

The Rushes of Chestnut Grove: One Family's Journey from Slavery to Freedom

By Regina Rush

My pursuit of information about the Rush branch of my family began shortly after I began working as a Reference Coordinator in the Albert and Shirley Special Collections Library in the late nineties. Researchers streamed through the library on genealogical quests, ferreting out information about ancestors ranging from the famous, to the not-so-famous, to the down-right infamous. Before long, a fervid desire to know my family's history had taken a hold of me, and I embarked on a journey to find out about the Rushes of Chestnut Grove. What I knew about my family's history could be summed up in a paragraph--a very short one at that. My paternal grandparents were James Neverson and Roberta Brooks Rush. They raised eleven children in a place called Chestnut Grove, a small unincorporated community nestled in the Green Mountains of Southern Albemarle County, Virginia.

An initial conversation with my father provided me with some information, but certainly not enough to appease the hunger that had grown inside me. Over the ensuing years, I sporadically researched my family's history but never uncovered the key piece of family history that continued to elude me: who owned our family during slavery?

An enlightening conversation one Saturday afternoon with my Cousin Gloria about eight years ago finally solved the mystery for me. When asked who owned our family during slavery, she responded "Honey, our people were owned by the Rives Family."

Beginnings—Part One

Margaret Rives King, granddaughter of Robert Rives, Sr., wrote in her book, *A Memento of Ancestors and Ancestral Homes written for her Nieces and Nephews*: "...I will hardly venture now to state how many acres, but I know in one direction we could drive fifteen miles and still be within the limits of the



Oak Ridge prior to 1900. Courtesy of Nelson County Historical Society

Oak Ridge Plantation."

As far as I've been able to determine, the Rush family's ancestral roots are deeply embedded in the soil of Central Virginia. My family's sojourn began in Nelson County, Virginia, on a 2555-acre plantation called Oak Ridge, owned by a local prominent family named Rives.

This family was part of Virginia's aristocratic planter class. They mingled socially with the well-connected of antebellum Virginia. The patriarch of the family, Robert Rives Sr., was a native of Sussex County, Virginia, who gained his wealth as an international merchant and farmer. By the time of Rives' death in 1845, he owned at least eight plantations in Nelson and Albemarle Counties. Oak Ridge alone had as many as 200 slaves working on the plantation, including my great-great grandparents, Nicey Anne Coles and Isham Rush.

An inventory of Rives' personal estate, compiled and valued in June 1845, included livestock, farm tools, furniture, household wares, and the enslaved individuals working on his plantations. The valuation of the slaves in this

document range from an assessment of "crippled of no value" for a house servant named William, to six hundred seventy-five dollars for a mother named Lavinia and her three children: Martha, Mary and Lucy. My great-great grandparents were assigned values of five hundred fifty dollars for Isham and a combined value of six hundred dollars for Nicey and two of their children, Betsy and Sam. The slaves on Rives' plantations were divided into two categories, "House Servants" and "Plantation Hands". Lee Marmon, author of *The Measure and Mirror of a Man: Generations of the Oak Ridge Estate*, noted, "The Oak Ridge bondsmen were evenly divided between 'house servants,' including all craftsmen as well as domestic servants and outdoors laborers....Some of these slaves were housed in a wooden grove of cabins to the west of the mansion."

Nicey and Isham were listed as "Plantation Hands," possibly one of the families living in the cabins described by Marmon. Margaret King's description of the field hands' housing provides more vivid imagery of the living quarters provided for the slaves: "The field hands lived in a collection

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of houses called the quarters. Each family had its own cabin built either of stone or hewed logs, plastered, with porches covered with vine....Each cottage had its own garden large enough for vegetables or flowers and arrangements for poultry....These little houses clustered around the overseer's house."

It appears Isham and Nicey had a long-standing relationship of more than thirteen years. Several documents suggest they had as many as fourteen children including Nathan, Betsy, Sam, William, Ella (my great grandmother), Cecelia, Louisiana, Lucy, Isham, Neverson, and Fleming. King asserted in her book, "My grandfather never sold his Negroes. They were sometimes dispersed among the plantations of his children, but families were never separated."

It is unclear from my research whether any of Isham's and Nicey's children were sent to other plantations or whether they remained with their parents as a family unit.

Following the death of Robert Rives, Sr., in 1845, the Rush family was relocated to one of the Rives' Albemarle County plantations, referred to as the South Warren Estate. This estate bordered Lock 25 of the James River and Kanawha Canal near present-day Warren, Virginia. Upon the death of Robert Rives, Sr., the estate was inherited by his son, Robert Rives, Jr. (1798–1866). Born in Nelson County in 1798, Robert, Jr., was the fifth child of Robert and Margaret Cabell Rives. After a brief stint representing Nelson County in the House of Delegates from 1823–1829, he moved to Albemarle County, eventually becoming one of the wealthiest men in Virginia. The 1860 Census records his assets at \$280,000: roughly eight

million dollars by today's calculations. However, most of the wealth of Robert Rives, Jr., was lost during the Civil War.

Part Two: Escape!

Not much is known about the Rush Family's day-to-day existence at South Warren during the 1840's, but the year 1851 proved to be an eventful one for Nicey. In January 1851, she gave birth to a baby girl named Ella, my paternal great-grandmother. She also attempted to escape the South Warren Plantation. Perhaps there is a correlation between the two events—her pregnancy and her attempted escape—but, unfortunately, no documentation has been uncovered to support it. It is not known what precipitated Nicey's attempt to escape or where she was apprehended. The only information that remains is a cryptic entry in Robert Rives' ledger on 20 September which states: "Paid H.D. Robertson for the apprehension of Nicey and mileage there with \$7.25."

According to the section in the 1849 Code of Virginia for Runaway Slaves "If such slave be arrested in this state and within fifty miles of his residence, a reward of five dollars, or if more than fifty miles, ten dollars...and in every case the person making the arrest and delivery shall be allowed mileage, at the rate of ten cents a mile for necessary travel from the place of arrest." H.D. Robertson was paid a flat fee of five dollars and two dollars and twenty-five cents to cover mileage. Based on the amount recorded in Rives' ledger, the number of miles translates to be approximately seventy-two. Lack of documentation makes it impossible to know which direction Nicey fled. The map on page 6 shows a seventy-five mile

radius around Oakland, Robert Rives' home on South Warren, and sheds some light on how far Nicey may have traveled.

For the next seventeen years, details of the Rush family's existence are a mystery. Equally mysterious are details concerning my great-great grandfather, Isham. His birth and death dates and parents' names remain a mystery. It's very likely that he was born on the Oak Ridge Plantation in Nelson County. Census records of his children confirm that Isham was a native Virginian. Three of his children record him as their father on their marriage licenses. His oldest son listed on the 1870 census was his namesake (spelled "Isom" in the census), and down through the generations some variation of the name continues to be used. Even today, more than a one hundred fifty years later, Isham remains in the family: one of my paternal uncles was named John Isom Rush. By 1868, Isham disappeared from public record, presumably deceased; however, Albemarle County Courthouse records and Census records helped me understand what happened to Nicey after the Civil War.

