

# SLAVES AND SLAVEHOLDERS OF WESSYNGTON PLANTATION

A Traveling Exhibition Organized by the Tennessee State Museum

## Overview:

“Slaves and Slaveholders of Wessyngton Plantation” focuses on the lives of both the enslaved African Americans and their white owners on a 13,000 acre tobacco plantation that existed in Robertson County. Through personal accounts, artifacts, and films the exhibit examines the institution of slavery and its impact on the state and the nation. The exhibit is funded in part by a grant from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area.



## Themes:

### *Introduction to the Slaves and Slaveholders of Wessyngton Plantation*

Joseph Washington of Virginia established the plantation in 1796, which was inherited by his son George. By 1860, George Washington was the largest producer of tobacco in the U.S. and his family was among the wealthiest of Tennesseans. They owned 274 slaves, who largely remained together for three to five generations, which is remarkable in a system that often separated enslaved families by selling children away from their parents. The Washingtons were also extraordinary in that they maintained detailed records, letters, diaries, and photographs that were eventually donated to the Tennessee State Library and Archives. This amazing collection of primary documents reveals insights into the heritage of the slaves' descendants, like John Baker, Jr., whose lifetime of research culminated in a best-selling book, *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation: My Family's Journey to Freedom*, award winning scholarship, and the basis of the exhibit.

### *Journeys*

Trek the routes from Africa and Europe to America, and eventually to Tennessee, of the ancestors of the slaves and slaveholders of the Wessyngton Plantation. Visit the founders of Wessyngton Plantation, Joseph and Mary Washington, and one of the earliest slave matriarchs, Jenny Blow Washington. See family portraits, photographs, and a slave bill of sale.

### *Southern Capitalists*

Behold Wessyngton's rise to the biggest tobacco producer in the U.S. Examine the interstate slave trade through the enslaved family of Daniel Gardner. Survey a tobacco field at Wessyngton and slave sale advertisements.

### *Women of the Plantation*

Consider the roles of enslaved and slaveholding women on the plantation. Study the documents of how women managed, made, and distributed clothing and tools.

### *Control*

Ponder the continual negotiation of power between the slaveholders and the slaves. Witness how overseers, like Benjamin Simms, used methods such as the task system and punishment to control the slaves.

### *Resistance*

Wonder how the slaves devised innovative ways to resist their owners' control. Learn about their secret religious services. Read a story about stealing a hog and running away. Browse archival photos and slave runaway ads.

### *Ties that Bind*

Reflect on how enslaved families preserved ties within bondage. Early photos, paintings, and a diary—by planter George A. Washington about a slave marriage—illustrate how African American families sustained themselves. Meet Granville Washington, and envision the challenges of a person born from the union of George Washington and an enslaved woman named Fanny.

### *No Longer Under Washington Control*

Ultimately, the Civil War led to the collapse of the plantation and slavery in Tennessee. Experience the trials and tribulations of the Washington family during the occupation of the area by the U.S. Army. Observe photos of the Washington family and of Civil War soldiers.

### *Choices and Uncertain Futures*

What options did slaves have during the Civil War? Discover how slaves reacted in various ways to the turmoil. Photographs and slave wartime stories offer a testament to the fates of their lives.

### *Generations in Transition*

Follow the transition from slavery to sharecropping at Wessyngton. A sharecroppers' contract, post-War photos, and series of narratives of the former slaves and slaveholders of Wessyngton elucidate socioeconomic and political change.



#### **Contents:**

The exhibit consists of ten freestanding screens (3 feet wide x 6 feet tall) that highlight the themes with informative text and graphics. It features twelve artifacts in three exhibit cases, each encompassing around 10.6 cubic feet (22 inches long x 22 inches wide x 38 inches high). The artifacts exemplify the slave trade, the slaveholders, and the enslaved. A real hand of tobacco, grown from the very soil of the former Wessyngton Plantation, is displayed in a special open case (1.5 feet wide x 6 feet tall). An audiovisual component is also included. Visitors choose from four videos on a *Brightsign* console with selection buttons. The main film is *Visions of the Past* (12 minutes). Three short clips (about 2 minutes each) illuminate the experiences of Jenny Blow Washington, Anne Nixon Cooper, and 3-D flythrough movie of a model of how Wessyngton Plantation appeared in 1860.

**Spatial Requirements:** The exhibition fits minimally into a space of 500 square feet, and optimally within 1,000 square feet.

**Participation Fee:** The participation fee is \$500. It defrays the cost of transportation.

**Installation and De-Installation:** Museum staff installs and de-installs the exhibit. At least one staff or volunteer of suitable physical capabilities to assist with the installation and de-installation is much appreciated.

**Press Kit:** The exhibit includes a press kit with a sample media release, logos, and images with captions.

**Educational Resources:** Host institution receives ten paperback copies of John Baker's book, 200 exhibit catalogues, and 15 exhibition posters. School groups become historians with the Archival Program, which is also included with this exhibit. Students and teachers explore and discover the lives of the people who lived at Wessyngton Plantation through primary resource materials with copies of documents, study guides, quizzes, activities, and artifact replicas.

**Scheduling:** To schedule the exhibition contact Dr. Rex Weeks, Museum Curator, by phone at 615-253-0143 or by email at [rex.weeks@tn.gov](mailto:rex.weeks@tn.gov). An American Alliance of Museums General Facility Report and a Certificate of Insurance are required. Host institutions must also sign a Letter of Agreement specifying the terms of the exhibit's loan.

Exhibit Plan:

