

# Free Labor

## Introduction

In 19th century northern Maryland, farmers planted cereal crops and raised livestock. This type of farming did not require a large year-round labor force, but instead, needed a flexible labor supply that could be managed in accordance with the changing seasonal demands of grain agriculture. The institution of slavery was ill-suited to this type of agriculture. However, because it had been embedded into the social and economic fabric of Maryland society, it remained in place. Yet, slavery changed with the changing demands of the northern Maryland economy. Slave hiring became increasingly common in order to accommodate the changing needs of grain agriculture. And farmers redefined the duration of enslavement through term slavery in order to secure the cooperation and dependability of enslaved workers.

Farmers resorted increasingly to hiring free wage workers to meet the fluctuating demands of the farm economy. **The Epsom workforce was thus composed of a combination of enslaved people, free black workers, and white wage laborers.**

White wage workers, in general, proved to be an unreliable source of labor at Epsom. Because labor was in short supply in early 19th century America, they could come and go as they pleased, knowing that another job could easily be found nearby. Free blacks, however, due to the circumstances of life in the slave society of 19th-century Maryland, did not enjoy the same freedom as white workers, and, as a result, maintained their jobs at Epsom for longer periods of time. Free black workers and enslaved workers thus proved to be the backbone of the workforce for Henry Chew at Epsom.

## White Workers

### White Wage Workers

White workers served in several capacities at Epsom Farm. Chew's most important white employee was his farm overseer. Chew had great difficulty finding a competent overseer who would remain at Epsom for more than a few months. Good overseers commanded high wages at this time, and with a young, largely uncultivated farm, Chew could not afford to pay the wages overseers demanded. As he complained to his father in 1833: *I also am without any regular overseer not being able to get one except at wages I cannot afford to pay.*

White skilled craftsmen were also important to the operation of Epsom. The farm demanded the services of skilled blacksmiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, masons, painters, and others. These skilled craftsmen were typically white men, though Chew's account books reveal that there were several free blacks who were skilled craftsmen as well. Chew's account book also reveals that he employed numerous white workers for seasonal labor. In his records, he labeled these men as "hirelings." Hirelings did a variety of jobs on the farm, including fence building, quarrying, plowing, planting, and taking farm produce to market. During harvest season, he tried to hire as many workers, black and white, for the demanding work of reaping crops, gathering and bundling them, and hauling them to shelter.

### German Workers

Among the white workers hired by Chew was a considerable number of Germans. Baltimore was a major port of entry for German immigrants who would come to the city in increasing numbers as the nineteenth century progressed. When they arrived in the city, these immigrants received help in finding work from the German Society of Maryland and its German Intelligence office. Seasonal work opportunities could be found at farms surrounding the city like Epsom, where farmers like Henry Chew were always in need of labor. During the 1830s, Chew's experience with German workers was not a good one. Frequently absent from work and generally unreliable, their employment was often short. Chew makes his discontent clear by referring to the German workers as, "Dutchman," a derogatory version of the German word Deutsch, meaning German. Even when he praised "Dutchman" Thomas Kesler as a "civil good hand," he found fault with him as being "too fond of associating with the negroes." (HBC Blotter or Memoranda Book, 16 June 1835, HSP)



*The Blacksmith's Shop* by Hans Heinrich Bebie (1800-1888), a Swiss artist who worked in Baltimore and belonged to the same generation as Epsom's German workers.

Workers' families provided a convenient source of much-needed additional labor. Chew rented housing and sold food to a number of workers and their families in exchange for their labor on the farm. In several cases, Chew hired several members of a single family, and in these cases would often combine the money he gave each worker into a single family account.

Dr Negro Dick Spencer		Commenced on the 25 January 1831	63
1831	25 days past paid Dr. George for his shoes got by him.	175	
26	1 Linen shirt delivered him by Child	-	
26	To Cash paid him	12	
March 29	To mending his shoes paid me to negro Henry	25	
April 2	To Cash paid him by Egglewhite in my absence	2	
3	5 days lost work, 14 days 19th March 4 days April 1831	166	
29	To Cash paid him on account of his wages	2	
30	10 days lost work & allowance for provisions	40	
May 4	To Cash paid him this day on account	150	
7	paid the most of this day		
		Open'd 20th Oct 1831	34.

