

A detailed oil painting of an elderly African American man, Yarrow Mamout. He is wearing a light-colored, textured cap with a dark band and a striped top. He has a gentle expression and is looking slightly to the right. He is dressed in a dark blue coat over a white shirt and a red tie. The background is a dark, muted greenish-brown.

# From Slave Ship to Harvard

YARROW MAMOUT

AND THE HISTORY

OF AN

AFRICAN AMERICAN

FAMILY

James H. Johnston

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of an African American Family**

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For Beth and Meredith



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## **From Slave Ship to Harvard**



## **Introduction**

When the eminent American portrait painter Charles Willson Peale was visiting Georgetown in 1818, he heard of a Negro living there, said to be 140 years of age. Peale wrote in his diary that he proposed “to make a portrait of him should I have the opportunity.” The man was Yarrow Mamout.

Almost two hundred years later, I, too, was in Georgetown when I came across Yarrow—his last name—or, I should say, a portrait of him hanging in the library. It was by a different artist, James Alexander Simpson, and done in 1822. Yarrow looks older and poorer. Still, I was captivated, even before I saw a copy of the stunning Peale portrait. Who was this black man, famous enough in his day to sit for two formal portraits, and why had I never heard of him? Thus began the research that uncovered this saga of an extraordinary African American family that went from slave ship to Harvard.

Our mental image of slavery is typically the slavery of cotton plantations in the Deep South at the time of the Civil War. The slavery Yarrow and his family experienced in the border state of Maryland was different. Yarrow came to America more than one hundred years before the Civil War. He knew freedom in Africa, the horrors of a slave ship, slavery in America, and then freedom again. Peale’s portrait of Yarrow is one of only two or three formal portraits by a major artist of an American slave who was brought from Africa.

I chose to write this book as a history of race and family, but it could just as easily have been a detective story about my research. For example, I knew that Yarrow was a slave to the prominent Beall family of Maryland, so I went to a historical library and began perusing a

folder on the Bealls. I noticed two men talking to the librarian. I saw her gesture toward me and heard her say that I had the folder they wanted. This is how I met Jim Beall and his father, Robert Beall.

Such serendipitous encounters made it seem as though an invisible hand were repeatedly guiding my research to new and more startling discoveries. When I went to the National Archives to review the deeds on property Yarrow owned in Georgetown, I found a copy of his signature, which, to my amazement, was in Arabic. Then there was the time I was looking at a map of rural Washington County, Maryland, when my eyes fell on the name Yarrowsburg Road.

The most remarkable break in my research came from a visit to the community of Yarrowsburg. Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, which is nearby, has a small, predominantly black congregation, and the pastor had invited me to a church reunion. He thought I might obtain oral histories about Yarrow's daughter-in-law, Polly Yarrow, for whom Yarrowsburg was named. Surprisingly, no one had heard of her. However, one person, Gloria Dennis, spoke up, saying, "I don't know anything about Polly Yarrow, but my family was named Turner. We came from here and are related to Nat Turner. Are you interested?"

My research up to that point had focused on Yarrow alone. However, that two major figures in black history—Yarrow Mamout and Nat Turner, who led a slave revolt in Virginia—were somehow connected to this obscure little community in Western Maryland added a new dimension and changed the direction of my research. I ultimately concluded, as you will read, that Mrs. Dennis and other Turner descendants could not be related to Nat Turner, but they are related to Polly Yarrow. Her maiden name was Turner, and it was her nephew's grandson who went to Harvard.

This book covers a period of 275 years, from Yarrow's birth in Africa in 1736 to the present time, and spans six generations. Since records on individual slaves are almost nonexistent and records on free blacks such as the Yarrows and Turners are often sketchy, there are gaps in the history that have been filled with less than perfect information.

Two of the generations discussed are Yarrows, and four are their in-laws, the Turners. To help readers keep family members straight,

a family tree begins the photo section and shows the relationships. For those who were slaves, the tree lists the names of the owners as well.

The book is organized into fifteen narrative chapters that tell the family's story in a historical context. The first five focus on Yarrow and the Bealls and provide background about the region of what is now the District of Columbia in colonial times, when Yarrow lived there, and the origins of slavery in Maryland and Virginia. The paintings, particularly Yarrow's sitting for Peale, need a chapter of their own.<sup>1</sup> Next are three chapters on Yarrow's sister, niece, and son, respectively. The narrative then moves to the family of his daughter-in-law, Mary "Polly" Turner Yarrow, and follows the Turners through the Civil War to Harvard and today. At the end of the book is an epilogue with a guide for seeing the buildings, places, documents, and art that are still around. I have also included maps from the period to show where the events took place.

The cast of characters is large, and so is their story. It begins in the highlands of Guinea and Senegal in West Africa in a place known as Futa Jallon, where Fulani people had settled. The Fulani were Muslims who in Yarrow's day were warring with their non-Muslim neighbors. During this period of warfare, Muslims were on rare occasions captured and sold into slavery. This seems to be how Yarrow, an educated Muslim, and his sister found themselves on a slave ship bound for America.

