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Enslaved Child Trafficking Within Late-Colonial Virginia: Certification of Enslaved Children in Augusta County, 1743-1774

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

I (McCleskey) began recording the information reported herein as the "Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County" dataset in 1985. Initially, the dataset consisted of 114 entries with eight fields per entry. The data supported my dissertation, a social history of colonial Augusta

County, Virginia.¹ At that time, I noted information about every enslaved and indentured laborer mentioned in the county's court order books, deed books, and will books. Those official Augusta County records are in good shape and are available as microfilm copies from the Library of Virginia. Comprehensive contemporary tithable compilations have not survived.

In 2013, I returned to the Augusta County order books to record information about civil litigation, and over the course of that research discovered four additional certifications of enslaved children, annotated in the present data as having been overlooked in research for my book, *The Road to Black Ned's Forge*.² Updated versions of one figure and two tables appear below.

During the late colonial period, Augusta County encompassed most of Virginia's frontier claims west of the Blue Ridge. In 1755, as of Virginia's annual tithable reporting date of June 10, the county population included 2,273 taxable white males aged sixteen years or older and 40 taxable Black males and females aged sixteen or older.³ Out of those forty taxable Blacks, at least two were free people of color. Augusta County's enslaved persons of 1755 are documented in detail in *The Road to Black Ned's Forge*.⁴

Except for Virginia's 1755 tithable report, no systematic records survive for the establishment of slavery in Augusta County during the colonial period. The number of enslaved people increased rapidly, however; historical geographer Robert D. Mitchell reported that, by 1782, the region approximating the configuration of colonial Augusta County included 2,315 taxable enslaved persons.⁵ The 118 children described in the "Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County" dataset were an early part of that rapid expansion.

Throughout the period of this dataset, 1743 through 1774, Virginia statutes directed enslavers to bring to their county court all enslaved children newly imported from outside the colony. The court (comprised of at least four sitting magistrates) certified the child's age and ordered it recorded. Virginia's certification laws forestalled future disputes over whether an enslaved child had reached the taxable age of sixteen years by publicly establishing an official age for newcomer children.⁶

Certification records from east of the Blue Ridge were tabulated and analyzed by historians Philip Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls in a 1989 study of the expansion of slavery into Piedmont Virginia after 1720. Morgan and Nicholls used Piedmont county certification data to underpin their argument that field labor for the Piedmont expansion was drawn disproportionately from

¹ Turk McCleskey, "Across the First Divide: Frontiers of Settlement and Culture in Augusta County, Virginia, 1738-1770." (PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, 1990).

² Turk McCleskey, *The Road to Black Ned's Forge: A Story of Race, Sex, and Trade on the Colonial American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

³ R.A. Brock, ed., *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie, Lieutenant-Governor of the Colony of Virginia, 1751-1758* (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1883-84), 2:352.

⁴ Appendix 3, "The Frontier Forty: Enslaved Pioneers in Augusta County," *Road to Black Ned's Forge*, 210-216.

⁵ Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), 100. Mitchell provides extensive economic context for early Augusta County and, more broadly, the Shenandoah Valley.

⁶ "An Act concerning Tithables," in William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia* (Richmond: various publishers, 1819-1823), 3:258-259, 6:40-41.

enslaved women and children, many of whom were African.⁷ Noting that monthly registrations of children in two Piedmont counties increased or decreased in a pattern comparable to monthly fluctuations in the arrival of African slave trade ships, Morgan and Nicholls treated all certifications as Africans.⁸

Certainly some individuals in the “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County” dataset were African; their arrivals can be associated with particular transatlantic slave trade voyages. *True Blue* arrived in the North Potomac River naval district from Anomabu, in modern Ghana, on August 16, 1759.⁹ Twelve days later, Augusta County justice of the peace William Preston bought sixteen enslaved people from Maryland merchant John Champe. Champe’s receipt acknowledged Preston’s payment of £752 “Curr[en]t money of Virg[inia] in full for sixteen Slaves sold from the True Blue.”¹⁰ At the next court session after Preston’s purchase, “four Augusta County masters produced five slave children for certification of the newcomers’ ages.”¹¹ No additional Augusta County court records indicate that these five children were part of Champe’s sale to Preston of sixteen slaves from *True Blue*, but the conjunction of events strongly hints at a connection.