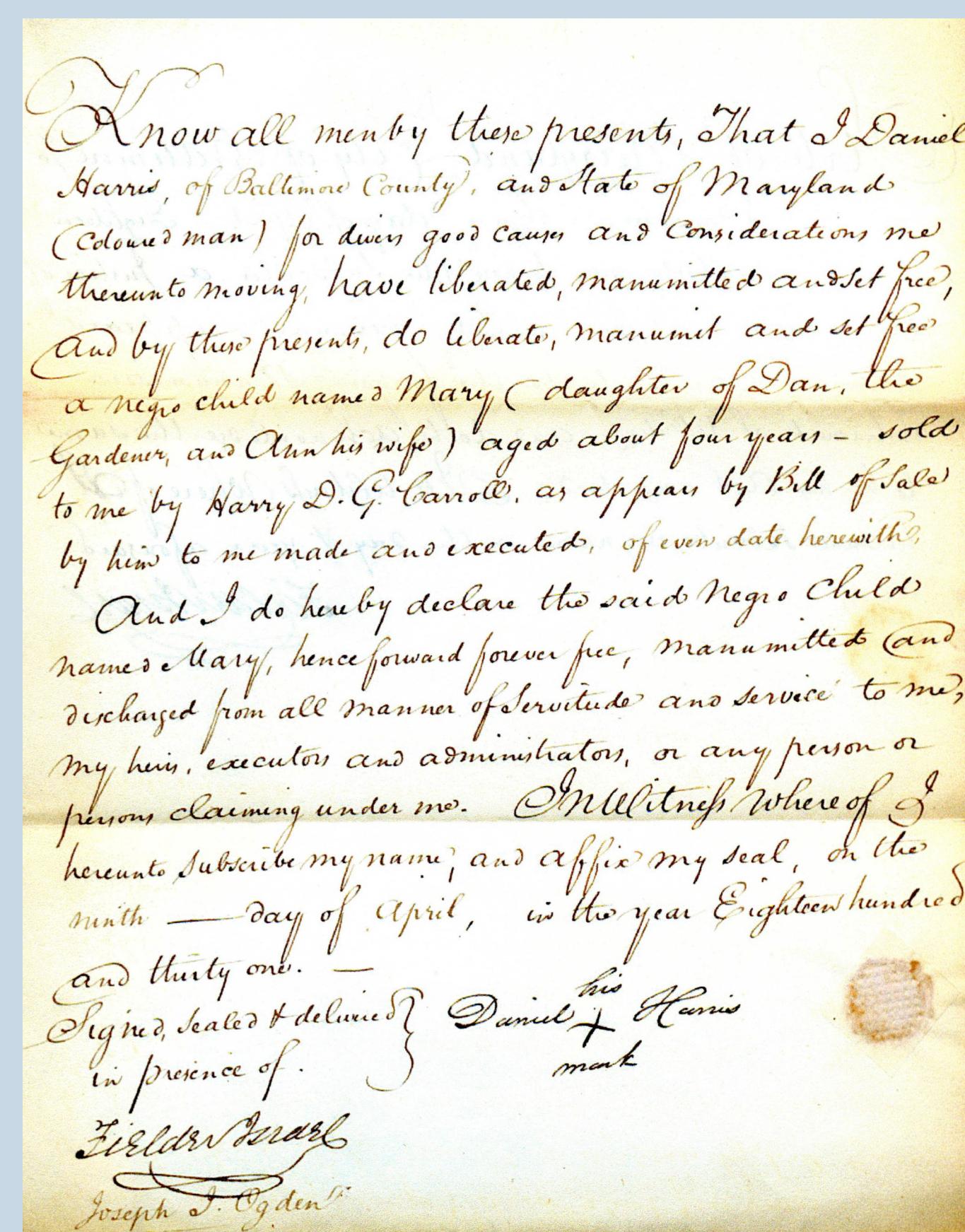
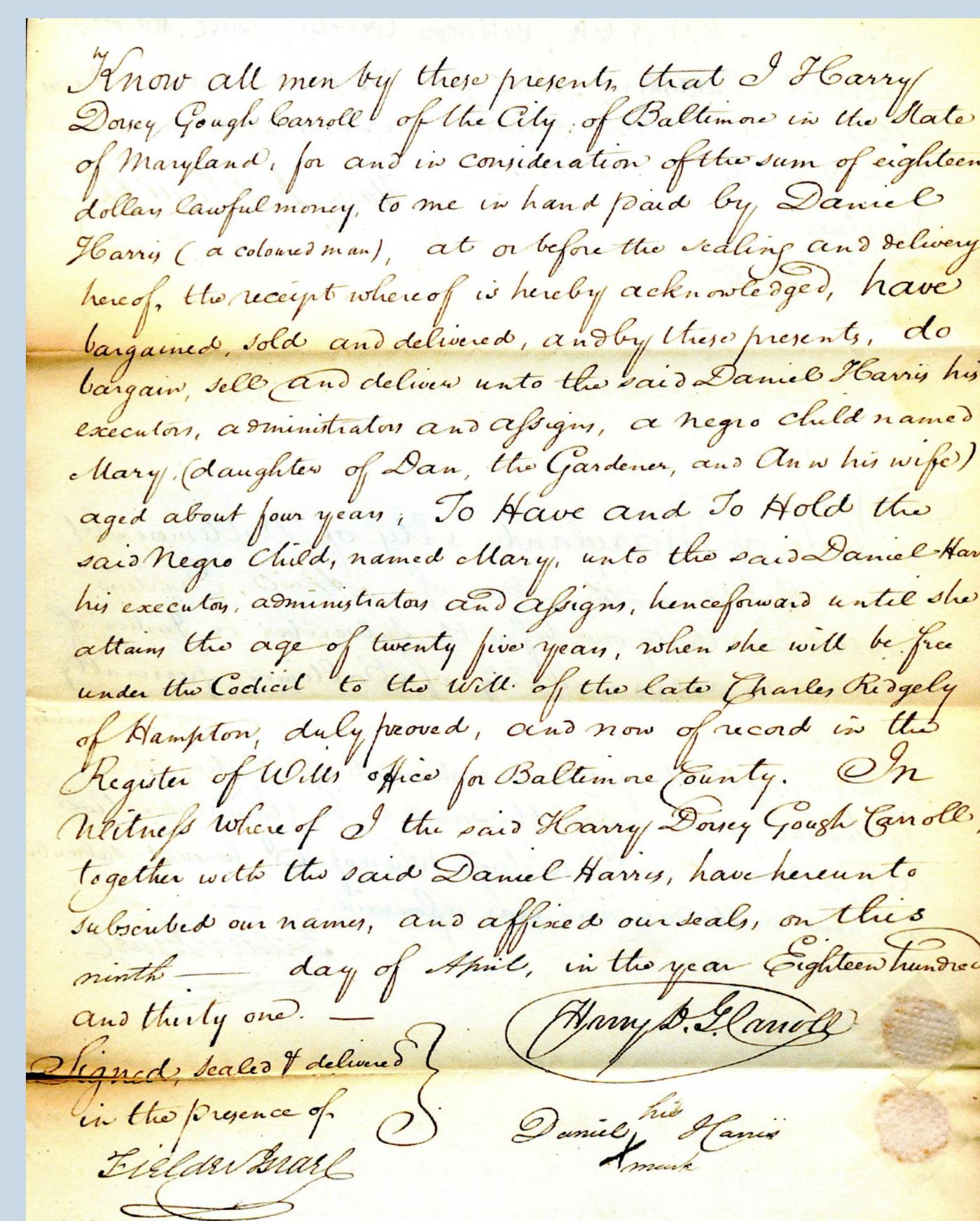
In his Account Book, Chew recorded payments made to Dick Spencer, a free black worker, as well as to his wife, Betsey. HBC Account Book, 1831-1833, Chew Papers, HSP.

