

## **HISTORIC GREEN SPRINGAS PART OF JAMES CITY COUNTY'S "PATHWAY TO FREEDOM"**

To most of James City County's citizens, the eight-mile-long roadway connecting three local historic sites--the National Park Service's Historic Jamestown Island and Historic Green Spring plantation, and James City County's newly-opened "Freedom Park"--is just a network of secondary roads leading north from Jamestown Island toward Route 60 and I-64. But to James City County's African-American residents, each of the historic sites along this road represents a chapter in the story of the origins, evolution, and abolition of Slavery in Virginia. In recent years, local African-American historians and genealogists have begun to suggest that this stretch of highway should be designated "The Pathway to Freedom" or "Freedom Road."

**JAMESTOWN:** Both historically and geographically, this "Pathway" begins at Jamestown Island, where some of the first Africans--"twenty and odd negroes"--arrived in August, 1619, having been traded at Old Point Comfort for supplies needed by the Captain of a Dutch privateer. Because Virginia was then "a society with slaves" rather than a fully-developed "slave culture," it is probable that most of the first Africans, and the few others that arrived here during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, were not considered slaves, but another class of "un-free labor," i.e., indentured servants. For the next four decades or so, some Blacks living in Tidewater Virginia were able to become free, marry, buy land, and even to possess slaves and indentured servants of their own.

**GREEN SPRING:** By the 1670s, however, the steady increase in large-scale tobacco production and the declining availability of English indentured labor led to the importation of large numbers of African slaves--first from the islands of the Caribbean and later directly from Africa. During the next thirty years most of the free Blacks already established in Virginia found themselves gradually stripped of both rights and property. Six years after Williamsburg became Virginia's capital, the House of Burgesses passed the infamous "slave code" which summarized laws that had been passed piecemeal during the latter portion of the seventeenth century. Significantly, the 1705 legal code classified "negro slaves" as personal property that could be bought, sold and inherited.

**Historic Green Spring plantation was one of the places where institutionalized chattel slavery took hold in Virginia, and “the peculiar institution” continued to be exploited by the property’s owners for the next two centuries. Having failed in his efforts to find a replacement for tobacco as Virginia’s major cash crop, by the 1660s, Governor Berkeley probably became increasingly dependent upon African-American labor to farm his 7000-acre property.**

**Some African-Americans staffed Green Spring’s huge mansion, and hundreds more may have worked as agricultural laborers and skilled tradesmen. Documents reveal that African-Americans participated in the turbulent events that took place at Green Spring during Bacon’s Rebellion and the American Revolutionary War. Some scholars believe that in the 1770s, the plantation’s outskirts served as the site of clandestine religious services conducted by the founders of the first Black-led Baptist Church organized in Virginia.**

**Ironically, between 1803 and 1818 Green Spring was the venue for one of Virginia’s most ambitious slave emancipation efforts, as more than thirty African-Americans were freed and re-settled in accordance with the will left by 27-year old William Ludwell Lee. Many of these ex-slaves received farmsteads in what was then known as the “Hot Water Tract,” a subsidiary farm or quarter in the northern section of Green Spring plantation, which by then encompassed more than 8,000 acres. As this acreage was gradually broken up during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the descendants of the emancipated Green Spring slaves, along with other Free Black families, continued to occupy farms within the “Hot Water Tract,” a portion of which now forms the nucleus of “Freedom Park.”**

**FREEDOM PARK: Located five miles north of Historic Green Spring, this recently-opened recreational park is sponsored by James City County, which has already spent over \$12 million on the first two of five projected phases of its development. Covering an area of nearly 700 acres, Freedom Park is intended to be an educational, as well as a recreational facility. Implicit in its name and founding concept is the mission of exploring and highlighting the historical experience of Free Black people in James City County. During the next few years this goal will be accomplished through the archaeological investigation of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Free Black farm sites within the park, and by the construction of a museum in which artifacts produced by these archaeological “digs” will be displayed along with historical documents.**

## **WHY “THE PATHWAY TO FREEDOM” CONCEPT IS CENTRAL TO ACCURATELY INTERPRETING HISTORIC GREEN SPRING TO ALL AMERICANS**

**Historic Green Spring’s 220 years of Early American History contains many stories of national significance. None is more significant today than the saga of African-American experience in Virginia. As painful as it may be for many of us to address, the genesis, evolution, and demise of slavery is a vital theme that permeates Green Spring’s history at each of its major stages, and which engages all of its major historical players in one way or another. This was as true in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century for Sir William and Lady Frances Berkeley as it was in 1862 for the Union soldiers who set fire to the Ludwell Lee mansion, not realizing that it was owned by northerners who were slaveholders.**