Similarly, on July 16, 1761, Augusta County magistrate and merchant Felix Gilbert wrote to Albemarle County entrepreneur Dr. Thomas Walker that “When I was at Fredrickb’g [i.e., Rappahannock River seaport Fredericksburg, Virginia] last I made a purchase of 21 Slaves.”¹² The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database identifies three vessels that reached the Rappahannock River in 1761, before the date of Gilbert’s letter. The first vessel, *Alice*, arrived on May 16.¹³ Given that Gilbert was present when the Augusta County court convened in Staunton on the morning of May 19, it seems unlikely that he bought twenty-one children and conveyed them from Fredericksburg to his store in Staunton (a trip of over 100 miles) in less than three days.¹⁴ But two additional vessels arriving on the Rappahannock River that spring, *Bassa* and *Dove*, entered respectively on June 4 from Windward Coast and June 15 from Senegambia.¹⁵ Either date would have given Gilbert ample time to purchase the children, convey them to his

⁷ Philip Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1790,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 46 (April 1989): 211-251 (see especially pp. 217-224).

⁸ Morgan and Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 46, no. 2 (1989): 248; see also Figure 8, “The Months in Which African Slaves Were Imported into Virginia and Slave Children Registered in Two Piedmont Counties, 1725-1774,” *ibid.*, 250. The relevant Virginia statutes uniformly referred to children imported to Virginia. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large* 2:479-480, 3:258-259, and 6:40-41.

⁹ Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database voyage #90763, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

¹⁰ John Champe & Co. receipt to William Preston, dateline Maryland 28 August 1759, Preston Family Papers, 1727-1896, Virginia Museum of History and Culture.

¹¹ McCleskey, *Road to Black Ned’s Forge*, 125 and 273n, citing Augusta OB, 6:314, 316.

¹² Felix Gilbert, Augusta County, letter to Thomas Walker, Albemarle County, 16 July 1761, per care of Mr Neil, in Thomas Walker Papers, Library of Congress (microfilm reel 2). The letter reads in its entirety: “Sir, I am Sorry I had not the pleasure of Seeing you when you were at this place. [Gilbert resided in Staunton, the seat of Augusta County.] When I was at Fredrickb’g last I made a purchase of 21 Slaves and made free to get Two hundred pounds Sterling from Mr Jackson of your money which I shall take care to provide the greatest part by the 10th August.”

¹³ Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database voyage #90760, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

¹⁴ Gilbert’s presence in court on May 19, 1761: Augusta OB 7:1.

¹⁵ Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database voyages #90880 (*Bassa*) and #90822 (*Dove*), <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

store in Staunton, and sell them before the court session beginning on August 18, at which twenty-two Augusta County enslavers, including Felix Gilbert, presented enslaved children to the court for certification of ages.¹⁶

At first glance, the dates of registration in Augusta County might be interpreted as indicating an African origin for children enumerated in the “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County” dataset. As in Piedmont Virginia, August and September were peak months for Augusta County certifications.¹⁷ The coincidence of registration months should be treated cautiously, however, because Augusta County’s quarterly court schedule complicated any monthly comparisons; see “Methodology/Date of Record” below for details. On closer scrutiny, another category of quantitative evidence strongly indicates that the Augusta County children were not recently imported to Virginia from abroad. The ratio of boys to girls registered in Augusta County was statistically dissimilar to the sex ratio of children certified east of the Blue Ridge, as reported by Morgan and Nichols.¹⁸

Table 1. Average Age (in years) of enslaved children registered in Augusta County and piedmont Virginia, 1750-1774 (revised 3/15/2022; originally published as Table 23, in *The Road to Black Ned’s Forge*)

Dates	Augusta County						Central Piedmont		Southside Piedmont		Northern Piedmont	
	Boys			Girls			Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
	n	Age	StDev	n	Age	StDev						
1750-1759	13	12.0	2.1	10	12.1	2.0	10.6	11.1	10.7	10.9	11.6	11.2
1760-1769	47	10.4	2.6	22	11.4	2.4	10.3	10.7	10.2	10.7	9.7	11.5
1770-1774*	17	9.5	1.7	4	8.5	3.3	10.3	10.0	10.4	10.8	10.7	10.9
Total, 1750-7477	36											
Minimum years	5			6								
Maximum years	16			15								
Median years	10			12								
Mode years	12			14								

* Includes 2 girls and 11 boys registered in 1771 and 1772 in Botetourt County, which split from Augusta County in 1770. No children were registered in Augusta or Botetourt Counties in 1774.

