

Farm Notes

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com

Our Time As Stewards of Wheatland

By Mariette Hiu Newcomb

After we had been farming in Fairfax County for about ten years on small plots of rented ground, it became clear that we needed more space for growing vegetables. We asked our friend, Darryl Wright, who was familiar with local real estate, to look for a good piece of land in the next county west of us. He found the 400 acres in Wheatland which used to be the cropland for the dairy operation across Berlin Turnpike. It had an old frame farmhouse, a small stone house, a large open pole barn, a cinderblock building used for a garage and shop, three ponds, 100 acres of woods, and 300 acres of open fields. It was more land than we needed and cost more than we could afford so we found the Plancks, the Moutoux, Timothy Wyant (one of our workers) to buy some of the open acres. A college friend, John Graybeal bought the 100 acres of woods, and we ended up with 180 acres of fields and a few woods.

We knew nothing about who owned or used the land before we found it. We knew it was beautiful, had good water, and good soil for pasture and growing vegetables. And we were able to buy it with a mortgage with Farm Credit of the Virginias in Leesburg in 1974.



The Wheatland farm in the 21st century.

It was interesting to hear that Billie and James discovered that this area may not have had Indian settlements but was on a well-traveled route between inhabited areas. It wasn't until the English Charles II in 1649 unilaterally declared "ownership" of the land once it was "discovered" and deemed not to belong to anybody that the land had "value" that he had the power to gift or sell or barter. Once owned and settled, the owner now could dictate how it would be used. Once owned, it was no longer available for common use.

The area rapidly developed in the first half of the 1700's, attracting homesteaders, some with slaves. The landowners passed down the property through the generations and Loudoun became a wealthy agricultural area. Quakers and others in Waterford were part of the Underground Railroad that helped smuggle slaves north. Wheatland was known to have 50 slaves in 1843.

This area was certainly the South and it is changing. We feel fortunate to have been able to acquire this land 45 years ago. We feel we have learned to treat the land and the people we have attracted to live and work with us as well as we can. We want this land always to be available to produce nutritious food and nurture satisfying healthy lives. 180 years ago there were enslaved people here. Today many of us envision a community of a different kind on this same land.

History Workshop

By James Barufka and Billie McElvie

Two weeks ago, we had a history workshop for the farmworkers and community members at Potomac Vegetable Farms. We presented the research we have been working on for the past two summers: a history of the 180 acres that PVF tends, from before colonization to now. In many ways, it is a history of racial violence and resilience, of land theft and environmental exploitation, as is the history of this entire country.

When we began working on this land-based history project in Purcellville, the primary question was: what happened here, on this specific land that Potomac Vegetable Farms now occupies? As the project grew and expanded, so did the guiding questions. They became: why is locally rooted history important? When you learn of the violence, resistance, and lives that occupied the same space as you do now, what do you do with that information? Rather than shy away from this tangled web of questions, the team working on what was tentatively called "the farm history project" folded those questions into the research.

It is easy to have a casual understanding of American history. But what would it mean to take our responsibility to history more seriously? For all the organizations who have committed to racial justice, how many of them are truly transparent about or even aware of how they are situated inside of systemic racism? As a land based business and community, PVF has a responsibility to understand what has happened on the land we farm now.

So what *has* happened? We know that the land we are on can primarily be considered Siouan land, as it was mostly inhabited by the Siouan tribes of the Manahoac and, slightly south, the Monacan, with whom the Manahoac were allied. The "Virginian Siouans," according to the Monacan's documented history, grew the three sisters crops of beans, corn, and squash. They also domesticated sunflowers, fruit trees, wild grapes, and nuts. They hunted deer, elk, and small game. Tutelo, a Siouan language from the Tutelo tribe who were located south of here, was the primary language of this region, indicating that this land was a place of frequent travel. Indeed, expansive trade routes ran up through this area of Virginia, connecting this area to other tribes and confederacies as far north as Canada and as far south as Florida. This land was a place that people passed through: where they hunted, traded, or made camp during their travels.

Between the arrival of the English in the 1600s and the

settlement of the early 1700s, the Manahoac and the Monacans fought many battles with the English and were increasingly pushed west. Members from the Algonquian and Iroquois confederacies also fought for their rights to continue traveling through and hunting in the piedmont region of Virginia, but to no avail. The 1722 Treaty of Albany pushed Indigenous people out of northern Virginia, with the understanding that colonists would not try to settle farther west than the Blue Ridge Mountains. Obviously, this agreement was not respected by the colonists. By 1744, the Treaty of Lancaster was required to resolve disputes over the breaking of the Treaty of Albany. This pattern of creating and then breaking agreements with Indigenous groups was only one of the many deceptive means through which colonists strove to eradicate Indigenous presence in northern Virginia and beyond, ceaselessly stealing land and pushing Native people farther and farther from their homes. Despite this, through their intelligence and endurance, some Indigenous people managed to stay in Virginia, such as the Monacans, who have an active community in the mountains of Amherst County.

