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Israel on the Appomattox

A SOUTHERN EXPERIMENT IN
BLACK FREEDOM FROM THE 1790S
THROUGH THE CIVIL WAR

MELVIN PATRICK ELY

Acclaim for Melvin Patrick Ely's ISRAEL ON THE APPOMATTOX

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“*Israel on the Appomattox* recovers a fascinating biracial world—right in the middle of the slave-based Old South.... The book shows whites, enslaved blacks, and, most especially, freed blacks working, living, trading, competing, cooperating, fighting, and (at least occasionally) loving together, in and around a special little place called by the freedpeople Israel Hill. The story stretches from the Virginia of Thomas Jefferson to the Virginia of Appomattox Court House. And it is extraordinary, inspiring and heartbreaking by turns.”

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A Family Story from Early America

“This remarkable account ... is rich with new insights on the dimensions of bondage and freedom in the slave South. Ely’s meticulous research and elegant writing make the experience of reading it both a reward and a pleasure.”

—James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*

“*Israel on the Appomattox* is a surprising and often heartening story of human struggle, personal dignity and compelling interracial cooperation in the deep shadow of slavery. It upends traditional assumptions about race in the Old South and, so doing, poses striking possibilities for America’s future.”

—James Oliver Horton
coauthor of *Slavery and the Making of America*

“The book unfolds as a revelation, and it contributes profoundly to the revision of our understanding of African American life in the nineteenth century.”

—Michael Kammen
author of *American Culture, American Taste*

“Melvin Patrick Ely previously wrote a wonderfully original and significant book on the popular radio and television series *Amos ‘n’ Andy* that upset a number of facile assumptions. He has now done exactly the same for Israel Hill.... Once again we are indebted to him for enabling us to take a deeper look at aspects of our past and our culture we thought we fully understood.”

—Lawrence W. Levine
author of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*

“A pathbreaking analysis of antebellum Virginia, Ely’s superbly documented discussion of race relations is seminal and destined for controversy.”

—Gerald David Jaynes, author of *Branches Without Roots: The Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1880*

ISRAEL ON THE APPOMATTOX



A SOUTHERN EXPERIMENT IN
BLACK FREEDOM FROM THE 1790S
THROUGH THE CIVIL WAR

Melvin Patrick Ely



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For

Vivien King Ely

my mother, my teacher

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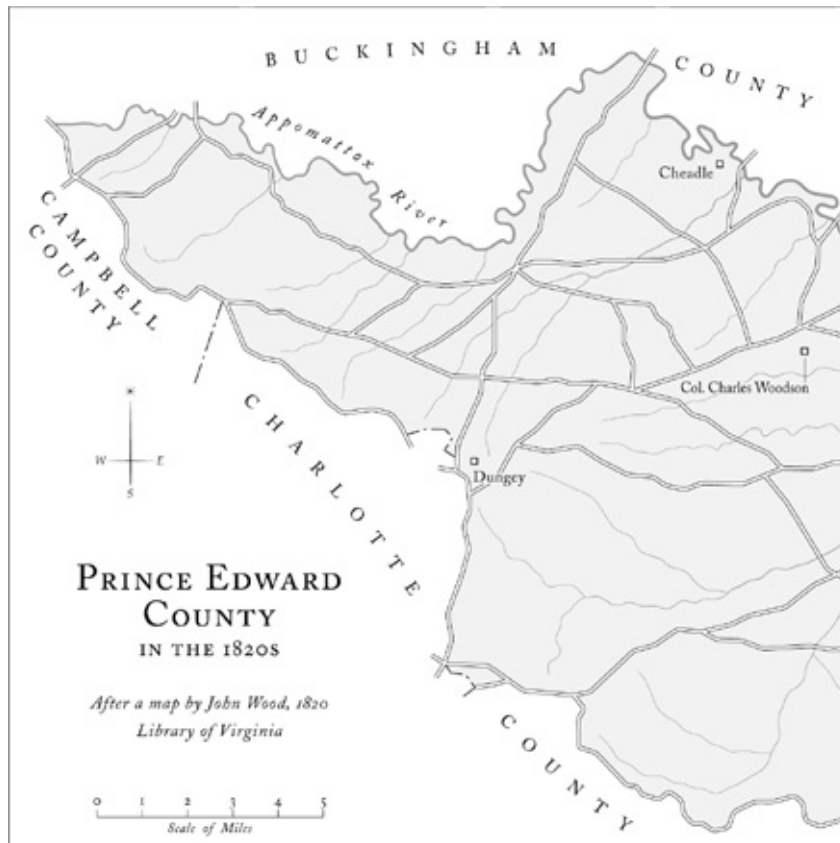
Many years ago, thumbing through an old textbook, I noticed a brief reference to Virginia aristocrat Richard Randolph, his decision in the 1790s to liberate his slaves, and his highly unusual plan to grant them four hundred acres of his land in a place later known as Israel Hill. What became of the freed men and women who settled there? I wondered. What kind of lives did they manage to build so near the scene of their former bondage, surrounded by plantations still tended by their enslaved brothers and sisters?

More than a decade later, I read Richard Randolph's will—the most heartfelt indictment of slavery I had encountered this side of Frederick Douglass. On that same day, I learned that a prominent white neighbor of Israel Hill had described the settlement to a national readership in 1836 as a failure, its free black residents having supposedly degenerated into layabouts, thieves, and harlots. But I also saw quotations from a brief reminiscence by another local white man who praised the Hill colony of antebellum days as the home of “many good free negroes.”

