



# *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*

TEACHER INSTITUTE

## **Matthew Ashby, a Williamsburg Resident**

### **Introduction**

Eighteenth-century Williamsburg was a complex community of approximately two thousand people—men and women, adults, and children, Black and White, free and enslaved. We know a lot about some of these individuals and very little about others. In the community, only about 2% were considered gentry class—the uppermost level of society. About 52% of the population was enslaved. A very small percentage of free Black families lived in the city. The rest of the population were poor or middling sort white people.

Using the case study of Matthew Ashby, whose family lived in Williamsburg prior to the Revolutionary War, students will investigate primary sources and build a profile of this unique Williamsburg family.

**NOTE:** There is a “surprise” element to this lesson—students should discover the details of Ashby’s life from the materials they read, not from a prior teacher-led discussion. Do *not* give away anything about the Ashby family until after the students have read the primary sources!

### **Language and Terminology**

When working with primary sources, it is important to understand the language and terminology used, in the context of the time in which the source was created. While definitions may remain the same over time, their meanings may change in a given lexicon. Three terms found commonly in eighteenth-century sources that need contextualization are mulatto, negro, and slave. We will address each here.

Matthew Ashby is described in his petition to the Governor’s Council in 1769 as “a free Mulatto.” The term mulatto at the time refers to a multiracial person, most often (and in Matthew’s case) of African and European decent. We know this term to be offensive today and therefore only use it in the context of the primary source.

The term negro was a commonly used noun during this period. The Ashby children attended the Bray School for negro children. At the time it was not intended as an insult, simply as a designation of color; negro is the Latin term for black. We only use this term in context of the primary source.

Slave is a noun indicating that being enslaved was the defining characteristic of a person’s identity. The adjective enslaved is used to describe someone’s place in society, rather than defining them by their position. Therefore, when we refer to these individuals as enslaved persons, not as slaves, we return agency to their lives and choices.

We have not removed or replaced these terms in primary sources. To do so is rewriting history, and not only compromises the source, but also marginalizes the people whose story is being told. Our intention and mission is to rewrite how history is *told*. Colonial Williamsburg embraces the need to share a more complete, diverse, and inclusive history of our nation.

## Background

### The City

Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia, the government center of the largest and wealthiest British North American mainland colony. It was (and is) also home to the College of William and Mary. As such, the small city largely functioned to support the government. Men who directly served the government, like Thomas Jefferson, could be found there. But so could clerks, tavern keepers, blacksmiths, milliners, footmen, cooks—all types of people were needed to keep a capital city running.

### A Word about Money

This lesson requires a little background knowledge about the money of the time. The British monetary system of pounds, shillings, and pence was used. There were 20 shillings in a pound, 12 pence in a shilling.

Pounds are represented by the same pound symbol the British use today. Shillings are represented by a small s, and pence are represented by a small d. When putting a price together, they go in the order of largest to smallest, pounds, shillings, then pence, sometimes with no symbol, just dots to separate them. So, when you are looking at prices, you will see something like, for example:

3..15..0 would be 3 pounds, 15 shillings, and 0 pence

But what is that worth? Making comparisons is a bit difficult: but we can say that a middling sort person, like a blacksmith, would earn about 25 to 40 pounds per year. So, you can use that as a baseline annual income for a middling sort person.

### The Ashby Family

Matthew Ashby and his brother, John, were the sons of Mary Ashby, a white indentured servant in the household of Williamsburg tavern keeper James Shields.<sup>1</sup> Their father was an unidentified man of African descent; the records do not say whether he was a free Black or enslaved man. The two boys were born free then became indentured because of two separate Virginia Laws. A 1662 Virginia law that declared that the status of the mother determined the status of the child. “Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> York County Orders and Wills, Book 17, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, Williamsburg, Virginia, 509. Mary was in the service of James Shields, as his inventory in 1727 lists mother and two sons, John and Matthew.

<sup>2</sup> William Waller Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 2 (New York: R.&W.& G. Bartow, 1823), 170. Available online at <http://www.vagenweb.org/hening/vol02-09.htm> (accessed May 19, 2009).