** In addition to the 113 children represented in the calculations above, Augusta County masters also registered one twelve-year-old boy in 1743 and four additional children of unknown gender in the 1760s; their ages were eight (2), ten, and fifteen years. These five children were not included in the above calculations.

Sources: For Piedmont, Morgan & Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1790,” *WMQ* 3d ser., 46 (April 1989), p. 223. For Augusta, Botetourt, and Orange Counties, see “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County Database.”

¹⁶ Augusta County Order Book 7: 50-71 (microfilm, Library of Virginia, hereafter cited Augusta OB). For details, see dataset.

¹⁷ Morgan and Nicholls graphed transatlantic slave-trade shipping arrivals in comparison to county court registrations of enslaved children. Morgan and Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia,” 248, 250-251 (citing Herbert S. Klein, “Slaves and Shipping in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* V [1975], 396).

¹⁸ My original tabulation of enslaved children appeared as Table 23, “Average age of slave children registered in Augusta County and piedmont Virginia, 1750-1774,” *The Road to Black Ned’s Forge*, 200. A revised version, which includes four previously overlooked Augusta County children, appears herein as Table 1.

Table 1. “Average age of slave children registered in Augusta County and piedmont Virginia, 1750-1774” (updated version of Table 23, *The Road to Black Ned’s Forge*, 200.)

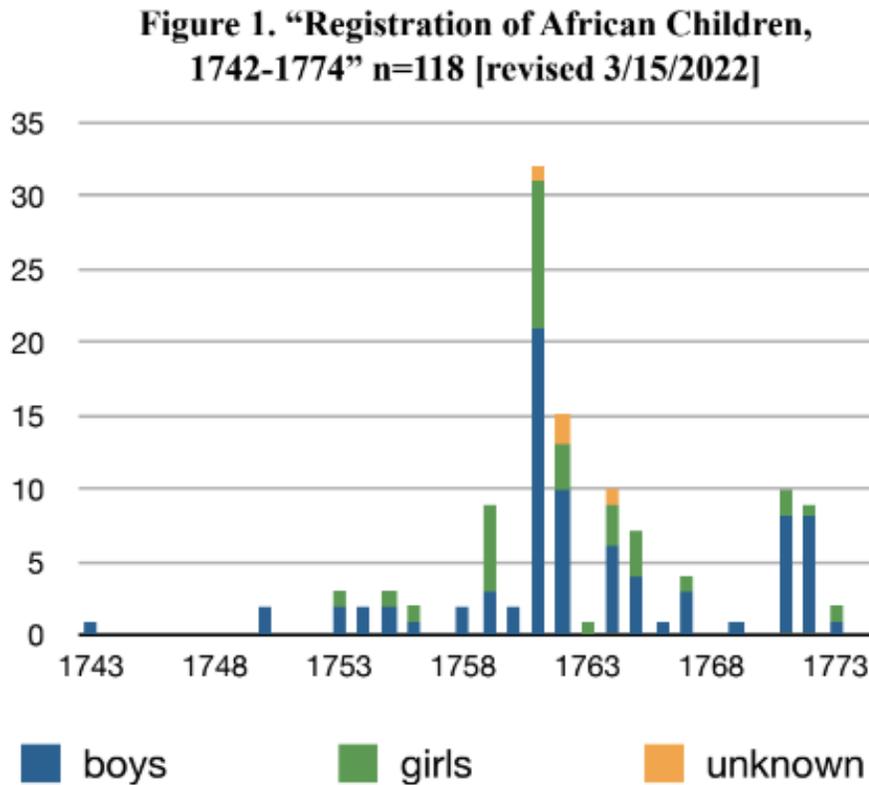


Figure 1. “Registration of African Children, 1742-1774” (updated version of Figure 6, *The Road to Black Ned’s Forge*, 130). As is noted above, I originally overlooked the certifications of four additional children (a 1750 boy, a 1758 boy, a 1759 girl, and a 1769 boy) who now appear in the graph.