Clearly, a remarkable and controversial story surrounded the people, and the idea, of Israel Hill; I resolved to pursue that story. I did not yet know whether this experiment in black freedom before the Civil War had “succeeded” or “failed.” I was ready to narrate the throttling of the community by hostile whites, or its success against the odds, or its decline through its residents' own misfortunes and missteps—whatever the record might reveal.

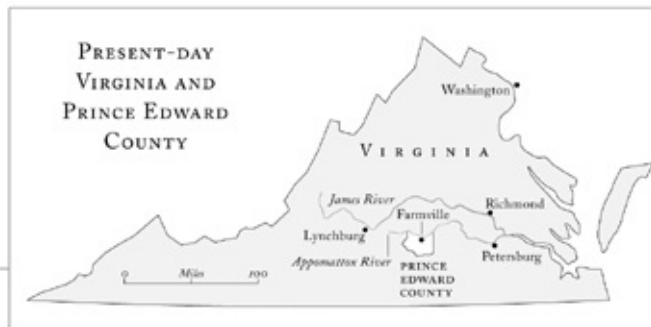
I was *not* fully prepared for what I learned over the next few years about freedom, bondage, and the relationship between the two. Earlier histories had shown in detail how Southern defenders of slavery branded free blacks as walking contradictions—a threat to the South's peculiar institution and to social order. Yet in dusty nineteenth-century documents, I found an additional story—one not of legislation or ideology but of everyday life.

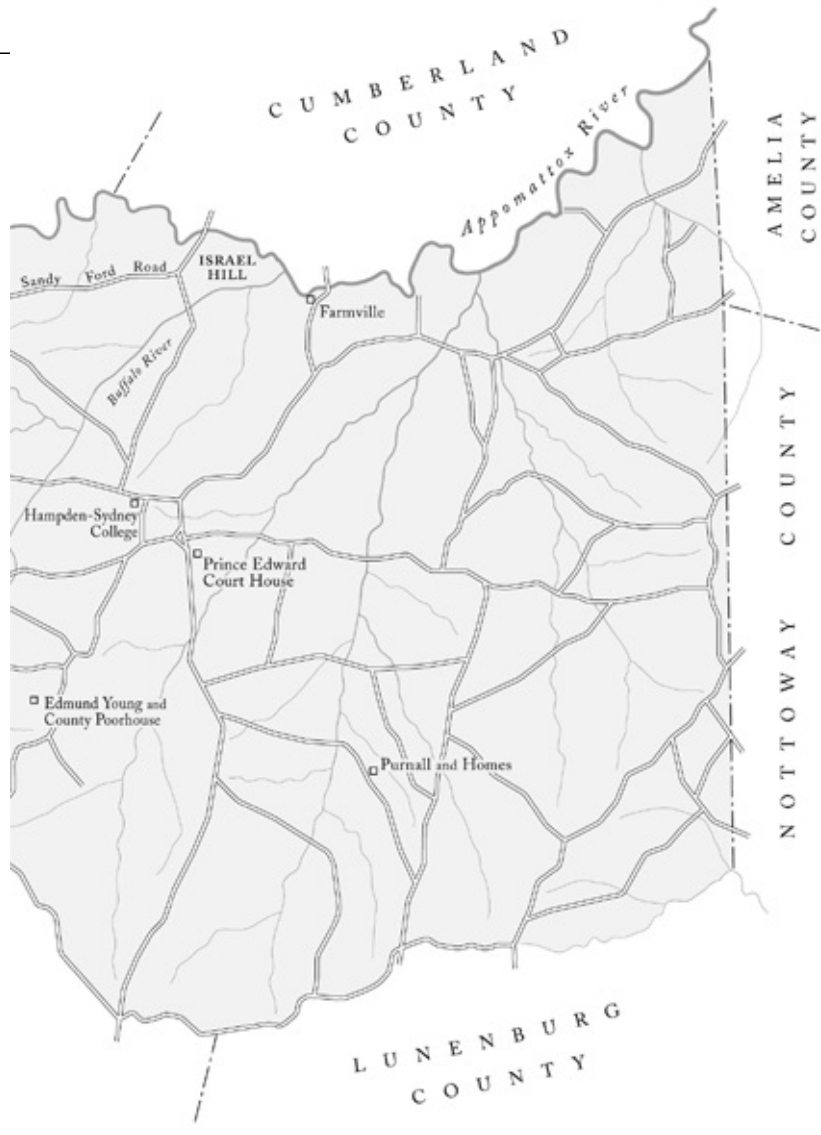
Slavery's long shadow darkened the landscape that surrounded Israel Hill. At the very same time, human bondage played another role that I had not truly understood before: many Southern whites felt secure enough to deal fairly and even respectfully with free African Americans partly because slavery still held most blacks firmly in its grip. That paradox helped make room for a drama of free black pride and achievement to unfold in an Old South where ties of culture, faith, affection, and economic interest could span the barrier between black and white.



**PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY
IN THE 1820S**

*After a map by John Wood, 1820
Library of Virginia*







The View from Israel Hill, 1863

In the winter of his ninety-ninth year, Sam White looked out from his Virginia farmhouse by the railroad tracks, across the gentle slope of Israel Hill, his home of five decades, and onto a world that was reminding him yet again what a remarkable life he had led. White was one of the few Americans left who personally remembered the Revolution that his fellow Virginians had championed and the first years of the Republic they had built. Now, early in 1863, the grandsons of those same Virginians were killing and dying by the tens of thousands to break up that Union.

The once glorious, now tragic history of his state and his country formed only the latest chapter in a life of paradox. On the one hand, Sam White was in many ways a typical Southerner of his time, if there was such a thing. He owned a farm, but only a small one; he and his father, and his three brothers had cleared their own land and built unpretentious but comfortable houses on it. Like two thirds of the households in the South, White and his neighbors farmed their tracts with little or no help from slaves.

Sam White's sons and daughters, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren could grow, raise, hunt, or catch much of the food they needed; they cut timber from the back sections of their hundred acres to construct houses and outbuildings, repair their fences, cook their meals, and keep warm during the winter. They earned cash to satisfy their other wants by raising tobacco and vegetables.

Like many other small landowners in the South, some of the men in the White family had found ways besides farming to earn money. A few worked at carpentry, coopering, or other crafts. Two of Sam White's brothers, one of his sons, and a nephew or two had poled cargo boats, or batteaux, filled with hogsheads of tobacco and barrels of wheat down the nearby Appomattox River to market at Petersburg. In more recent years, some Whites had taken work in the small tobacco factories of nearby Farmville, a growing center of trade for the area. Just now, though, there were fewer men than usual on Israel Hill, as almost everywhere else in the South. For by 1863, the Civil War had become what Abraham Lincoln had warned of: a remorseless revolutionary struggle, consuming American citizen-soldiers in staggering numbers.

Sam White could not guess that the war's final drama would unfold on the very ground he looked out upon in 1863. General Robert E. Lee would fight his last major battle a day's march east of Israel Hill in April 1865. Lee would hold one final, urgent meeting with the Confederate secretary of war just two miles from the White farm before he set out toward the neighboring Appomattox Court House, and Ulysses S. Grant would write to Lee later that day from the same place suggesting that the Confederate general surrender. Nothing so dramatic

had happened in the neighborhood up to 1863. But even by then, the war had hit White and his friends hard: the Confederate Army had called perhaps a dozen men into its service from the little settlement of Israel Hill alone.¹

Sam White's experience of peace and war reflected that of his society and his time—yet in some ways he had lived a different sort of life than most other small farmers in the South. For one thing, he and Phil White, his kinsman and neighbor, had made enough money to buy and sell a number of lots and buildings in Farmville. In an overwhelmingly agricultural South, White had played his part in the rise of a would-be boomtown.

But there was another, deeper reason White saw the world from a different angle than other Southerners of his economic level. In a society where most landowners, and most free people, were white, and where most African Americans lived out their lives as slaves, Sam White was both free and black. Apparently of purely African ancestry, a tall man in a family of tall men, he still carried his century-old frame erect as he visited the houses of his neighbors²—all of them, like him, former slaves or children and grandchildren of former slaves—to talk about developments in a Southern world that Lincoln and his armies were now struggling to change forever.

White's life journey from slave to free man, from property to proprietor and entrepreneur had been channeled by the great changes his country had gone through since his childhood. The Revolution that liberated America had belatedly freed Sam White as well. His master, Richard Randolph, wealthy son of a great Virginia planter family and brother of the future statesman John Randolph of Roanoke, had become notorious at twenty-two: accused of impregnating his wife's sister and killing the newborn baby, Randolph had been acquitted in a spectacular court hearing with the help of his attorneys, Patrick Henry and John Marshall. But that generation of patriots had given Randolph something grander than a defense of his good name: the legacy of the American Revolution and its Declaration of Independence.

Citizen Richard Randolph, as he called himself in the style of the French Revolutionaries, had unwillingly inherited Sam White and scores of other slaves from his father. When Randolph died at twenty-six in the year 1796, he left a will, written in his own hand, that assumed the form of a ringing abolitionist manifesto. Randolph took special care to “beg [*humbly* beg[,] [his slaves’] forgiveness” for his part in the “infamous practice of usurping the rights of our fellow creatures, equally entitled with ourselves to the enjoyment of Liberty and happiness.” And he called for Sam White and the others to go free.³

Richard Randolph was not the only Virginia emancipator of his era; George Washington left a will at about the same time providing that his slaves be liberated at his widow's death. Contemplating the inhumanity of slavery, Randolph's cousin Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.” Scores of white Virginians set slaves free during the years that followed the Revolution.

But Jefferson and most others who admitted slavery was morally indefensible never pressed for a sweeping emancipation, for they had no idea what would become of liberated African Americans. Jefferson suspected that Africans were intellectually and physically inferior to Europeans; once emancipated, he believed, they would have difficulty surviving among whites. Even worse, Jefferson feared, generations of grievances between master and bondman would lead to race war if slavery ceased to exist as a system of social control. Mar

whites believed that blacks who did become free should be removed from Virginia.