A recodification in 1705, An act concerning Servants and Slaves states “And if any women servant shall be delivered of a bastard child within the time of her service . . . That in recompence of the loss and trouble occasioned her master or mistress thereby, she shall for every such offence, serve her said master or owner one whole years after her time by indenture . . . shall be expired; or pay her said master or owner, one thousand pounds of tobacco . . . And if a free christian white woman shall have such bastard child, by a negro, or mulatto, for every such offence, she shall . . . pay to the church-wardens for the time being . . . or be by them sold for five years to the use aforesaid: And in both the said cases, the church-wardens shall bind the said child to be a servant, until it shall be thirty-one years of age.”<sup>3</sup>

Because Mary Ashby was a free white woman, Matthew and John were born free. However, when they were born, Mary was indentured so they too were bonded in service until they were 31 years old.

Colonial records do not tell us to whom Matthew was bound, but after being released from his indenture Matthew worked in and around Williamsburg as a carter, a person who hauled goods from one place to another. He may have learned to ride, handle horses, and drive carts and wagons during his long years as a servant.<sup>4</sup> Ashby gained the trust of Virginia’s Governor Botetourt, who hired him to carry diplomatic papers to agents involved in negotiations with Indians in the less settled frontier areas of western Virginia.<sup>5</sup>

Though the union was not recognized by law, Matthew Ashby was married to an enslaved woman named Ann, who belonged to Samuel Spurr of Williamsburg. By 1764, Matthew and Ann had two children, Harry, and John. Matthew wanted to obtain their freedom, but a 1723 Virginia law had ended private manumission by deed or will, stating that “no negro, mullatto, or Indian slaves, shall be set free, upon any pretence whatsoever, except for some meritorious services, to be adjudged and allowed by the governor and council.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, Matthew Ashby had to work through a lengthy process to free his family. First, he had to come to an agreement with Spurr to buy Ann and his two children. The price Spurr set was 150 pounds, which Matthew seems to have saved and paid by 1764. By purchasing his wife and children, Matthew became their owner. If he wanted to free them, Virginia law required him to petition the governor’s Council for permission to manumit, or free, Ann and his children. Before Matthew could free his family, Ann gave birth to Mary, their only daughter, on October 24, 1764. Mary’s birth was recorded in the Bruton Parish Register. The entry describes Mary as a “free mulatta,” which shows that even though by law Mary was owned by her father, the community considered her free. Harry, John, and Mary attended the Bray School in

---

<sup>3</sup> W.W. Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Thomas DeSilver, 1823), 86–88. Available online at <http://www.vagenweb.org/hening/vol03-06.htm> (accessed May 19, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ashby owned several saddles, a saddle bag, three horses, and a cart harness for two horses. York County, Virginia, Wills and Inventories, Vol. 22 (1771–1783), pp. 34–36. Some biographies of Matthew Ashby say that he was a carpenter. He probably was someone who could do several different kinds of work including carpentry, but there is no direct evidence that he did skilled or plain carpentry work.

<sup>5</sup> Botetourt, Norborne Berkeley, Baron de. “Officials Letters of Norborne Berkeley Baron de Botetourt, Governor of Virginia, 1768–1770” Diane McGaan, ed., (M.A. Thesis, College of William and Mary, 1971), p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> W.W. Hening, ed. *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 4. (Richmond, VA. 1820) pp. 126–134. Available online at <http://www.vagenweb.org/hening/vol04-06.htm> (accessed May 19, 2009).

Williamsburg, a school sponsored by The Dr. Bray Associates of London, a philanthropic organization in England closely associated with the Church of England (Anglican). Instruction at the school was based on the Bible, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, and other religious materials sent from England to schoolmistress Ann Wager. Children, ranging in age from three to ten, learned to read and possibly write, to speak properly, and to recite the Anglican catechism. The girls, including Mary Ashby, were also taught to sew and knit. Mrs. Wager was also instructed to take the children to Bruton Parish Church for regular services.<sup>7</sup>

In November 1769, Ashby did petition the governor and Council for Ann and his children's freedom, claiming that "she has been a faithful and diligent Wife ever since marriage and praying that he may be permitted to set her and his Children free." The Council approved his petition stating that they "were of the opinion, that the said Ann, John, and Mary were deserving of their freedom, and it was order'd that the said Matthew Ashby have leave to manumit and set them free."<sup>8</sup> It is likely that the Ashby's son, Harry, had died by 1769 because he was not named in the petition nor are there any other references to him.

In the autumn of 1770, a runaway advertisement for an enslaved man named Sam in the *Virginia Gazette* "forewarn[s] all persons from harbouring or entertaining the said slave . . ." but cautions that Sam, "pretends to lay claim in freedom, and is now harbored at one Matthew Ashby's."<sup>9</sup> Helping Sam would put Ashby's family in great danger in a slave society like Virginia. Ashby's reputation for trustworthiness in the Williamsburg community may have protected him in this situation.

