

Emerging Writers

Volume 5

Article 5

2022

America's Forgotten Laborers: The World of Enslaved Craftsmen

Zack Dow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [American Studies Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Labor History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dow, Zack (2022) "America's Forgotten Laborers: The World of Enslaved Craftsmen," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 5, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerging Writers by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

America's Forgotten Laborers: The World of Enslaved Craftsmen

by Zack Dow

The story of early America is one of pioneers and patriots, hardworking, self-made individuals who built a powerful nation from a group of colonies. Important American figures like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are remembered not only as revolutionaries but also as engineers and innovative, skilled creators. Jefferson, for example, designed the entirety of his renowned estate and even built pieces therein. The story of Benjamin Franklin is told passionately in schoolbooks, recalling his many inventions and skills; but as is all too common in American history, the picture of this country's beginning is painted with a biased brush, one that leaves out an important color.

Historically, tradesmen constituted a large and fundamental part of the workforce. In days before the utilization of fossil fuels and large-scale industrialization, specific, specialized handcrafts comprised American industry. Remnants of the work of these craftsmen are admired today, earning spots in museums across the country and selling in auctions as fine antiques. There is widespread awareness of many of these crafts, but it is not so well known that it was enslaved people who "predominated in craft and industrial labor" and who were not limited to field work (Foner, Lewis 2).

Enslaved people are homogenized by textbooks and school curriculum. For decades, students have learned of unskilled, plantation-working workers who predominately picked and processed cotton or worked as servants. Of course, these jobs were very common, and there is

good reason for schools to focus on these individuals; the brutality and oppressive working conditions faced by this caste of the enslaved are perhaps the worst, and the cruelty of the institution is effectively encompassed by the study of such people. What is not included, however, is the sizeable population of highly-skilled workers, enslaved persons who despite being legally forbidden from learning to read, write, and perform mathematics (which was often relevant for certain crafts), achieved artisanal positions and created fine pieces, some of which are highly praised today. Nearly every large plantation housed a number of skilled workers (smiths, carpenters, etc.), and southern cities had no shortage of enslaved craftsmen, especially as production increased around the time of the Civil War (Foner, Lewis 4).

An exceptionally well-preserved example, Jefferson's Monticello, provides a powerful look into the work of a particular enslaved man, John Hemings, whose family name is infamous, but not for the exceptional work of the man in question. John Hemings was the brother of Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman with whom Jefferson had several illegitimate children. John Hemings was a joiner that belonged to Jefferson, who, after Jefferson's ability to import fine pieces from Europe declines, was utilized heavily in the outfitting of Monticello (Self, Stein 231). The work of John Hemings is extensive: "He worked on the Chinese railing, venetian blinds, cellar sashes, bedchamber closet, and window shutters and participated in many more projects at Monticello" (Self, Stein 233). Most notably, Hemings is also responsible for working on the famous oval arch that leads into the library, which is a piece of much spectacle and technical prowess. The unfortunate reality is that John Hemings is not a part of the popular conversation about Monticello. Jefferson is certainly remembered, as is Sally Hemings, but the landmark site that attracts much tourism today has not cemented itself as a display of enslaved craftsmanship.

Several pieces in the estate were imported or made by high-profile white tradesmen,

but enslaved craftsmen contributed considerably to the outfitting of Monticello. It should be reiterated that emphasis on the negative aspects of slavery—the suffering, the cruelty, the toil—is justified and important to understand, but at large, there is a significant lack of appreciation and representation of the fine work of Black Americans.

Skilled Black workers were not always enslaved. Thomas Day was a free Black cabinetmaker in North Carolina, whose shop “was the third largest furniture manufactory” in the state (Prown 215). Day was certainly a minority, being that he was born into a family of free Blacks, apprenticing under his father and receiving an education under a private tutor (Prown 217). As a Black American in the Antebellum South, freedom and formal education were certainly not the norm; however, Day was still at a disadvantage given his skin color, and his intense success as a master craftsman breaks stereotypes reinforced by a narrow education, which teaches that enslaved people were unskilled and unaccomplished. Day was an artisan who was educated, respected, and achieved levels of success enviable by free white men of the day; yet, while recently gaining recognition, the life and work of Thomas Day are still largely unknown to non-academic audiences.

Just as the diversity of enslaved labor is largely underappreciated, so too the depth and diversity of individual enslaved people eludes the public mind. Dave the Potter was an enslaved man who fit no mold of what or whom he was supposed to be. He was taught to write by his master, which originally was for his work as a typesetter, but he ultimately utilized this skill in a nuanced and sophisticated way as a potter. Dave’s work “appears to be unique in the history of pottery. That uniqueness stems from the artist, his life, and his use of his craft as a form of self-expressive protest...” (de Groft 249). Hundreds of surviving pots tell the story of an enslaved man who not only was an incredibly skilled and unique artisan but was also a complex and intelligent individual. Most exceptionally, more than a quarter of Dave’s pots feature

inscribed poetry, which was used to teach other enslaved people to read (de Groft 255). The enslaved were involved in the handling and storage of such pots, so by Dave's efforts to include poetry therein, he created an opportunity for his peers to learn a forbidden skill. Here again it is seen that Dave the Potter conforms to none of the stereotypical and generalized characteristics of an enslaved person. Rather, he possessed highly developed skill and craftsmanship and fought oppression through hidden messages and irregular artistic expression; yet he too has been excluded from the uncritical curriculum of slavery, which strips away depth and achievement in Black history—and for every Dave the Potter, how many more skilled, complex enslaved people have been lost to history?