Sam White's master, Richard Randolph, had offered a radical answer to Jefferson's moral dilemma: he denied that any dilemma existed. Randolph was not content to restore to his slaves their God-given freedom; he also called for them to receive four hundred acres of his land on which to build new lives as independent men and women. When Randolph's family carried out his will in 1810 after years of delay, his ex-slaves gave the name Israel Hill to their new home in the rolling terrain of Prince Edward County, and they called themselves "Israelites." This was their Promised Land, to which they had been delivered out of bondage.

But Israel Hill amounted to more than a personal promise fulfilled; it was a visionary Southern experiment in black freedom. In building this community of free, self-supporting black landowners in the very neighborhood where the Israelites had grown up as slaves, Richard Randolph and some ninety African Americans had launched a small but audacious attempt to demonstrate that a harmonious society containing free people of both races could exist.

Randolph conceived the idea that became Israel Hill, and his widow, Judith, overcame many obstacles to make his wishes come true. But the community's success over the decades had depended squarely on Sam White and his black fellow settlers. Their path, though arduous, had lain clearer before them because other Afro-Virginians had established themselves as free people in earlier years.

By the time Richard Randolph wrote his will, Prince Edward County already had a small free black population; that group would grow noticeably during the period before Randolph's germ of an idea came to fruition on Israel Hill. At least three local black or mixed-race families had bought land in the 1780s and 1790s, and a couple more would do so about the time Richard's former slaves settled on their new acreage. Other pioneering free blacks in Prince Edward owned no ground, yet by the 1790s were already developing strategies to make the most of their freedom.

The central figure on Israel Hill during the settlement's founding years had been Sam White's father, the aptly named Hercules White, a man esteemed by the Randolphs and the emancipated slaves alike for his strength of body, mind, and spirit. By the time Israel Hill was settled in 1810–11, it seemed that the Hill's new residents might in fact need the strength of a Hercules, and not only because there were houses to build, land to clear, and crops to cultivate. Though no longer in bondage, the men and women of Israel Hill lived in a land where both law and custom limited the rights of free blacks and ensured that relatively few African Americans became free in the first place.

In 1806, the state passed a new law requiring any blacks who received their liberty to leave the state within a year. Authorities did not apply that law to Richard Randolph's freedpeople, whose emancipation had been ordained long before. Still, neither Sam White nor any other free Afro-Virginian could vote, serve on juries, or join the militia; the law had required White to secure a license from the county court to possess a gun, and later prohibited black ownership of firearms outright. The people of Israel Hill owned land, but many of their fellow free blacks did not and therefore had to work for whites to earn their bread. White people rarely addressed or referred to an Israelite as "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Miss"—titles that even the humbler whites felt entitled to.

Great events—the rise of natural rights philosophy, the American Revolution and its aftermath—had brought Sam White his liberty, and momentous developments had continued to shape his life as a free man. A Virginia slave, Nat Turner, led a rebellion in 1831 that killed at least fifty-five whites. In the days after Turner’s revolt, a major of militia in Farmville worried that the blacks of Israel Hill might be considering a local replay of Turner’s rising. Cooler heads averted any extreme repression of the Israelites and other blacks of Prince Edward County, but the county court did confiscate free Afro-Virginians’ weapons.

In the years after the Turner rebellion, a small but vociferous abolitionist movement had arisen in the North. The abolitionists accused white Southerners—who considered themselves industrious, Christian sons and daughters of the founding fathers—of living parasitically on the labor of others in a violently anti-Christian, antidemocratic slaveholding society.

The indignant response of the white South had yet again complicated the lives of Sam White and the people of Israel Hill. Some influential white Virginians now told themselves and the outside world that slavery was just and godly—the most beneficial arrangement for the slaves themselves. Blacks, the argument went, would live in a state of civilization only so long as whites ruled and guided them; free blacks, white Southern apologists insisted, lived miserable, depraved lives.

Even a Southern proslavery hawk might utter the occasional good word about a free African American. Sam White himself had had a rare experience for a free black in the South, winning praise in publications from New Orleans to New York as one of the “honorable ... original settlers” of his community, “a venerable patriarch ... as highly respected for tried and well sustained character as any man.”⁴ The bad news for him and his fellow Israelites was the context in which White received those accolades.

Colonel James Madison—not the former president, but rather a leading entrepreneur in Prince Edward County—had written a defense of the Southern way of life in 1836 in the form of a brief, highly inaccurate history of Israel Hill, which other proslavery propagandists later elaborated upon. Defenders of slavery asserted that Sam White’s upright character had been molded during his half century as the favored bondman of a refined white family; they used the attainments of White and some of his peers to set in sharp relief the degeneracy they saw had overtaken more recent generations of black Israelites, deprived of the supposed civilizing framework of slavery.

The younger residents of Israel Hill had become “idle and vicious,” Madison wrote in the *Farmers’ Register*, a magazine read throughout the South; the Hill’s women, he said, had turned to prostitution. The editor of the *Register*, the famous agricultural reformer and Southern nationalist Edmund Ruffin, added an improbable swipe of his own at the men of Israel Hill: they preferred to pole heavily laden boats up the Appomattox River, he wrote, because of all occupations that one was “nearest to idleness.”⁵

Madison, Ruffin, and people like them held one belief that their ideological opposites, like Richard Randolph, had apparently shared: if a community of liberated blacks could flourish, it would challenge white people’s basic assumptions about the black race and about the organization of Southern society. This Madison and his like could not accept. The bleak picture they drew of Israel Hill in the 1830s proved durable, despite a whole series of achievements by the Whites and their black neighbors; proslavery writers had revived an

elaborated on the legend in the press as the North-South struggle deepened during the 1850s. The free black community of Israel Hill, a product of the first American Revolution, had become a potent and tenacious symbol in the great conflict that produced the second.