On or around April 12, 1771, less than two years after freeing his wife and children, Matthew Ashby died at approximately the age of forty-four. In his will, Ashby stated that "I resign my soul to God trusting in the merits and mediation of my dear Redeemer Jesus Christ for the pardon of all my sins & as to my worldly goods which it has pleased God to bless me . . ." and requested that "my good friend John Blair," former president of the Governor's Council, be his executor and see to the "maintenance & support of my loving wife Ann Ashby & for her education and maintenance of my two children." John Blair had been president of the Governor's Council for many years, including when Matthew sent in the petition to manumit his family, and had served as acting governor twice. Blair refused the executorship, perhaps because of advancing age or because he was hesitant to accept the responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Ashby's estate was inventoried at a value of 80 pounds, 18 shillings, and 6 pence. Although a relatively small estate, it nevertheless included certain fashionable luxury items such as a silver watch and a tea board. The inventory also listed four horses and four cows, some furniture, and laundry and candle making equipment, suggesting that Ann may have been a laundress and possibly made candles for sale or home use.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Ann, John, and Mary

---

<sup>7</sup> Van Horne, pp. 189–192, 241–2, 277–8.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin J. Hillman, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia: June 20, 1754–May 3, 1775*, vol. 6 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1966), 334–335.

<sup>9</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), October 25, 1770.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Ashby's Will, 15 April 1771, York County, Virginia, Wills and Inventories, Vol. 22, pp. 25–26.

<sup>11</sup> Inventory of the Estate of Matthew Ashby, 17 June 1771, York County, Virginia, Wills and Inventories, Vol. 22, pp. 34–36.

Ashby did not have to be listed in the inventory, and their value appraised as his human property, was Ashby's greatest legacy to his family.

Ashby's widow, Ann, was not unmarried for long. She married George Jones; by January 30, 1772, the *Virginia Gazette* carried George Jones' notice that "my Wife Anne and myself cannot agree in the Management of our Affairs." Jones "forewarns all persons from giving her Credit on my Account, as I will not pay any of her Contractions after the Date hereof. The Debtors to the Estate of Matthew Ashby, deceased, are desired to make speedy Payment, that I may be enabled to pay the Creditors, who are desired to bring in their Accounts against the said Estate."<sup>12</sup>

Little is known about the fate of Matthew's children, including a possible fourth child, also named Matthew, who would have been born immediately following Matthew Ashby's death. There are several references in account books between 1772 and 1775 which suggest that Ann was working as a laundress. The Orderly book of the Second Virginia Regiment and Robert Carter's 1775 account book also mention Ann as working as a laundress for the regiment while they were encamped at the College of William and Mary. The last mention of Ann in the public records is the 1782 United States census.

The Ashby's freedom came more than a decade before the Virginia legislature legalized private manumission in 1782, increasing the size of the free Black population in the state.

Through Matthew's brother, John, the Ashby family continue to live in the Williamsburg area today.

## Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Use primary sources to make inferences and draw conclusions about historical events, people, and objects.
- Discover how historians compare primary sources to gain a more thorough picture of a historical event or figure.

## Materials

- Graphic Organizer: Researching a Williamsburg Resident
- Inventory of the Estate of Matthew Ashby
- Matthew Ashby's Will
- Virginia Governor's Council Response to Matthew Ashby's Petition
- Glossary: Matthew Ashby (optional based on level of student vocabulary)

## Setting the Stage

**NOTE:** It is important to not share with students any information about Matthew Ashby before you begin this lesson.

1. To assess their prior knowledge, ask students to define primary and secondary sources. Explain to students that primary sources are original documents, artifacts, records, or other materials created by individuals who participated in or witnessed past events.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), January 30, 1772.

Explain that secondary sources are accounts or interpretations of people or events based on primary sources.

2. Ask students to give examples of both primary and secondary sources. Examples of primary sources include letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper articles from the time period in question, oral history interviews, documents, photographs, artifacts, or anything else that provides a first-hand account about a person or event. Examples of secondary sources include history textbooks, books about historical events, biographies, and reference works in print and online.
3. Discuss with students the various primary sources that are available to us from the eighteenth century. Brainstorm the kinds of information we can glean from letters, diaries, newspapers, and other sources.

