is divided into sections by horizontal lines and some headings. The names are written in ink on aged paper.

Quarter	Name
1	Davis
2	Jack
3	Nancy
4	David Jones
5	Sam
6	Sam
7	Jack
8	Jack
9	Adam
10	Abraham
11	Jim
12	Jack
13	Buttler
14	Marion
15	Eliza
16	Francis
17	John
18	Charles
19	George Smith
20	Pegg
21	Jack
22	Mary
23	Retty
24	Rachael
25	Christie
26	Mariah
27	Letty
28	Baswell
29	Sam
30	Nat
31	Will
32	Jack
33	Wife
34	Nat
35	Jack
36	Bill
37	Ummal
38	Sally
39	Bill
40	Hanson
41	Abraham
42	Sam Carpenter
43	Jessy Carpenter
44	Pear
45	Harvey
46	David Clark
47	Sam
48	Poll
49	Nancy Spring
50	Jessy
51	Harriet
52	Louise
53	Jessy
54	Harriet
55	Upton
56	Thos
57	Agulla
58	Child
59	Phillis
60	Benjamin
61	Mary
62	Sam
63	Bob
64	Charles
65	Rat
66	George
67	Charles Grandson
68	Ummal
69	Elizabeth

Figure 2: Excerpt from first page of "List, names of enslaved people divided by quarters," Peter Family Papers, The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon.

The documents were initially transcribed verbatim, including errors in spelling and trades that preface the enslaved person's name, such as "Car. [Carpenter] Harry" (00077) and "Car. [Carpenter] Charles" (00078).

Our final spreadsheet has thirty-one columns, with all but three actively used in this dataset. Given our intention to continue to work with additional sources related to the Peters, we anticipated additional fields (Age, Amount_\$, and Amount_lbsTobo) that will be needed as we go forwards and backwards in time.

Robert Peter deceased at Slashes Quarter, Jany [January] 25th 1808; Bought at Sugar Lands of the Same Estate; Bought at Rock Creek," in Box 26, Folder 50, Peter family papers, George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. See also "Daybook, Thomas Peter for the estate of Robert Peter [Jr.], 1809-1832," Box 36, Peter family papers, George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon.

Both documents contain primarily “Registration” events. However, because the 1790 source was added to for a few years after its creation to denote births, deaths, sales, and purchases of enslaved people, “Birth,” “Death,” and “Sale” events and related roles are included. We used the “Relocation” event type when it is indicated that enslaved people were moved from one quarter to another (e.g., Abraham [00023] and Mima [00024]), and “Employment” event type when enslaved individuals were hired out to another enslaver (e.g., Bett [00086] and Harry [00140]). Although we are not yet certain why enslaved people were relocated from one quarter to another, possible explanations include the reunification of families, returning to original worksites, or redirecting labor where it was most needed.

Sex was imputed based on the enslaved person’s name. Numerical ages were not used in either document, but in a few instances terms such as “old,” “girl,” or “child” were used, which we equated with the corresponding “Age Category” options defined by the Enslaved.org controlled vocabularies.

We have selected “Plantation” for the field “Place Type,” even though “Quarter” is part of the location name, as the place name indicated the distinct land tracts rather than a specific domicile for the enslaved. Because the “Place_Name” spellings appear differently across documents, we include a field for standardizing their spellings to ensure searchability by location. See footnote 4 for common spelling variation examples.

Unique identifiers were first assigned to the enslaved people named in the 1790 account. This number is five digits and starts at 00001, with the very first enslaved person in the 1790 account, Ned Doull. The enslaver and hirers/employers were also assigned a five-digit number, with the prefix “ER” for “Enslaver.” Note that these numbers have no specific meaning aside from a way to compare individuals within and between documents and denote when we believe the individuals described represent the same person, especially across multiple events within a document.