Where individuals fail to be recognized, the skilled work of the enslaved can be seen in cities and towns. The prominence of these mold-breaking Black workers is illustrated in Catherine Bishir's *Crafting Lives*:

New Bern, like its sister cities, bustled with enslaved and free, Black and white artisans, along with hundreds of other workers of every color and status. Whether Blacks composed a majority of the local population, as they did in New Bern and a few other towns, or a substantial minority, as in many southern cities, Black artisans formed a constant presence in the human and economic landscape. (40)

When looking into the past, it is easy to forget the diversity of industry and the number of different occupations. Although extremely dominant in the Antebellum South, cotton production was not the only product of labor; at the bare minimum, things like clothes, buildings, and basic furniture needed to be produced, so even in the most plantation-dominated regions of the United States, some amount of skilled work existed, often enslaved (Foner, Lewis 2). Bishir presents a picture of historical labor, giving appropriate recognition to its enslaved and free Black

constituents. In fact, in New Bern, not a single historical building project was documented that did not include both Black and white workers (Bishir 42).

It is clear that the roles of enslaved Blacks were not limited to picking cotton, cooking, or doing housework. The myriad of careers undertaken by white workers are prominently remembered by schoolbooks, but as is seen in the case of New Bern, Black workers contributed equally (if not more, in the case of a predominately Black town) and played a vital part in industry. Why then is it taught that enslaved people only picked cotton, with hardly any mention of anything else, and with only minimal recognition of figures like Thomas Day? Challenging these ideas and, at the very least, recognizing the contributions of well recorded Black artisans is a step that needs to be taken in American education. In fact, many Americans have unknowingly seen the work of enslaved and free Blacks in historical buildings and antique furniture.

Presented above are figures who qualify as American role models, at the very least deserving of a passage in a textbook. They provide a perspective of Black history in stark contrast with one focused on servants and fieldhands. How might educating youth on accomplished enslaved people and free Blacks affect the development of racist attitudes or inspire Black children (who, even today, are taught that their ancestors were mostly menial workers)? The value of figures like Thomas Day, Dave the Potter, and John Hemings is immense, and they represent only a fraction of Black workers, being unusually well documented and having many surviving pieces—a fortune most workers of history do not possess.

Not discussed in this paper are dozens of accomplished enslaved and free Blacks for whom documentation exists; also not mentioned are the hundreds of thousands of Black workers that have been lost to history. Looking at cabinetmakers alone, between 1760 and 1800, “more than 147 white cabinetmakers worked in Charleston,” while of some “3,324 enslaved craftsmen...25 percent, or 831, worked in a trade that cabinetmakers employed in their shops...”

(Strollo 43). That is not to say that all 831 enslaved people were cabinetmakers, but there were certainly some, and most any job in the 19th-century cabinet shop would have required a set of highly developed skills (Strollo 47). Narrow curriculum and outdated educational materials fail to convey the whole picture, and even with good reason to focus on field-working enslaved people, a vital group of people is being left out. American Labor historian Phillip S. Foner and Appalachia historian Ronald L. Lewis attest, “slaves were found in all the crafts, from the most skilled to the least skilled...it is difficult to see how most industries could have operated without bonded labor” (Foner, Lewis 2). It is clear then that enslaved Americans constituted an important population of skilled laborers who have not been given the recognition they deserve.

American students have only been taught about a handful of notable figures of Black history: Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with brief mention of influential individuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington; white figures, on the other hand, constitute the vast majority of history curriculum. Contemporary acts of racism illustrate a need to improve educational programs regarding the history of Black Americans. Informing the masses about the incredible accomplishments of those who faced what was among the worst treatment of any group in the history of the United States has tremendous power to break long-lasting stereotypes and inspire Black Americans. As curator Derrick Beard writes,

We must put down the stereotypes of the watermelon and pick up the reality of the hammer. We must deconstruct and rid ourselves of the coon, the mammy, and the pickinenny and embrace and acknowledge the carpenter, the seamstress, and the silversmith. We must transform the negative names of the Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus, and Buckwheat to that of Henry Boyd, Thomas Day, and Joshua Johnson (qtd. in Prown 215)

The story of America is simply incomplete without these fundamental laborers, some of whom achieved incredible success despite passionate oppression and racism. Black Americans have been taught a history lacking accomplishment, save those mentioned above, but the humble, everyday worker can prove to be just as inspirational.

Works Cited

- Bishir, Catherine. *Crafting Lives: African American Artisans in New Bern, North Carolina, 1770-1900*. North Carolina UP, 2013. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&A>
- Foner, Philip S., and Ronald L. Lewis, editors. *The Black Worker, Volume 1: The Black Workerto 1896*. Temple UP, 1978. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvn1tbr6>
- de Groft, Aaron. “Eloquent Vessels/Poetics of Power: The Heroic Stoneware of ‘Dave thePotter.’” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1998, pp. 249–260. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1215184. Accessed 14 Mar. 2021.
- Prown, Jonathan. “The Furniture of Thomas Day: A Reevaluation.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1998, pp. 215–229. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1215182. Accessed 14 Mar. 2021.
- Self, Robert L., and Susan R. Stein. “The Collaboration of Thomas Jefferson and John Hemings: Furniture Attributed to the Monticello Joinery.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1998, pp. 231–248. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1215183. Accessed 14 Mar. 2021.
- Strollo, William A. ““An Amazing Aptness for Learning Trades:’ The Role of Enslaved Craftsmen in Charleston Cabinetmaking Shops.” 2017. *Virginia Commonwealth U*, Master’s thesis. Accessed 12 Mar. 2021. <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6280&context=etd>,