

MULBERRY GROVE



Bruce Macdonald

HISTORY

In 1760, Benjamin Borden's heirs granted James Willson a parcel of land consisting of about 382 acres near Brownsburg. In 1779 James Willson and his wife, Rebecca, conveyed 200 acres to their son, John Willson. It is probable, although not certain, that these 200 acres were part of the original parcel deeded to James Willson in 1760. Since the original house on the property (a simple two-story, two room frame structure) dates to about 1790, it is likely that John Willson built it.

When John Willson died in 1826, his will conveyed his "lands" to his son, Samuel Willson. Samuel Willson purchased more land in 1827, and about that same time, began to improve the house by adding a stair hall, a large two-story addition on the north-east end, and a two-story slave dwelling on the opposite end of the house. The north façade of Mulberry Grove, facing Sterrett Road today, was originally the rear of the house. The property was

named for the Chinese mulberry trees that Samuel Willson grew in an attempt to raise silkworms.

OCCUPANTS OF PRIMARY DWELLING

Samuel Willson and his wife, Phoebe Tate Willson, had a large family of four sons and six daughters. Phoebe died in 1846, leaving Samuel a widower. By 1850, most of the older children had married and moved out, and the 1850 Census Schedule of Free Inhabitants lists the occupants of the house as Samuel (age 66); Sally (22); Estaline (20); and James (18). Samuel's profession was listed as "Farmer."

SLAVERY AT MULBERRY GROVE

When James Willson died in 1809, his will mentioned one enslaved person, a woman named "Dine," probably Dinah. When James' son, John Willson, died in 1826, his will gave Samuel



The slave dwelling, attached to and sharing a chimney with the main Mulberry Grove house, was built c. 1825–35.

“all my slaves not heretofore given to him” and he specifically mentioned “Bob, a negro man, Nance, a mulatto woman, and her daughter Matilda.” The appraisal was recorded February 5, 1827, and mentions the following enslaved people: “1 Negro Man Harvey, \$400; 1 Negro woman Mellinda, \$300; 1 Negro boy Jerry 3 years old, \$100; 1 Negro Ely 2, \$50.” From this, it appears that John Willson gave to his son, Samuel, slaves named Bob, Nance and Matilda before his death; and Harvey, Malinda, Jerry and Ely via his will. In the 1850 Census, the Schedule of Slave Inhabitants indicates that Samuel Willson owned a total of 18 slaves: 10 males ranging in age from 3 to 60 (including one deaf and blind 19-year old); and 8 females ranging in age from 6 months to 47. So in three generations, the number of persons enslaved by the Willson family at Mulberry Grove had grown from one in 1804 to seven in 1826, and to 18 in 1850 according to the Census that year. As the land holdings and need for laborers increased, so did the number of enslaved individuals.



Enslaved persons had to cross either the front or back porch to gain access to the main house (at right).

EXISTING SLAVE HOUSE

Unlike the other slave dwellings on the Brownsburg tour, Mulberry Grove’s is attached to the main house. It shares a chimney with the main house, and Jobie Hill, preservation architect and founder of the “Saving Slave Houses” project, noted when she visited that the enslaved persons who built the slave dwelling (c. 1825–35) were actually quite skilled to join the two structures

with a common chimney. The lower floor of the slave dwelling was used as a kitchen, and there is a loft upstairs, probably used as sleeping quarters for a cook and others. Reflecting the culture of slavery, there is no entrance from the slave quarters directly into the main house; slaves would have needed to go outside and use two steps on the back porch to reach the entrance to the main house. Drawings in 1981 for Mulberry Grove’s nomination to the Virginia Landmarks Register noted two foundations to the west of the main house which may have been dwellings for field laborers.

By Isabelle Chewning with generous assistance from the research of Larry Spurgeon.



Kitchen fireplace in the Mulberry Grove slave dwelling, left; ladder to sleeping loft, right.