Sam White had seen many whites in Prince Edward struggle, in a way that Colonel Madison never did, to sort out the dissonance between their desire to defend slavery and their free black neighbors' obvious fitness to function as free people. According to the county's oral tradition, after a series of thefts on neighboring plantations, suspicion had fallen on the free blacks of Israel Hill. White men searched homes on the Hill for stolen goods. Finding none, many Prince Edward whites came to admit, and repeated for years afterward, that the black Israelites were honest and decent even as men like Colonel Madison proclaimed the opposite.⁶

When the need to justify the South's institutions grated against the realities of day-to-day life, race relations became more complex and fluid rather than more uniformly rigid. One historian has written that "the generation preceding the Civil War [saw] the drive against the free Negro ... so intense that he was branded as the pariah of society"⁷—but that verdict leaves part of the story of race in antebellum Virginia untold.

Sam White and the other Israelites had indeed faced their share of obstacles and insults. Still, having lived the first half of his life as a slave and a second half century as his own master, White knew how much even his imperfect freedom was worth. No one could buy or sell him or separate him from his wife and children. A slave could not buy, sell, bequeath, or inherit property. Sam White had fed his family on his own farm, inherited land from his father, Hercules, and earned enough on his own to buy additional real estate. Most free blacks did not become slaveholders, but occasionally White or a free black neighbor did work a slave, either hired from a white person or purchased outright.

The law barred black testimony against whites in court, but free Afro-Virginians in Prince Edward sued white neighbors and defended themselves against suits by whites; the blacks typically received a full hearing and sometimes won their cases. Farmville and its environs suffered their share of crime, involving both races and all classes; a free black defendant invariably faced an all-white court or jury. But Sam White knew that acquittals of blacks were very common. Local courts had found free African Americans not guilty even when the charge was a sensational one—burning down the house of a public official, for example.

When the first Baptist church in Farmville had formed—at the very time Colonel James Madison of that town published his attack on the Israel Hill experiment—the white pastor welcomed Sam White and his kinsman Phil as the congregation's first members. The presence in the church of free, ambitious, successful black entrepreneurs and landowners did not stop white men and women from joining the congregation. More than a few whites in Prince Edward recognized Sam White and his relatives as "proud" residents of Israel Hill and—Colonel Madison notwithstanding—considered the black settlement "prolific ... of many good free negroes" of "ability" and "integrity ... very much respected and trusted by all classes of citizens."⁸

Most of the things people did in Prince Edward County, blacks and whites at least sometimes did together. People of both colors who had money transacted business with one another. Two families seeking their fortune, one white and the other free black, moved we

together. Men of both races labored shoulder to shoulder on construction sites and along the Appomattox River. Even in this color-conscious society, free blacks and whites of moderate means worked together as hired harvesters on wealthier people's plantations, and men of both races earned the same wages.

Sam White knew, too, that whites and blacks in Prince Edward found themselves side by side in places more intimate than the county's wheat fields or the mercantile houses of Farmville. A white Revolutionary War veteran approached the county court in 1818 with a petition for a federal pension that would help him support himself, his daughter, and the mulatto grandchildren she had borne him. One of Prince Edward's solid white citizens revealed during a court proceeding a few years later that his wife's sister had become pregnant by a black man. About the time Richard Randolph died, a comfortable white farmer nearby gave his daughter in marriage to a free mulatto; the couple bought a farm next door to the bride's father and named one of their sons after him. That brown grandson himself took a white wife, as did several of his free Afro-Virginian contemporaries. These interracial unions drew complaints from some whites, but neither authorities nor ordinary citizens broke them up.

Sam White, like other free blacks, had good reason to rejoice that he was not a slave. But he knew that even the relationship between slave and master, and between slave and Southern society at large, was not nearly as simple as Colonel Madison and the Northern abolitionists, each in their own way, depicted it.

The abolitionists did understand that slavery was full of horrors. Prince Edward and Virginia's other tobacco counties struggled through economic depressions during many of Sam White's years as a free man. Land and possessions were frequently forfeited and auctioned off by the sheriff, or sold in desperation—and slaves constituted the main category of personal property. Most whites preferred not to break up black families, for reasons of humanity and of economy—demoralized slaves did not produce as much. Yet black men, women, and children were often moved about, families split apart, and children as young as three or four separated from their mothers. Countless groups of manacled slaves trudged down Prince Edward County's main road toward the cotton states.

Sam White lived in a place and had known a time, as late as his own middle age, in which a slave who stole bacon or whiskey might find himself sentenced to have both ears nailed to pillory and then cut off, and to be burned on the hand with a hot iron, and to receive thirty-nine lashes. Masters and overseers whipped slaves without any due process at all. The law denied bondpeople the right to own property, and it was exceedingly difficult for them to own themselves by purchasing their freedom.