## Free Black Workers

### Journey out of Slavery

Many of the free black workers employed at Epsom had previously been enslaved at Hampton. When Charles Carnan Ridgely, the proprietor of Hampton, died in 1829, a number of the people who had been enslaved at Hampton were freed in accordance with Ridgely's will. Others remained enslaved and were inherited by Ridgely heirs, including Harriet and Henry Banning Chew.

According to the terms of Ridgely's will, enslaved men were manumitted at the age of 28 and enslaved women were manumitted at the age of 25. For newly-freed men and women, working at Epsom most likely represented a much-needed opportunity to earn a wage for farm work. Additionally, working for Chew allowed those who had been freed to remain close to family members who were still enslaved, either at Epsom or on other nearby properties. By providing work for freed men and women, Epsom helped enable their transition to freedom, and helped facilitate the growth of Towson's first free African American community.



The 1831 bill of sale and manumission papers for Mary, the four year-old daughter of Daniel Harris, a skilled gardener on the Chew farm and Anne Harris, his wife and a washer woman at Epsom. Daniel and Anne Harris, who had been enslaved workers at Hampton, were freed in 1829 under the terms of the Ridgely will. Their daughter, Mary, however, was taken from them and given to Harry Dorsey Gough Carroll when the Ridgely estate was divided among the heirs. Daniel Harris (ca. 1785-1867) was the first African American to purchase land in Towson. In 1853, he purchased land on Hillen Road from Benjamin and Mary Payne. Source: *Miscellaneous Records, Baltimore County, Maryland State Archives*.

### Free blacks, formerly enslaved at Hampton, working at Epsom, 1830-1850\*

\*This is a select list, not a definitive list. A definitive list awaits further work on the Chew manuscripts.

- |                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Gabriel Cromwell          | 8. Hannah's Kitty [Barton] |
| 2. Emmanuel Smith (Yellow)   | 9. Daniel Harris           |
| 3. Charity Boston            | 10. Anne Harris            |
| 4. Milly's Elisha [Norris]   | 11. Rezin Sheredine        |
| 5. Bett Spencer              | 12. Herculus [Brice]       |
| 6. Henry (Yellow) [Sheridan] | 13. Ellick Williams        |
| 7. Saul (Solomon?) Norris    | 14. Mary Smith             |

### Work and Wages

Chew hired free black workers to perform various types of labor at Epsom. This included farm labor, dairy work, marketing, coach driving, blacksmithing, shoemaking, and gardening. Like the white laborers, some free black laborers worked on the farm year-round, while others stayed only a few months. Typically, male farm hands or hirelings started at \$6 to \$8 per month. Usually in the winter months these workers made a dollar less than in the summer months, and if they stopped working for Chew temporarily, they usually made less when they eventually returned. However, it appears the longer individuals worked for Chew, the more they made. Skilled free black workers in some cases earned as much or even more than free white workers at Epsom.

## Women and Children

Chew employed both women and children to work at Epsom. Women, both black and white, fulfilled many roles, from working as cooks, midwives, nurses, house keepers, and washerwomen to laboring in the fields or in the dairy. The wages of free black women ranged from about \$3-5 per month, whereas white women's wages were around \$5-6 per month. Women worked at Epsom for different lengths of time; while some worked on the farm for a few months, others worked for years. Nurses and midwives visited as needed. Harriet Ridgely Chew typically handled financial affairs regarding their payment.

In 1829, Henry Chew described to his father the labor of the enslaved children at Epsom. This description provides a sense of the type of labor all children, enslaved and free, could perform on the farm: "I have a boy only 13 years old who I can & do trust with my ox cart hauling corn from the field from miles distant. Another 10 yrs old is the only male house servant I have. My sixes and sevens are hauling corn etc." Henry Banning Chew to Benjamin Chew, Jr., 13 November 1829, *Chew Papers*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.