In Piedmont Virginia, the numbers of boys and girls “were fairly equally matched from the 1740s on, most particularly in the 1750s and 1760s.”¹⁹ By contrast, in Augusta County, many more boys than girls were certified throughout the period of 1750 through 1774 (Table 2). Could the Augusta County ratio of boys and girls have been the product of random chance? We tested the probability of child registration by sex in Augusta County, and rejected the null hypothesis that the probability of boy registration would equal the probability of girl registration (Figure 2). In mathematical notation, H_0 was rejected at twin-tailed $p=5.7404e-05$. In other words, assuming a seller’s market, sellers offered to Augusta County purchasers so many more boys than girls that the sex distinction cannot be attributed to random chance.

¹⁹ Morgan and Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia,” 221.

[Table 2. Sex ratios of enslaved children registered in Augusta County and piedmont Virginia, 1750-1774 (ratio expressed as number of boys per 100 girls)

Years	Augusta County	Central Piedmont	Southside Piedmont	Northern Piedmont	Total Piedmont
1750-1759	260	108	97	95	101
1760-1769	214	92	116	131	106
1770-1774*	425	142	126	122	131
Numbers of Children	113**	1,586	1,613	163	3,362

* Includes 2 girls and 11 boys registered in 1771 and 1772 in Botetourt County, which split from Augusta County in 1770. No children were registered in Augusta or Botetourt Counties in 1774.

** In addition to the 113 children represented in the calculations above, Augusta County masters also registered one twelve-year-old boy in 1743 and four additional children of unknown gender in the 1760s; their ages were eight (2), ten, and fifteen years. These five children were not included in the above calculations.

Sources: For Piedmont, see Table V, “Sex Ratios of African Children Registered in Piedmont County Courts, 1725-1774,” in Morgan & Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1790,” *WMQ* 3d ser., 46 (April 1989), p. 222. For Augusta, Botetourt, and Orange Counties, see “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County Database.”

Table 2. “Gender ratios of enslaved children registered in Augusta County and piedmont Virginia, 1750-1774”

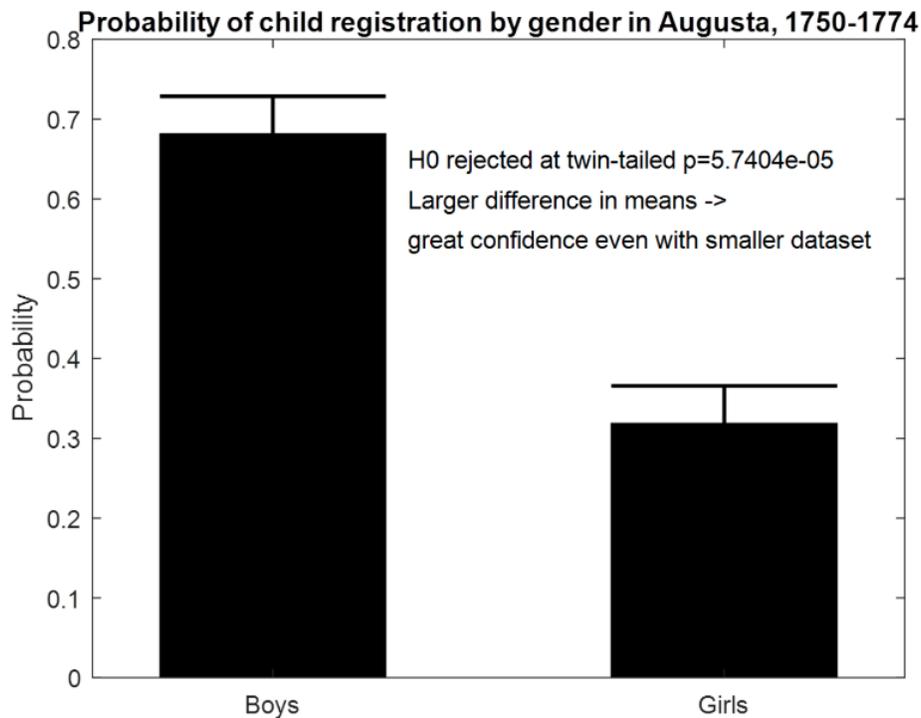


Figure 2. “Probability of child registration by gender in Augusta, 1750-1774.”