### Strategy

1. Tell the students that, for this lesson, they will need to think like a historian. Often a historian will find only one document about a person and they will have to try and learn as much as they can about that person based on just that one piece of evidence.
2. Introduce students to the three types of primary sources that they will be using for the activity.
  - Inventories – In/ the eighteenth century, after a person died, a listing of all their belongings and what those belongings are worth was created, so that any debts the person had could be paid. These inventories were completed by three individuals appointed by the county court. These individuals were often peers of the deceased in their community.
  - Wills – Written by individuals giving instructions on how their belongings are to be handled after their deaths. (Inform students that most people in the eighteenth century did not write wills.)
  - Petitions – Petitions were written to the government asking for something. A petition could be written asking for the changing of a law, the creation of a new law, or as in this case, a special concession to be made by the Governor’s Council.
3. Divide the class into three groups. Give each student a Graphic Organizer: Researching a Williamsburg Resident and a copy of the Glossary: Matthew Ashby (optional). To keep the groups from discussing their documents with each other, you may want to have them go to different areas of the room.
4. Distribute primary sources to each group: Group One receives Matthew Ashby’s estate inventory; Group Two receives Matthew Ashby’s will; and Group Three receives the Virginia Governor’s Council Response to Matthew Ashby’s Petition. Allow time for students to read and discuss their assigned primary source document. Students should complete their Graphic Organizer: Researching a Williamsburg Resident to the extent their source allows. None of the sources have All of the information. You will want to

circulate among the groups to help with language, definitions, and background knowledge about the eighteenth century. DO NOT share with students any specifics about Matthew Ashby's life—this lesson works best if they uncover that information themselves.

5. After reconvening the class, ask each group what they learned about Matthew Ashby from the document they read. Ask them to NOT share any information until it is their group's turn. [*NOTE: It is essential to discuss the documents in a specific order.*] Start the inventory. Tell the class to imagine that this group of historians found their document first. Next, talk about the will. Finally, discuss the response to the petition.
6. Students will build on their knowledge of Matthew Ashby, to help complete any missing information after all documents have been revealed, please refer to the background information included with this lesson.

### **Lesson Extension**

1. Assign each student an eighteenth-century Williamsburg resident to research (see *Through Different Eyes: Biographies of Eighteenth-Century Residents*). Give each student the name of his/her Williamsburg resident, the primary and secondary sources for that person, and another copy of the Researching a Williamsburg Resident graphic organizer. Ask students to read the primary and secondary sources and use them to hypothesize about the person they were assigned. They may use the Graphic Organizer: *Researching a Williamsburg Resident* to assist them in their research.

*The Bob and Marion Wilson Teacher Institute of Colonial Williamsburg is supported in part by the William and Gretchen Kimball Young Patriots Fund.*

**Graphic Organizer: Researching a Williamsburg Resident**

<b>Document Name</b> _____	<b>Student's Name</b> _____
Full name of the person _____ Birth date _____ Death date _____ Age at death _____ Name of spouse _____ Names of children _____ _____ _____ _____	Write a brief description of this person's occupation. How do you know, or what information did you use to infer that occupation?
What is this person's social level? How do you know?	
Using the known facts, what are some possible assumptions you can make about this person?	



**Inventory of the Estate of Matthew Ashby****Deceased viz.**

1 Bed bolster pair sheets and Counterpin	6..0..0
1 Do. Do.	5..0..0
1 Do. Do. and 1 Sheet	3..15..0
1 Do. and Bedstead and Rug	3..0..0
6 old Chairs	0..10..0
1 Round Table	0..10..0
2 Ironing Tables	0..12..6
1 Tea Board	0..5..0
3 Tea Spoons and Tongs	0..12..6
1 Chest and 2 Trunks	1..10..0
a parcel of old Books	0..8..0
2 Looking Glasses and 1 Cupboard	0..10..0
1 Silver Watch	3..0..0
Parcel old Pewter	2..0..0
5 Iron potts and 2 Kettles	5..0..0
2 Tea Kettles	0..15..0
1 Marble Morter	0..10..0
1 Iron Do.	0..2..0
1 Skillet	0..5..0
Parcel Tin Ware	0..15..0
4 Tubs and 8 pales	1..0..0
7 Trays	1..5..0
2 Soap Jars	0..15..0