At the same time, White had seen the local courts exonerate many enslaved men and women charged with serious crimes against whites. On the very eve of the Civil War, a panel of justices in neighboring Nottoway County had acquitted a slave of an assault on his mistress with a rock, despite the two-by-four-inch gash in her head that the white woman pointed to as she made her complaint. And White could recall the acquittal in his own county a few years before the war of an enslaved youth whom a white woman had accused of raping her. Almost until the first shots of the War of Secession were fired, some slaveowners in Prince Edward and neighboring counties had recognized the injustice of human bondage in the way

Richard Randolph had: by emancipating slaves.

Sam White took for granted something that the escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass had noted in the 1840s: that complex human relationships were part and parcel of American slavery, inhumane though that system was. The realities of daily life led whites in Prince Edward to admit the humanity of blacks routinely in myriad ways. And blacks, free and slave alike, successfully laid claim to rights and considerations that the theory of racial slavery denied them.

White would have been surprised by some propositions about values and behavior in the Old South that many Americans of our own time accept as fact. White people had displayed their worries about Israel Hill during the weeks after Nat Turner's slave revolt of 1831, requiring free blacks to turn in their guns to county authorities. But other responses to the Turner rebellion had shown how little Prince Edward resembled the martial society that the Yankees of Sam White's time, like some Americans today, believed the South to be.

White's county was one of dozens in Virginia where the scramble to defend against slave rebellion in 1831 revealed not a militarized culture of bold, well-armed, dead-eye marksmen born on horseback, but rather a land of frightened, often befuddled white men milling around in ragtag militia musters. Those men often discovered to their shock that they had no guns to fight off the anticipated tide of vengeful slaves—or that the few arms they did have laid rusted in caches nearly forgotten over years when militia drill consisted of an occasional afternoon of drinking and socializing.

Sam White would also have chuckled at the popular romantic notion that an archaic code of honor rigidly and ritualistically ordered the society he lived in. Southerners did guard their personal honor zealously. Yet White understood that conflicts in Prince Edward, whether they involved blacks or whites, rarely ended with a brace of dueling pistols and two men firing at thirty paces; much more often, a brace of lawyers fired off subpoenas to friends, relatives, and associates of the antagonists. White knew, too, that when men did resort to violence in Prince Edward, a challenge to meet on the field of honor was vastly less common than the spectacle of two neighbors—both white, both black, or occasionally one of each color—carping, then shouting, until one picked up a stick and whacked the other over the head (after which, often enough, the customary brace of lawyers was brought to bear).

Above all, White knew something that many people today find difficult to believe—that his world, in spite of its discriminations against him and other free Afro-Virginians, had never become one in which “whites would not tolerate free Negroes living among them,” where most white people treated the free black as “an incorrigible subversive” to be “almost uniformly feared and despised,” or where the purchase of property and other steps free blacks took toward self-improvement “enraged” their white neighbors.⁹ In reality, the liberties one could secure as a free African American, though circumscribed, were substantial—hence the exertions of many to buy their own freedom and that of their relatives, and to acquire some ground to live on in their Southern homeland.

Of course, Sam White knew only what he himself had seen and heard, and his life had not been “typical.” But the more we learn about the South, the better we understand that no one Southern experience and no single landscape typify any era.

As a free black man, Sam White was an exception, but not a rarity: one in eight Afro-

Virginians during the generation before the Civil War was a free person, and one in ten free people in his home county was black. White's neighborhood could lay no stronger claim to typicality than anyplace else, but it was thoroughly, unmistakably Southern. Prince Edward was a slaveholding, tobacco-growing, rural, black-majority county in a state that had more slaves than any other and more free African Americans than any save Maryland—a state in which most free blacks, like White himself, lived in the countryside, not in the cities on which many modern studies focus. The view from Israel Hill was finite, but it took in a range of experience that included a goodly portion of what Southern life was before and during the Civil War.

Sam White's liberation as part of a large group, and the Randolphs' grant of land to him and his fellow freedpeople, had indeed been unusual. But White's day-to-day experience as a slave and then as a free man illustrates the span of possibilities in the rural Old South. After all, "to define" means, literally, to trace the bounds or limits of something. The boundaries of life in the slaveholding South encompass the loopholes, the "give," the deeply human interactions, the occasional dramatic acts of conscience, and the African American achievements within that system—all of which, paradoxically, were of the essence in a society at whose core lay white supremacy and economic exploitation.

Richard Randolph may have seen himself as the initiator of a unique experiment in black freedom. But in fact, the people who came to call themselves Israelites, along with the black and white neighbors, help us define what was *normal*—for the venerable Sam White for Prince Edward County, and for the Southern society in which White lived his century of life.



Liberty and Happiness

CITIZEN RICHARD RANDOLPH AND HIS SLAVES

Dickey Randolph took a fright one summer day when he saw a man leading two horses up the lane toward his parents' plantation house. The boy was only eleven, but he knew what a riderless horse could mean in time of battle, and one of this pair belonged to his father, who had gone off to fight in the Revolutionary War. Dickey had already lost one father to illness when he was only five. Now, in July 1781, he concluded that a British bullet had taken his stepfather, St. George Tucker—the man he called “Papa” and whose “most dutyfull son” young Richard Randolph felt himself to be.