Were the sellers of enslaved children to Augusta County enslavers behaving comparably to the sellers of enslaved children to Piedmont Virginia enslavers? We tested the probability of boys being registered in Piedmont counties as compared to boys being registered in Augusta County, and rejected the null hypothesis that the probability of boy registration in one location would be equal to the probability of boy registration in the other location (Figure 3). In mathematical notation, H_0 was rejected with a twin-tailed p of less than one in a million. Assuming a seller's market, sellers of enslaved children to Augusta County purchasers offered so many more boys than the traffickers selling children to Piedmont Virginia enslavers that the distinction cannot be attributed to random chance.

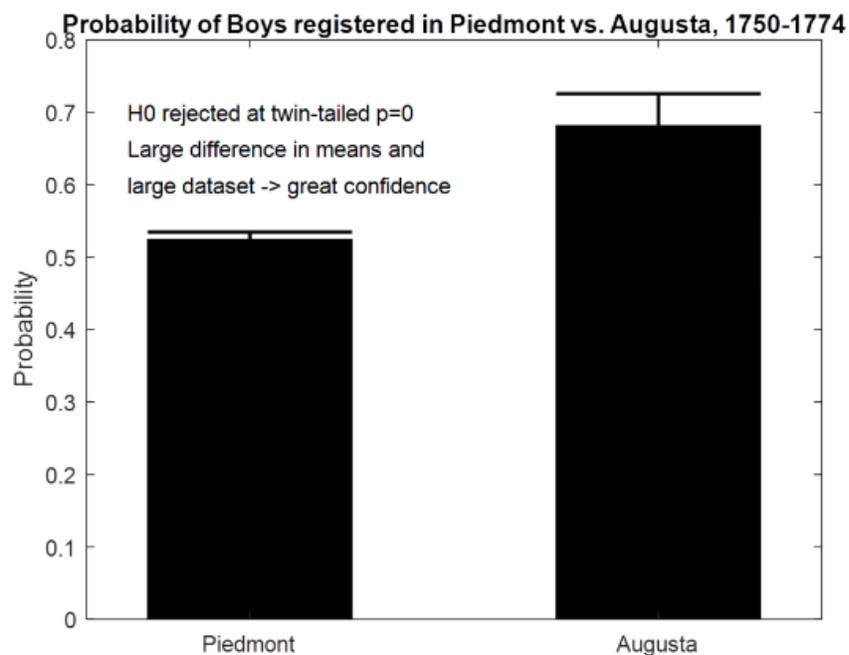


Figure 3. "Probability of boys registered in Piedmont vs. Augusta, 1750-1774."

Sellers of enslaved children to Piedmont Virginia purchasers did not behave like sellers of enslaved children to Augusta County purchasers. Assuming Morgan and Nicholls were correct that most of the enslaved children registered in Piedmont Virginia were recently imported from overseas, then the pronounced regional differences in sex ratios suggest that the sellers to Augusta County were not the same traffickers as the sellers to Piedmont Virginia. Most of the large number of boys certified in colonial Augusta County appear to have been brought there from inside Virginia, not from abroad.²⁰

Perhaps Augusta County officials treated all recently arriving children as foreigners because slavery was new to them and to the settlement frontier. Alternatively, Augusta County enslavers may have certified their children to avoid future disputes over when to tax a child not born locally. Whatever their motives for applying Virginia's slave importation laws to an unintended

²⁰ For the diverse regional origins of enslaved persons who were brought to early Augusta County, see McCleskey, *The Road to Black Ned's Forge*, 130-132.

purpose, Augusta County officials and enslavers unwittingly created rare quantifiable evidence of late colonial Virginia's internal human trafficking.

Dates of Data Collection

1985-1986
2013-2018

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Augusta County, Virginia

Temporal Coverage

1743-1773

Document Types

Order or decree
Civil document

Sources

Augusta County, Virginia, Order Books 1-15, microfilm reels #62-66, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA [hereafter LVA] (abbreviated in dataset as Augusta OB).

Botetourt County, Virginia, Order Book, 1770-1771, microfilm reel #27, LVA (abbreviated in dataset as Botetourt OB 1770-1771).

