Exploring the "Confederate Slave Payrolls"

During the U.S. Civil War, the Confederate Army required enslavers to loan their enslaved people to the military. Throughout the Confederacy from Florida to Virginia, these enslaved people served as cooks and laundresses, labored in deadly conditions to mine potassium nitrate to create gunpowder, worked in ordnance factories, and dug the extensive defensive trench networks that defended cities such as Petersburg, Virginia.

Confederate breastworks in front of Petersburg, Virginia, 1865. National Archives Identifier 524565

To track this extensive network of thousands of enslaved people and the pay their enslavers received for their lease, the Confederate Quartermaster Department created the
This series, **comprising nearly 6,000 payrolls for enslaved labor**, sheds light on the lives of enslaved people loaned to the Confederate Army during the Civil War, and may provide a wealth of genealogical information relating to the names and home counties of African Americans.

The payrolls show the time period covered, the Confederate officer under whom the enslaved people were employed, the place of service, names of the enslaver, names and occupations of the hired enslaved person, number of days employed, daily rate of wages, amount paid, and the signature of the person receiving the payment.

For example, this payroll record shows that for each day of March 1862, a man named Ben cooked for the Confederate military stationed at Pinners Point, VA, **earning 60 cents a day** that would go to his enslaver.
Prior to the Civil War, Moses Hunt was a field laborer at a plantation called White Hill, which is now partially protected in the modern boundary of Petersburg National Battlefield. "Confederate Slave Payroll 1099" shows that Charles Friend hired Moses and another man named Henry to construct earthworks at Williamsburg in the spring of 1862.

Unusual among these "Confederate Slave Payrolls," the Ashley Ferry Nitre Works, Charleston Nitre Works, and Nitre Works District No. 4 all employed enslaved women as laborers. During the Civil War, the manufacture of gunpowder became a serious concern for the Confederacy. One of the ways the Confederacy acquired potassium nitrate, a critical element of gunpowder, was through creating “nitre beds,” large rectangular pits filled with rotted manure and straw and covered weekly with urine and liquid from privies and cesspools. The people employed by the Confederacy to do this noxious work were enslaved.

Learn more about the enslaved women of the Confederate Nitre Works on the Pieces of History blog.
The enslaved men, women, and children named on this payroll were put to work at the Ashley Ferry Nitre Works in South Carolina. "Confederate Slave Payroll 4994" – Ashley Ferry Nitre Works, April 1864. National Archives Identifier 121637367

You may view the full series of "Confederate Slave Payrolls" in the National Archives Catalog: National Archives Identifier 719477

Many thanks to Rachel Bartgis, conservator technician at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. This feature was adapted from Rachel’s posts on the Pieces of History blog:

- Confederate Slave Payrolls
- Enslaved Women of the Confederate Nitre Works

Learn more about the “Confederate Slave Payrolls” in the National Archives News article by Victoria Macchi, “Confederate Slave Payrolls Shed Light on Lives of 19th-Century African American Families.”

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Celebrating Constitution Day

September 17 is designated as Constitution Day and Citizenship Day to commemorate the signing of the U.S. Constitution in Philadelphia on September 17, 1787. The National Archives celebrates the 234th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution with special virtual programs for all ages, including book talks, public programs, and interactive webinars. The National Archives is the permanent home of the original Constitution.

See our Celebrating Constitution Day page for an array of related online resources.

George Washington is about to receive the draft of the Constitution from James Madison in this mural by Barry Faulkner in the National Archives Building in Washington, DC

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Start your research on History Hub
Have a question? Find your answer on History Hub!

For those looking to conduct research or learn more, we encourage you to browse recent posts and questions on History Hub’s African American Records Community.

Related posts include:

**Where do I search for references of enslaved people in estate records?**

**Why are there no records of slave manifests after 1860?**

**How can I research records of slaves and their owners?**

Has Constitution Day inspired you to read up on this founding document? See these related questions:

**How many drafts of the Constitution were written before it was finalized?**
See our recent newsletter for more details, information, and instructions about using History Hub for your research.

Make History Hub your first stop! You can ask—or answer—questions on History Hub, or see if your question has already been answered.

COVID-19 Update

The National Archives is committed to the health and safety of our visitors and staff. We are closely monitoring the situation regarding COVID-19, and we are working with public health officials and our counterpart agencies to monitor and respond to the evolving conditions and following CDC guidelines.

For more information, visit https://www.archives.gov/coronavirus

Questions or comments? Email us at catalog@nara.gov.