4 pair flat Irons	0..12..6
1 Spit Grid Iron frying pan Ladle and Skimmer	0..7..6
1 Pine Table	0..2..6
26 Candle Moulds and Frame	2..0..0
5 Stone Jars and 7 Juggs	1..10..0
1 pair steelyards	0..7..6
4 Saddles	2..10..0
1 pair Cards and spinning Wheels	0..10..0
2 Chests	0..15..0
1 pair saddle Bags	0..5..0
Parcel Carpenters Tools	1..10..0
1 Bay Horse	10..0..0
1 Do.	5..0..0
1 Do.	3..0..0
2 Cows 1 Yearling and 1 Calf	10..0..0
Cart harness for 2 horses	0..15..0
	£77..5..0
147 lb Bacon @ 6D.	3..13..6
	£80..18..6

Wm. Pierce, Jonathan Prosser, Cutht. Hubbard

Returned into York County Court the 14th day of June 1771 and Ordered to be recorded

Examd                      Teste                      Thom. Everard C. Cur.

Inventory of the Estate of Matthew Ashby, 17 June 1771, York County, Virginia, Wills, and Inventories,  
Vol. 22, pp. 34–36.

**Matthew Ashby's Will**

15 April 1771 [Probate]

In the name of God Amen, Matthew Ashby being sick of body but of sound sense & memory do make and ordain this my last will & testament in manner following. I resign my soul to God trusting in the merits & mediation of my dear Redeemer Jesus Christ for the pardon of all my sins & as to my worldly goods which it has pleased God to bless me with I give & bequeath the whole after my funeral expenses & just debts are paid to my good friend John Blair, Esq. In trust for the maintenance & support of my loving wife Ann Ashby & for her education and maintenance of my two children John & Mary Ashby in a good christian way with the approbation of my said trustee to whom I hereby appoint my exr. Of this my will IN WITNESS whereof I hereunto set my hand & seal this 25th day of November 1769 in Williamsburg.

Matt. Ashby

his mark

Matthew Ashby's Will, 15 April 1771, York County, Virginia, Wills, and Inventories, Vol. 22, pp. 25–26.

**Virginia Governor's Council Response to Matthew Ashby's Petition**

27 November 1769

On the Petition of Matthew Ashby, a free Mulatto setting forth that he had two Children by his present wife Ann Ashby, while she was a Slave to Samuel Spurr, that he bought her and the two Children of the said Spurr for one hundred and fifty pounds, that he has now two children alive by her John and Mary, that she has been a faithful and diligent Wife ever since marriage, and praying that he may be permitted to set her and his Children free; the Board being satisfied therein, were of opinion, that the said Ann, John and Mary were deserving of their freedom, and it was order'd that the said Matthew Ashby have leave to manumit and set them free.

Benjamin J. Hillman, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia: June 20, 1754–May 3, 1775*, vol. 6 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1966), 334–335.

**Glossary: Matthew Ashby**

**approbation** – approval

**bedstead** – frame of a bed

**bequeath** – to give by will

**bolster** – long pillow

**cards** – tools for preparing fibers (such as flax or wool) for spinning into yarn

**Council** – twelve men who advised the governor; also the upper house of the legislature

**counterpin** – counterpane; a coverlet

**cupboard** – table or cabinet for cups

**do. or Do.** – ditto, the same as previous

**Esq.** – abbreviation of Esquire, a title allowed by courtesy to all who are regarded as gentlemen

**Exr.** – abbreviation of executor, one who carries out the orders of a will

**hereunto** – to this document

**looking glasses** – mirrors

**maintenance** – food, clothing, medical care, etc.

**manumit** – to release from slavery

**mediation** – intercession on behalf of another

**morter (mortar)** – a cup-shaped instrument, usually of stone or pottery, in which ingredients are pounded with a pestle

**mulatto** – An outdated term for a multiracial person, usually of mixed African and European descent. We know this term to be offensive today and therefore only use it in the context of the primary source

**pales** – boards

**pardon** – forgiveness

**pounds** – units of British money. One pound equaled 20 shillings or 240 pence; denoted by the symbol £ before the numeral. (No pound coin existed.)

**redeemer** – one who saves from sin

**rug** – a bed cover resembling a colorful “shag rug,” similar to a heavy comforter

**skillet** – frying pan with feet to set over hot coals

**steelyards** – balance for weighing objects

**tea board** – stylish table for serving tea

**testament** – formal declaration

**tongs** – a grasping device, usually of two pieces joined at one end by a pivot or hinge, used to pick up objects (such as sugar cubes)

**viz. or Viz.** – abbreviation for *videlicet*, the Latin term meaning “that is to say” or “namely”

**witness** – one who was present at an event or transaction and can testify to its having taken place