Botetourt County, Virginia, Order Book, 1772-1776, microfilm reel #27, LVA (abbreviated in dataset as Botetourt OB 1772-1776).

Orange County, Virginia, Order Books 2-3, microfilm reels #30-31, LVA (abbreviated in dataset as Orange OB).

Methodology

The original sources for the "Enslaved Children Imported to Augusta County" dataset are manuscript (i.e., handwritten) documents generated by eighteenth-century county court clerks. During county court sessions, a clerk recorded minutes (contemporary notes) of the court's activities and subsequently transcribed these rough minutes by hand in bound volumes known as court order books. Today, Virginia's surviving original order books typically are held by modern clerk of circuit court offices in local county courthouses, and microfilm copies are

available at the Library of Virginia in Richmond. The Augusta County records totaled 7,434 manuscript pages, Botetourt County 1,207 pages, and Orange County 1,403 pages.

The “Enslaved Children Imported to Augusta County” dataset includes all official county court registrations of enslaved children imported into Augusta County from its initial settlement in the 1730s through the end of the colonial era in 1775. A typical entry is found on page 220 of Augusta Order Book volume 14, a page which is part of the record for court activities on the day of May 22, 1771. The handwritten entry reads in full, “Michael a Negroe boy belonging to James Bell Sen^r is adjudged to be 12 years old & ordered to be certified.” Information from this particular entry was recorded in the dataset as ChildSerialNumber 1376.

Methodology/Child Serial Numbers: The “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County” dataset includes numerous children with names identical to other enslaved people; each name identifiable as belonging to a unique person has been assigned a unique child serial number. The numbers in this dataset are not sequential because during the original research, I assigned serial numbers to enslaved adults as well as to indentured servants, neither of which are included in the present database.

Methodology/Date of Record: The date entered in the “DateOfRecord” field is the day, month, and year that an enslaver brought an enslaved child into court for certification of the child’s age. Morgan and Nicholls compared months of county certifications to months of slave importations to Virginia and found that “the months in which children were registered and slaves imported . . . move in tandem.”²¹ From this association, Morgan and Nicholls assumed the certified children to be African. This would be a difficult assumption to extend to Augusta County, however. During most years from 1749 through 1769, the Augusta County court met quarterly, typically in February or March, in May, in August, and in November.²² The Augusta County month of record therefore is directly comparable neither to monthly certifications in other counties nor to monthly importations into Virginia.

Methodology/Geographic Coverage: The “Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County Database” includes three decades of foreign imports within what was for colonial Virginia an unusually vast county. Augusta County was created from territory administered initially by Orange County. In 1738, a Virginia statute defined Augusta County’s original northern border as running from “the head spring of Hedgman river, to the head spring of the river Potowmack,” a line that then was believed to mark the southwestern limit of the Northern Neck proprietary grant, the Fairfax family’s lands between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. Augusta’s eastern border was “the top of the . . . Blue ridge,” beyond which the county extended expansively “to the utmost limits of Virginia.” The same statute stipulated that Augusta County would remain an administrative subdivision of Orange County until Virginia’s governor and

²¹ Morgan and Nicholls, “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia,” 248 and fig. 8, 250.

²² From 1749 to 1752, six Virginia backcountry counties (Albemarle, Augusta, Brunswick, Frederick, and Lunenburg) were authorized by statute to hold court quarterly rather than monthly. The statute expired in 1752, but Augusta County magistrates ignored the monthly requirement and continued to convene court quarterly, with few exceptions. For details, see Turk McCleskey, “Quarterly Courts in Backcountry Counties of Colonial Virginia,” *Journal of Backcountry Studies* 7 (Fall 2012), 47-57.

council judged that the population had reached an appropriate size.²³ On October 29, 1745, the governor and council ordered the establishment of an independent Augusta County.²⁴ During the probationary period from 1739 to 1745, only one Augusta County enslaver reported an enslaved child to the Orange County Court. Eventually, in 1770, Augusta County was subdivided to create Botetourt County.²⁵ I added child certifications from colonial Botetourt County to the present dataset in order to provide a three-decade-long comprehensive search for imported children within the bounds of the original Augusta County. The Augusta County and Botetourt County child certifications were not included in Morgan and Nicholls' data, which drew exclusively from the county court records of Piedmont counties.