At roughly the same time as the Fulani were moving into Futa Jallon, settlers from England were sailing to the American colonies of Virginia and Maryland. The settlers, in desperate need of something to export in exchange for finished goods from England, turned to the surest moneymaker they could find, the addictive tobacco leaf. Agricultural factories called plantations sprang up, and the planters began buying indentured servants and convicts from Great Britain and, later, slaves from Africa to do the work.

Ironically, the Beall family, which owned Yarrow, traces itself back to a man who came to America through battle and enslavement similar to Yarrow. The English were fighting their neighbors in Scotland when the English captured the Scotsman Ninian Beall and shipped him off

to America as a prisoner of war for a term of years. Ninian found life in Maryland so agreeable that when he ultimately was freed, he urged his relatives in Scotland to join him, and they did.

Yarrow's first owner, Samuel Beall, was descended from these relatives and was a prominent figure in early Maryland. He bought Yarrow right off the slave ship on June 4, 1752, and made him his body servant. Yarrow was a savvy, hardworking man. When he was freed forty-four years later, he quickly earned enough money to buy a house in Georgetown, invest in bank stock, and make interest-bearing loans to merchants. It was as a small-time financier that he came to the attention of Peale. The artist was hobnobbing with presidents, politicians, scientists, philosophers, and the rich and famous when he heard of the African. That such a great man wanted to paint a former slave made a big impression on Yarrow, and Yarrow made a lasting impression on Peale as well.

The record is thinner on Yarrow's immediate family: his sister, wife, and son. His sister seems to have been a slave named Hannah who worked at a tavern in Rockville, Maryland, about thirteen miles north of Georgetown. When she finally got her freedom, she moved to Georgetown and called herself Free Hannah and later Hannah Peale.

Yarrow's wife, or partner, was a slave when she gave birth to Yarrow's son. Her name appears to have been Jane. Freed on the death of her owner, Ann Chambers, she called herself Jane Chambers.

Yarrow Mamout was fifty-two years old when his son Aquilla was born. By law, Aquilla was the slave of his mother's owner. Therefore, Yarrow had to buy the boy's freedom. Yarrow taught Aquilla everything that he knew, and he even arranged for his son to be taught to read and write.

Yarrow's niece was named Nancy Hillman. She was Hannah's daughter and was every bit as clever as her uncle. Twenty years after Yarrow died, Hillman discovered that an old loan of his was in default. She hired a lawyer, filed suit in court, and recovered the unpaid principal plus interest.

In the meantime, Aquilla left Georgetown to purchase a small house in the farming region of Washington County, Maryland, known as Pleasant Valley, forty-five miles northwest of Georgetown. He

moved apparently because his wife, Mary “Polly” Turner, wanted to live near her brother, who was a slave there. Aquilla died seven years after buying a small parcel in the valley, leaving the widowed Polly to carry on alone. She became a midwife. As demand for her services grew, the place where she lived ended up being called Yarrowburg, even though the community itself was white.

This part of Maryland is steeped in black history. John Brown rented a farm nearby. He used it as staging ground for his raid on Harpers Ferry. It was a mile and a half from Polly Yarrow’s house. The Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg, was fought five miles away. Union and Confederate troops chased each other through the valley on their way there.

Polly may have delivered her brother’s son, Simon Turner.<sup>2</sup> The family history after his birth is more certain. Born a slave, Simon asked for his freedom when he grew up and enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. He fought in the famous, and controversial, engagement of black troops known as the Battle of the Crater and returned home after the war.

With the postwar constitutional amendments guaranteeing freedom, the family turned its attention to education. Simon had married Lucinda Sands, the daughter of an ambitious and respected ex-slave named Arthur Sands. Although Sands and his children were illiterate, he did not want his grandchildren to be, so he helped start the first black school in Pleasant Valley.

Simon and Lucinda Turner’s daughter, Emma, was gifted academically, and the family sent her to Storer College in Harpers Ferry to get a teaching degree. She met Robert Ford, a young theology student from Howard College in Washington, and the two were married.

It was their son, Robert Turner Ford, who entered Harvard University in the fall of 1923. He was the grandson of slaves. Polly Yarrow was his great-great-aunt, and Yarrow Mamout was her father-in-law. Ford graduated from Harvard in 1927, almost exactly 175 years after Yarrow had arrived on a slave ship.

The sixth generation of the family consists of Ford’s daughter Alice Truiett and her four cousins, Gloria Dennis (the woman I met at Mt.



Moriah Church in Yarrowsburg), Emily Willis, Cynthia Richardson, and Denise Dungee. Among them, the five women hold eight college degrees. All are married and live in Baltimore.

What follows is the history of this family—and a case study of race in America.