A moment later, though, something struck Dickey as “very odd” in the frightening scene now before him: the man approaching the house was, after all, leading not one but two horses. If Tucker were dead, then Syphax, the black personal servant who had accompanied him to the military encampment, should now be astride that second horse, returning home to bring the sad news and leading Papa's mount behind him. But Syphax had apparently remained in camp—something he would have done, Dickey concluded, only if Tucker were still alive to enjoy the black man's services. The boy soon learned with relief that his deduction was correct. Tucker's horse, Hob, had gone slightly lame; Tucker, alive and unhurt, had sent Hob and a sorrel horse back to Bizarre, the Randolph plantation where Dickey and his family had moved to escape the British menace in his mother's native Tidewater section. For the time being, at least, the family still had a father.¹

The incident crystallized in one anxious moment three of the interlocking elements that molded young Richard Randolph's view of the world. The war—both as a personal drama and as a crusade for revolutionary ideals—formed many of Richard's most indelible childhood memories. A second essential factor in the day of the riderless horses was Syphax, the African Virginian valet. Sy's presence or absence at that moment, and at others during the war, literally embodied the difference between life and death to young Dickey; fears about Tucker's fate could be instantly “dispell'd by a Grin” from the black man.² Syphax and other black figures affected Richard Randolph in ways that proved as abiding as Dickey's moment of panic in the closing weeks of the Revolution was fleeting.

Finally, Richard's character was shaped profoundly by Tucker himself, and by the old man's circle of friends. An intellectual, a young paladin of Revolutionary Virginia, and later an influential political figure, Tucker thought deeply about American liberty, American slavery, and the dissonance between the two. The education he gave Dickey ensured that the boy would think about those things, too.

Dickey Randolph was a deep-dyed patriot with a boy's cordial loathing for the rogues on the other side. "I wish the British may meet with destruction & their attempts be baffled in every instance," he wrote to Tucker. "Which I make no doubt they would if the Tory's do not give them such good intellig[e]nce." "I wish I was big enough to turn out" for battle, the eleven-year-old added, "if I was I would not stay at home long." A precocious boy, Richard followed the military campaigns in detail, and he was not shy about sharing his own tactical and strategic judgments with Tucker.³

By the summer of 1781, when Richard Randolph feared for his stepfather's life, the neighborhood had sent many soldiers into the conflict, and local men had helped guard some two hundred British prisoners in Cumberland, the Randolphs' home county. The military had made heavy demands on the area for guns, foodstuffs, and clothing—"all ... we could spare" as some leading men put it; an installation not far away at the village of Prince Edward Court House produced gunpowder and ammunition.⁴ Now the struggle with the British entered what turned out to be its closing act, in Randolph's own Virginia. General Nathanael Greene, commander of the Continental Army in the South, had retreated into the state from the Carolinas at the beginning of 1781 and sent his heavy weaponry and baggage to Prince Edward Court House for safekeeping. In February, the militia in Cumberland, Prince Edward, and half a dozen neighboring counties had been mustered and sent to reinforce Greene, and St. George Tucker had been called to lead militia troops with the Marquis de Lafayette.⁵

The British commander Charles Cornwallis and his army moved from North Carolina into southeastern Virginia; on the same Monday in early July 1781 that Richard Randolph spied the riderless horses, Cornwallis sent Colonel Banastre Tarleton with a detachment of cavalry and mounted infantry to raid Prince Edward County and other strategic areas. By Friday Tarleton and his men began burning, looting, and carrying away some local men as prisoners.⁶

On Saturday, with nine hundred British troops only seven miles away, Dickey Randolph's mother, Frances, wrote to tell St. George Tucker of her "utmost distress"; she was preparing to evacuate Bizarre with the three Randolph boys, sons of her late first husband, and with two babies she had borne by Tucker. Frances was a strong, determined woman; her son John remembered how she "flung my deceased father's most valuable papers into a pillow case" and put his steel hilted dagger into her stays" as she made ready to leave. Yet Dickey was perceptive enough to detect his mother's fear, and to know what the bustle of slaves packing up the family's belongings meant. Frances knew it would take her slave wheelwright until Monday morning to repair the one wagon, "so very weak," then available at Bizarre. At any moment the mounted British force might decide to wheel back eastward through the Randolph-Tucker plantation before the family could get away.⁷

In the end, Frances, Dickey, and the others apparently did not flee; by the time they were ready to go on Monday, Tarleton had turned south—away from Bizarre—and then east to return to Cornwallis. Still, long weeks of hardship for the neighborhood followed as yet more men, supplies, wagons, and horses were rounded up from an exhausted countryside for a new offensive in the east.⁸ Finally, three months after the days of fear at Bizarre, Cornwallis, trapped between Continental land forces and a French fleet, surrendered at Yorktown, and the war was over.

During those fearful times, Frances Tucker had found support and stability in her slaves—boon no master or mistress could take for granted. Slavery robbed blacks of liberty but not of will, and the Revolution had presented some new options to bondpeople. Early in the war the British had offered freedom to slaves who would join them, and thousands fled from their masters during the conflict. The Tuckers themselves acknowledged that slavery was tyrannical and that blacks had good reason *not* to stand by those who owned them. Thus Fanny was expressing relief, and not a mistress's blind assumption of black servility, when she wrote, as she prepared to flee Tarleton's raiding party, "My faithful Servants are every thing I could wish them, & are willing to follow my fortune."⁹

Enslaved African Americans—especially house servants and skilled craftspeople—stood out in the minds of the Tuckers and other slaveholders as vivid personalities, their lives intertwined with those of the whites among whom they lived. Even as Frances prepared to flee the British, she followed the custom of her class, taking time to send her husband news about the health and welfare of several black individuals.