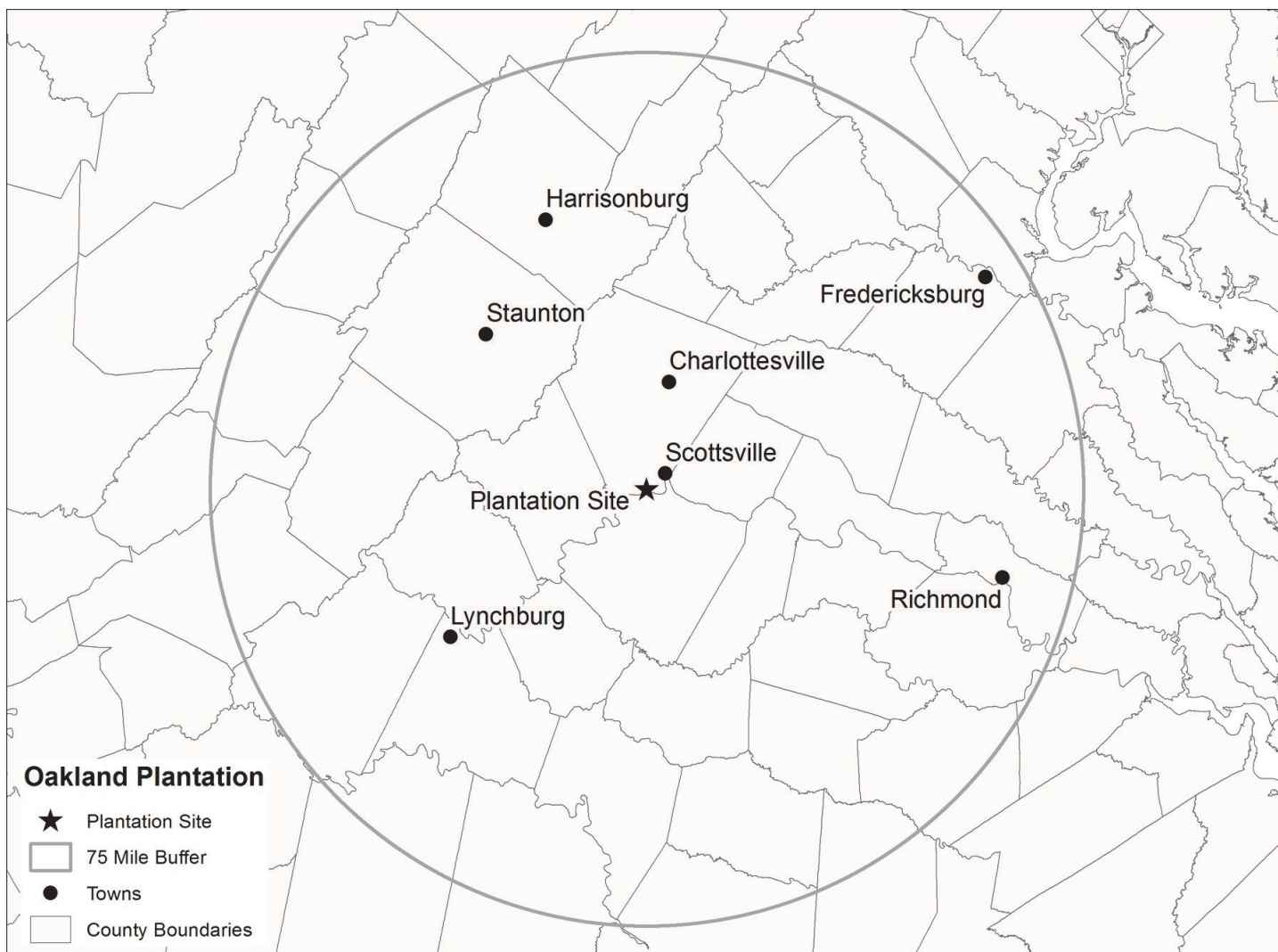
Part Three: Emancipation

On September 18, 1868, Nicey and a man named Paul Moseley went to the Albemarle County Courthouse to obtain a marriage bond. Two days later, on September 20, 1868, they were married at the Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Esmont, Virginia, by a minister named Alexander White. Ironically, Nicey and Paul were married seventeen years to the day when Robert Rives, Jr., recorded the entry in his ledger concerning Nicey's recapture.

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 1851.
 Sept. 20th. Paid H.D. Robertson for the apprehension of Nicey and mileage, ^{per unit.} \$ 7 25

Excerpt from Robert Rives Ledger (1846–1863): Rives' payment to H.D. Robertson on 20 September 1851 for apprehending Nicey Coles and returning her to Rives at Oakland. Courtesy of Scottsville Museum.