Methodology/Child Names: The spelling of some names may vary from the source. Some of the enslaved children in this database can be identified later in other Augusta County documentary sources, but the spellings of their names was not always consistent. When I identified enslaved people in subsequent documents who had appeared earlier in childhood certifications, I standardized the spelling of those names.

Methodology/Child's Sex: in 1993, Philip Morgan, Mick Nicholls, and I were fellows together at what then was called the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Prof. Nicholls reviewed my Augusta County roster and identified several of the children's names as boys or girls; his assistance is noted in this data. Additional confirmations came from Augusta County, Virginia, Personal Property Tax Records, 1782-1795, Library of Virginia microfilm.

Methodology/Child's Age: Invariably, the Augusta County court certified the ages of enslaved children as whole years.

Methodology/Child's Description: Court certifications sometimes included descriptive terms, which are included here. This field also includes contemporary notes about gender. Additionally, three Botetourt County certifications included the annotation "imported into this Colony," signifying that the children likely arrived by ship and thus were much more likely to have been African. I interpret the absence of such annotation from the great majority of child registrations as circumstantial evidence that the children were not imported from abroad.

Methodology/Enslaver Names: As a graduate student, I embarked upon a quantitative history of Augusta County that began with a tally of the county's real estate records. Almost immediately, the notion of faithfully recording eccentric spellings of thousands of names struck me as absurd, because it was too difficult to compile comprehensive acreages for land owners who possessed more than one tract. Arbitrarily, I standardized spellings, and on the occasions when two individuals had the same name, I distinguished them by adding a digit to the given name. I printed the names on fanfold paper and thereafter employed those spelling versions in all other databases. In the present "Enslaved Children Imported To Augusta County Database," I removed any identifying digits and added enslaver serial numbers that indicate unique individuals.

²³ "An Act, for erecting two new Counties, and Parishes; and granting certain encouragements to the Inhabitants thereof," Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 5:78-80.

²⁴ Wilmer L. Hall, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, vol. 5 (Richmond: Virginia State Library 1967), 191.

²⁵ "An act for dividing the county and parish of Augusta..." in Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 8:395-398.

Enslavers are listed first by surname and then given name to facilitate alphabetical sorting of enslavers. Identifiers such as Junior, and their abbreviations, are rendered as part of the given name, without a space between the name and the identifier, e.g., NathanielJr. The identifier Senior may not appear in the database if that individual originally appears in the Augusta County real estate records without the identifier Senior.

Methodology/Enslaver Current Acres: Surviving colonial-era records will not support precise calculation of how much Augusta County land an individual *controlled*. It is, however, possible to calculate the amount of real estate for which an individual owed quitrents, an annual obligation collected in the name of the monarch. Land subject to quitrents helped determine a landowner's eligibility to vote and hold office. While in graduate school, I built a database of Augusta County land ownership whose sources—patents, deeds, and wills—appear to be complete. These sources are identified fully in note 2 of my 1990 essay “Rich Land, Poor Prospects.”²⁶ I used the same real estate database for the present project to report how much (if any) land was held by first-time certifiers of enslaved children. As indicated above, a majority of certifiers owned at most 300 acres, and one in five first-time certifiers possessed no taxable acreage. It is highly unlikely, however, that the seemingly landless certifiers *controlled* no land. For Augusta County, there survive copious records of intermediate steps toward converting crown land into real estate. These records include surveyor record books and a land entry book.²⁷ Such intermediate claims sometimes were sold, but no systematic record was kept of the transactions. I strongly suspect that Augusta County's entry and survey records can reveal intermediate land claims of the apparently landless owners who certified enslaved children.

Date of Publication

July 2023

Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/5LWJ7J>

Linked Data Representation: [Enslaved.org](https://enslaved.org)

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²⁶ Turk McCleskey, “Rich Land, Poor Prospects: Real Estate and the Formation of a Social Elite in Augusta County, Virginia, 1738-1770,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 98 (July 1990): 459-486.

²⁷ Augusta County Surveyors' Record 1, 1744-1761, and Record 2, 1761-1774 (LVA Augusta County microfilm reel #107); Augusta County Entry Book, No. 1, 1745-1779 (LVA Augusta County microfilm reel #108a).

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