To match individuals in the 1790 and 1807 sources, we examined each grouping of names and their location (when known), starting with groups with less common names to make identification more straightforward (see Fig. 3 for the practical illustration of the authors at work). For example, in the 1790 account, Betty (00002), James (00003), Ben (00004), Charity (00005), Jupiter (00006), Letty (00007), and Jenny (00008) were part of Group 1, with no quarter identified. In the 1807 list, these same individuals were together and part of Group 16, enumerated at Blantyre Quarter. There is variation in the names – “Jem” (00003) was named “James” and “Leathe” (00007) was spelled “Letty”. With these similarities, we reasonably concluded that these were indeed the same individuals in both lists, and each were assigned the name unique identifier from the 1790 account.



Figure 3: To visualize the matches across both documents, the dataset creators wrote a name and group number on an individual sticky note and lay them out by location on open wall space. Images courtesy of the authors.

Likewise, Ned (00052), Peg (00053,) and Fan (00054) were part of Group 9 in the 1790 account and part of Group 5 in the 1807 list, enumerated at Strife Quarter, wherein “Peg” was called “Margaret” (00053), “Peg” being a common nickname for “Margaret.”

Some of the enslaved were enumerated with surnames, which made identification across both lists relatively simple: see David “Davy” Clarke (00020), John “Jack” Glasgow (00107), and George Smith (00059).

Included in the Comments field, we noted our logic either for or against making a match of individuals between documents. For example, a Sambo (00062) appeared on “Robert Peter Account, 1790” and a Sam (00243) was a carpenter at Strife Quarter on “Draft Robert Peter List, 1807.” With no additional evidence, we had no reason to assume that Sambo = Sam. Conversely, with five Johns on each list, confirming which may have been which required aligning larger groups of individuals with each John to ensure an accurate match. Only three of the Johns could be confidently aligned across both documents. John (also known as Jack) Glasgow (00107) was easily matched based on surname; John (00109) and John (00092) were matched by appearing in the same grouping of names on each document.

The individuals who we could not confidently match were assigned new unique identifiers. To ensure each individual received their own identifier, and to prevent duplication of unique identifiers, we bypassed strictly consecutive numbers. To reiterate, these numbers have no specific meaning, aside from a way to compare individuals within and between documents, and do not reflect a total count of individuals in the dataset.

The final methodological element to clarify in regard to our dataset is the standardization of first names (Stndrd_FN) for enslaved people alongside recorded name (First_Name). We selected one specific spelling to ensure the ability to compare and to find individuals amid spelling variations.¹² For example, we standardized the spelling of “Harriot” (in the original records), to “Harriet” (societally the most common spelling). We dropped the “ey” on names such as “Lucey” and “Nancey” and standardized them to “Lucy” and “Nancy” for the same reason. “Herculous” and “Hillen” were standardized to “Hercules” and “Helen.” “Alce,” “Ailse,” “Ailsey,” and “Elsey” were standardized to “Alce,” the most common way the name spelling appears over time. Several enslaved people included in the original sources were unnamed, only referred to as “child” or “mother.” Per Enslaved.org’s recommended practices, “unnamed” was listed in lieu of the first name of these individuals. When a surname was not found on the original, the standardized surname field remains blank. Note that at least one couple, Jerry and Harriet Beall (00042 and 00043, respectively), have a standardized surname assigned based on information found in later documents.¹³

Because we maintain the original spelling and then provide the standardized spelling, we are able to both acknowledge Peter’s way of referring to an enslaved person with a diminutive as found on the original, while also giving the enslaved person respect. We standardized an enslaved person’s name to a full name if we knew the enslaved person was referred to by *both* a diminutive and a full name based on the evidence we have. For example, “Tobey” was standardized to “Tobias,” “Davy” to “David,” and “Zilla” to “Priscilla.”

Date of Publication

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/4RAKTV>

Linked Data Representation: [Enslaved.org](https://www.enslaved.org)

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Tudor Place Historic House & Garden
Mellon Foundation

¹² Note that the standardized spellings used to date are based on this dataset and may be revised as information is added with new variations from additional primary sources.

¹³ Jerry and Harriet were purchased by Robert Peter, Jr. from his father’s estate in January 1808. In this document, Jerry is referred to as Jerry Beall. In Robert Peter, Jr.’s, will, recorded in November 1809, Robert Peter, Jr., emancipated “Jere Beall and his wife, Harriott.” See Montgomery County Will Book G page 237, Maryland State Archives.

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