After the displacement of most Indigenous people from the piedmont region of Virginia, Loudoun County rapidly settled in the 1730s. For about 100 years, from the mid 1700s until the Civil War, the 180 acres that Potomac Vegetable now occupies was a wheat farm tended to by Black slaves. We have found the names of about 50 people who were enslaved on this land between the years of 1761 and 1860. We wish we knew more about their lives than we do, but their histories have been so erased. We know that some of them were married and had kids. We know that some of them died only a few months after being born, too early for anyone to have written down their names. We know that at least two of them were unimaginably brave and ran away from here, despite the dire consequences. We know that at least one of them, Arch, was caught. We know that some of them were given the opportunity to be emancipated, but only if they took up the offer to be shipped to Haiti or Africa, distant places they knew nothing about. We know that some of them turned this offer down. And we know that they tended to this soil -- they, like us, made food grow up out of this land. They, like us, had immense knowledge of this landscape. They lived in such intimate connection to this land: they relied on it for medicine and rebellion, for sustenance and worship. Their

knowledge of this ecosystem was explicitly tied to their survival, so their knowledge was vast.



The pink outline was identified for reparations. The black outline is Wheatland Farm.

The people who were enslaved on this land displayed immense resilience and resistance. Other than those who decided to run away and emancipate themselves, we also have reason to believe that the Grapevine Telegraph ran through here. The Grapevine Telegraph is the unofficial name for the dense network of information channels through which enslaved people (primarily Black women) spread critical knowledge about routes to freedom, strategy, resistance, and news about the Civil War. Virginia was a hot-spot for these information meeting points, many of which were located in post-offices, mills, or barns where Black women would gather to do labor. The Wheatland plantation, where PVF now resides, was home to both a large production mill and store. Based on the mill, the proximity of the property to a post-office, state lines, and the Underground Railroad networks that ran through Waterford and the Catoctin mountains, we can strongly

suspect that an important meeting place and information hub was the farm's very own mill.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau of Loudoun County made plans to confiscate 81 tracts of land -- approximately 12,000 acres, if not more -- from former slave owners to be turned over to the newly free Black population. This attempt at land-based reparations was actively and violently resisted by white people in Loudoun, and never actually happened. Though we can find no direct evidence of our specific land being listed for confiscation, we feel safe assuming that it would have been; the land at the time was owned by the family of Robert L. Wright, a colonel in the Confederacy who died in the spring of 1865. As the reparations process targeted members of the Confederacy, it's only logical that Wright's land would have been confiscated. However, even though we didn't find Wright's name on this list, we *did* find the names of landowners all around us: our neighbors to the north; our neighbors to the south; properties all up and down Berlin Turnpike; in Waterford; in Leesburg. Had these land reparations actually occurred, the landscape of our current community would be much different. Perhaps the Black population in Loudoun County wouldn't have decreased by over 20% between the end of the Civil War and today. It is possible that we ourselves would not be here at all.

There is so much more to this history than we've so far discovered. Our intention with this project is to create an informative, transformative, and healing documentation of the history of the land that PVF now occupies, one that, by illuminating where this land has been, helps provide a roadmap of where this land should go. As this community attempts to imagine new futures for this place, ones that hope to repair rather than repeat the harm of the past, we must be honest and informed about what has happened here. We must try to understand how this land, which was tended to for generations by Indigenous and Black people, has ended up in the hands of a predominantly white community, producing food that nourishes predominantly white consumers. We must face the legacy we inherit -- a legacy of displacement, enslavement, violence, and theft -- and acknowledge that the legacy lives on.

In history research, and in life, we must make room for two realities: first, that colonization and slavery were incredibly recent, so to imagine that our systems, communities, soil, and streets bear no trace of them is ignorance; and second, that colonization and slavery were incredibly recent, so to imagine that their legacy is natural

Continued on page 4

History, Continued from page 4

and forever is also ignorance. We have been brought to where we are by the currents of the past that are beyond our control, and we are tied to the generations before us in ways we have no ability to change. But we ourselves are living history. The people who steward this land after us will

feel the memory of us in the soil, the water, and the trees, the same way we feel the memory of those who came before us. We learn history so that we can orient our lives toward a more just future. Toward the world that we want to co-create.