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Map depicting 75-mile radius of possible escape routes taken by Nicey Coles during her 1851 attempt to run away from Oakland.

Map Courtesy of Chris Gist, GIS Specialist, The Scholar's Lab—UVA Library.

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By 1870, forty-seven year-old Nicey Moseley was still residing in Warren, Virginia, and sharing a home with her husband, forty-seven year-old Paul Moseley; her twelve year-old stepson, Paul Jr.; and seven of her children: Ella, twenty; Cecelia, eighteen; Lucy, sixteen; Louisiana, three; Isham, thirteen; Neverson, eleven; Fleming, seven; and her granddaughter, Sophronia, Ella's eleven month-old daughter. The 1870's saw Nicey's daughters, Cecelia and Lucy, married and out on their own. Nicey's son and stepson had either died or migrated to another area by 1880.

The 1880 Census shows that Nicey and her family moved near to her daughter, Cecelia, somewhere in the Scottsville District. Her husband was still alive and only three of her children remained in her household: Isham, Fleming, and Louisiana. Nicey died sometime between 1880 and 1900 and presumably is buried at the Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Esmont, Virginia.

Part Four: Great-Grandma Ella (1851-1914)

Surprisingly, locating the footprints of my Great-Grandmother's life proved to be difficult. Family members, who could provide information about her life, have long since passed on.

Using census records from 1870-1910, I have pieced together some events of her life in Albemarle County. Ella Rush, daughter of Nicey and Isham, was born in January 1851 at the South Warren Estate located in the town of Warren, Virginia. Ella first appears in public record in the 1870 Census at age twenty residing in the household with her mother, stepfather, siblings, and eleven month old daughter, Sophronia. The census reveals Ella could not read or write, and her occupation is listed as "Housekeeper" on the 1870 Census and "Keeping House" on the 1880 Census. Great Grandma Ella was representative of the majority of newly emancipated freedwomen during Reconstruction. Historian Noralee Frankel writes in her article, *From*

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Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women's History in the Civil War Era, "Most black women secured jobs in only a limited number of occupations, all clustered at the bottom of the wage scale....Domestic services performed for nonfamily members for nominal pay."

The most prominent footprints of Ella's life are best followed using the 1900 and 1910 Census. By 1900, Ella is forty-nine years old, and she's had twelve children with six surviving to adulthood: Sophronia, Nannie, John, William, Curley, and James (my paternal grandfather). She has learned to read and write, and her occupation is listed as a "farmer." In October 1896, for \$25.00 and \$1.75 in fees and taxes, Ella purchased five acres of land in Chestnut Grove from a neighbor named Sophronia E. Childress. My family still owns this land today.

By 1910, Ella is fifty-nine years old,

living with her youngest child, seventeen year old Curly, and still residing on the land she purchased in 1896.

On December 2, 1914, at the age of sixty-three, my Great-Grandma Ella died and was laid to rest at the Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Esmont, VA.

Along my genealogical journey of more than fifteen years, I've been blessed to learn about some of the amazing people in my family whose shoulders I stand on. Great-Great Grandma Nicey, who did not let the restrictive confines of slavery diminish her vision of freedom or the fear of capture stand in the way of her attempting to obtain it. Nor did the obstacles of illiteracy, poverty, and raising a family on the wages of a domestic stand in the way of Great Grandma Ella's vision of becoming a land owner. I eagerly anticipate making the acquaintance of the next Rush ancestor, who through time has been relegated to a line in a courthouse ledger or languishes on the pages of a tattered family letter in an archive. A Russian proverb says "you live as long as you're remembered." I

continue my genealogical journey to rescue them so they may live.

About the author:



Regina Rush is a Reference Coordinator at the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia. Here she's pictured with one of the Rives' ledgers that helped her reclaim her family history. (Photograph by Molly Schwartzburg)