No slave figured more prominently in the letters of the Randolphs and the Tuckers than Syphax, personal servant first to Richard's father, then to his stepfather. As Richard grew into manhood, he, too, would come to depend on a body servant called Syphax—probably the same man who had attended his two fathers. The Randolphs and St. George Tucker trusted Syphax absolutely. He traveled alone back and forth between the several Randolph-Tucker homes and Tucker's military camp, sometimes carrying his master's money and other valuables. Mounted on a good horse, Syphax could easily have ridden off to the British, gained his freedom, and sold useful intelligence about the American forces with whom he was living—but it never entered anyone's mind that he might do so.¹⁰

The family's trust in Syphax did not arise from any fawning subsmissiveness on the black man's part, however. The Randolphs doubtless assumed that Syphax's family connections—had he a wife and children—would bring him back home. Still, only a fool sends a person into a war zone with vital goods and information unless that man, besides being attached to the homeplace, is also known to be strong of will, brave, and resourceful in the face of unexpected perils. Syphax exuded dignity and ability. Many years after the Revolution, Richard Randolph's brother John, by then a famous politician, described Syphax as the ultimate measure of young Dick himself. "You might see in the old Attendant Syphax whom [Richard] had carried with him to [college in] New York that his master was a gentleman," John recalled.¹¹

Syphax, the most significant black figure in the life of future emancipator Richard Randolph, was proud to work as the personal servant of genteel, even great, men—and that makes it all too easy to misjudge him utterly. A long-standing stereotype depicts the loyal valet as a mentally tyrannized figure gratefully wearing a white man's castoff clothes and looking down on the lowly field hand. Then there is the modern notion that serving is not a skilled occupation—a snobbish bias that working one shift as a waiter will permanently correct.

Syphax was a slave, and he may have been reared to be a valet. But when Richard Randolph's will set him free, the old man would prove more than ready to defend his interests against white aggression. In the meantime, Syphax Brown, as he was known by the

early 1800s, would spend his early years of freedom working in one of the local inns as “Waiter on Gentlemen.”¹² That was a title that one could claim proudly. During Syphax’s hostling days, a master from nearby advertised for a runaway slave who had “a pert walk, good countenance, [and was] very active and fond of waiting on gentlemen.”¹³ For the proud, even cocky man, escape had been yet another act in a life of black assertiveness; his “fondness” for serving men of quality was no mark of servility, but rather an element in the runaway’s self-esteem—as it was in Syphax Brown’s.

The natural father whom Richard barely knew, John Randolph Sr., had mortgaged nearly all his slaves—that is, presented them as collateral when taking out loans. But to risk losing Syphax to creditors was unthinkable, so Richard’s father had avoided including him in the mortgage.¹⁴ Syphax exerted a direct, active personal influence on the younger Randolph. The black man certainly acted as a source of family history and lore, and probably of wisdom acquired through an eventful life.¹⁵ The time that Syphax spent serving Richard during months of study at Columbia College—leavened for both men by socializing and political stargazing in New York and Philadelphia—not only gave the servant an opportunity to enhance his considerable experience and sophistication, but also may well have deepened the bond between the two men.

As advantaged as Richard was—wealthy, tall, handsome, intelligent, socially prominent—he experienced the culture shock that has affected Southern youth attending Northern schools from that day to this. Yankees seemed less warm and hospitable than Southerners, and all the Virginia students seemed to take ill upon their arrival in the North. Richard won acclaim at Princeton as a public speaker yet quickly grew discontented with the teaching and course of study there.¹⁶ Randolph, barely eighteen, could experience a bit of home in the person of his two younger brothers, who also studied at Princeton and Columbia—and in New York, he had the companionship of Syphax as well.

Other slaves, too, took important places in the Randolphs’ lives. That the family called Billy Ellis, one of their slave carpenters, by both a given name and a surname already suggests that he stood out. Indeed, John Randolph later accused Dick’s sister-in-law Nancy of having been scandalously intimate with Ellis when she lived at Bizarre. That accusation does not ring true; among other things, Jack alleged that Nancy Randolph had written a love letter to Ellis, who in fact did not know how to read or write. Even so, this skilled slave—a short, black-skinned man whom John indignantly referred to as “this dusky Othello”—had qualities that made him seem to Jack a plausible if illicit paramour for a beautiful, wealthy young white woman.¹⁷ Nancy did feel warmly toward Ellis, but in a manner typical of the more open-minded slaveowners of the period. “Poor Billy,” she wrote to a friend after John’s outburst; “he does not deserve to be slandered—his fidelity to his Master when living—and his veneration for his memory always made me feel a regard for him such as I had for [his brother] William’s Johnny and many of my Father’s blacks.”¹⁸

Hercules, a slave born around the midpoint of the eighteenth century, became a Randolph family favorite while filling a prodigious variety of roles much different from those of Syphax. Hercules may have worked at times in the family mansions, but he also knew how to plow a field, grow tobacco and corn, slaughter and dress hogs, drive a wagon or cart, and do a cooper’s and carpenter’s work. Years later, Hercules would become the central figure in the

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