Schools were Segregated in Loudoun County Not So Long Ago

By Michael Lipsky

At midnight in normal times it's less than an hour's drive from Loudoun County to the White House. Yet into the 1970's this represented the distance between the Nation's Capital and fierce political battles to maintain racially segregated schools in the heart of Northern Virginia. To put this in perspective, resistance to desegregation in Virginia is recent enough that one of the founders of Potomac Vegetable Farms, Tony Newcomb, born in 1935, attended segregated schools as a child.

The Supreme Court ruled school segregation to be unconstitutional in 1954, fourteen years after I was born. Official resistance to school desegregation ended in the state after I was more than thirty.

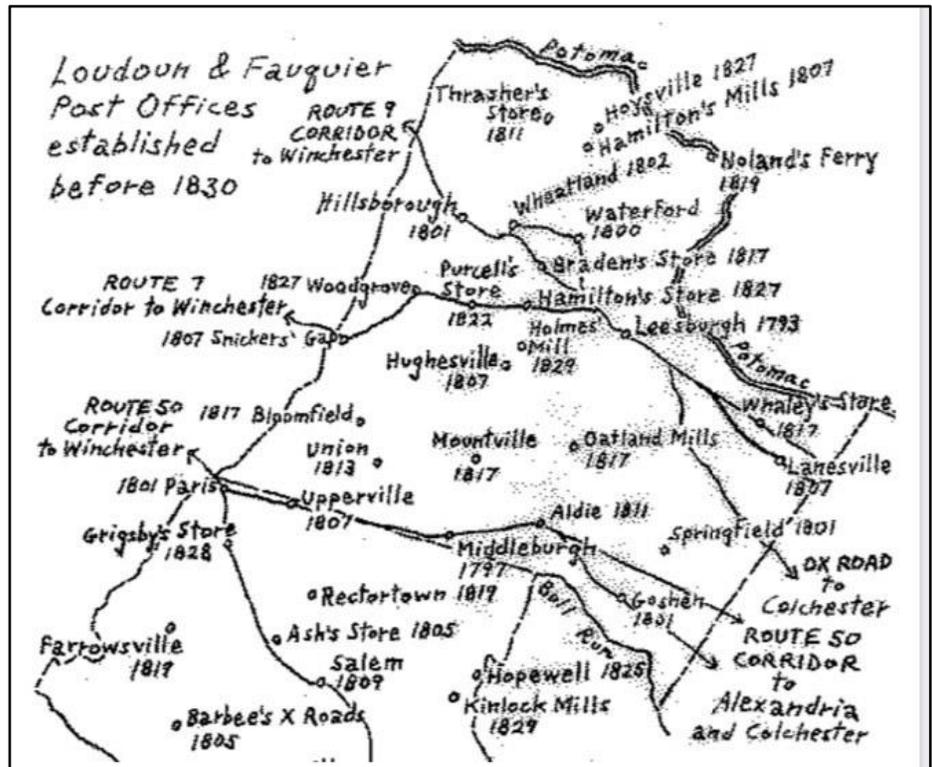
One can see echoes of Virginia's desegregation conflicts in where our friends are located in the Metropolitan area. People our age and even younger live in the District of Columbia and Maryland, almost never in Virginia. When they were starting out in life they would not buy housing in jurisdictions that endorsed segregation.

One of the strengths of the presentation on the history of the farm in Loudoun County is the way it locates the story of Northern Virginia in the egregious history of the American South. Particularly unsettling are its reminders of the terror perpetrated for generations by secret citizen organizations in Loudoun County as in the rest of the South, which punished Black people who sought to exercise their rights, and the white people who supported them. No comfort should be taken that Virginia was not as lawless as Louisiana and Mississippi, historically the twin capitals of white supremacy.

How do I come to this account? I was born and raised in New York City. I devoted years to civil rights activism after graduating from college. I met Hiu Newcomb and visited the farm for the first time in 1994. I moved to the farm after we married eight years later.

As I think about engaging with the history of Loudoun County I'm reminded of a visit to the National Park Service's historic site in Little Rock, AR. It commemorates the 1957 struggle of nine Black students to desegregate the high school.

A park ranger told me of an older visitor who studied the exhibits and then began to weep. She wept, I understood as we talked, from wishing she had had the courage back in high school to speak up for the students against the yelling and cursing mob. The experience of the woman in this story represents what it might mean, to borrow a phrase from a famous civics curriculum, to face history, and ourselves.



Post Offices may have been part of the Grapevine Telegraph.