

A Just and True Return: Pennsylvania's Surviving County Slave Registries, 1780-1826

Article Authors

Cory James Young, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, cory.james.young@gmail.com

Dataset Creators

Cory James Young, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, cory.james.young@gmail.com

Project Website and/or Data Links (if applicable)

<https://coryjamesyoung.com/justandtrue/>

Thumbnail Image for article & caption (include link here if relevant; include image as a *separate* attachment)

[Engrossed copy](#) of the 1780 "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery." The clerk misjudged the size of his handwriting and was forced to hyphenate the word "Abolition," symbolically cleaving the bill's central promise. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania History & Museum Commission.

Citations for publications based on this research (if applicable)

Young, Cory James. "From North to Natchez during the Age of Gradual Abolition." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 143, no. 2 (April 2019): 117-39.

Young, Cory James. "For Life or Otherwise: Abolition and Slavery in South Central Pennsylvania, 1780-1847." PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2021.

A Just and True Return: Pennsylvania's Surviving County Slave Registries, 1780-1826

Review Type (keep one)

Peer Review

Abstract

A Just and True Return (JATR) contains information about more than 6,300 Black people and their enslavers principally taken from extant registries from fifteen Pennsylvania counties: Adams, Allegheny, Bedford, Berks, Bucks, Centre, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Fayette, Lancaster, Northampton, Washington, and Westmoreland. It also includes a handful of records from four counties—Crawford, Franklin, Philadelphia, and York—whose registries have not been located, but which can be partially reconstructed from a variety of other sources. Implemented during the Revolutionary War, Pennsylvania's "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" mandated that enslavers register "any Negro or Mulatto slave or servant for life or till the age of thirty one years" with their county clerk by November 1, 1780 in order to continue holding them in lifetime bondage. A supplemental act passed in 1788 extended this obligation to the children of registered women, granting enslavers six months to register newborns as their property for twenty-eight years. When complete, each entry provides the name, place of residence, date of birth, race, and sex of registered people; the date they were registered; and the name and occupation of their enslavers. Slightly less than two-thirds of the entries describe people whom enslavers held in lifetime slavery, while more than one-third describe children they held in term slavery. An ongoing project, JATR is the first effort to compile all surviving registration data in a single location.

Description of Dataset (footnotes can be used)

A Just and True Return (JATR) contains information about more than 6,300 Black people and their enslavers principally taken from extant registries from fifteen Pennsylvania counties: Adams, Allegheny, Bedford, Berks, Bucks, Centre, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Fayette, Lancaster, Northampton, Washington, and Westmoreland. It also includes a handful of records from four counties—Crawford, Franklin, Philadelphia, and York—whose registries have not been located, but which can be partially reconstructed from a variety of other sources. An

ongoing project, JATR is the first effort to compile all surviving registration data in a single location.

Implemented during the Revolutionary War, Pennsylvania's "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" mandated that enslavers register "any Negro or Mulatto slave or servant for life or till the age of thirty one years" with their county clerk by November 1, 1780 in order to continue holding them in lifetime bondage. A supplemental act passed in 1788 extended this obligation to the children of registered women, granting enslavers six months to register newborns as their property for twenty-eight years. Pennsylvania's gradual abolition legislation resulted in the construction of an archive of thousands and thousands of unfree people: those who were registered as slaves for life and those who registered as slaves for a term.

Pennsylvania term slavery was a modified form of Black chattel slavery. Enslavers developed the institution through innovative applications of colonial statutes and favorable readings of gradual abolition law. Enslavers understood that the young Black people they held in bondage for twenty-eight years were like lifetime slaves. Enslavers regularly treated them as property rather than as servants who owed an obligation and purchased, separated, and bequeathed them accordingly. When they advertised their sale in newspapers, enslavers were as likely to declare that they owned people with time to serve as they were to declare that they owned their time. Contributing to this elision was the fact that enslavers provided county clerks with the same information about the children they registered as term slaves as the people they had registered as lifetime slaves. Although the Pennsylvania legislature had intended to create clear records distinguishing these two groups, the repetitive act of registering people as property helped to reinscribe existing structures of white supremacy. In an ironic twist, the very legislation that purported to advance slavery's abolition in Pennsylvania generated thousands of legal documents that positively established its existence.

Nearly all of the data in JATR are derived from four kinds of sources, as can be seen in the accompanying citation list. The first are individual registrations, also called returns. These documents were produced by enslavers or their agents and contain the most descriptive information about the people they registered. Significant numbers of returns have survived from Cumberland and Fayette counties. The second are manuscript slave registries. These volumes were produced by clerks and constitute a convenient record of a county's individual registrations. Some clerks, like those in Chester and Dauphin counties, copied down the returns verbatim, while others, like those in Adams and Washington counties, summarized or tabulated the information. The third are transcribed slave registries. These are copies of manuscript slave registries produced at a later date and are the reason such complete data exist for Allegheny and Lancaster counties. Finally, the fourth are published county histories. While these are the least detailed sources, they remain invaluable as a record of registered people who lived in far-flung northeastern and southwestern Pennsylvania, or what was then Northampton and Westmoreland counties. I use the phrase "registered people" rather than "enslaved people" to acknowledge that this category contains those who were enslaved for life and those who were enslaved for a term. The phrase also nods to the fact that registered people sometimes used

these documents to assert their liberty. In these moments, slave registrations became freedom papers.

3,392 of the 6,312 registrations are complete, meaning that the majority of entries provide the name, place of residence, date of birth, race, and sex of the registered person; the date they were registered; and the name and occupation of their enslavers. Slightly less than two-thirds (3,937) of the entries describe people whom enslavers held in lifetime slavery, while more than one-third (2,347) describe children they held in term slavery. Sex is clearly stated in over 90% (5,723) of entries with an almost perfectly balanced sex ratio (2,859 males and 2,864 females). For the 10% (589) of entries that do not clearly state sex, given names are a useful proxy. Race is clearly stated as either “Negro” or “Mulatto” in over 90% (5,701) of entries, with the vast majority of registered people—85% (4,844)—being described as “Negro.” While only 15% (857) of registered people are described as “Mulatto,” this is not evenly spread across space and time. For example, term-enslaved people were more likely to be registered as “Mulatto” than their parents who were enslaved for life. This can be partially explained by the fact that term-enslaved people were more likely to be registered individually, whereas those who were enslaved for life were often registered as part of a racially monolithic group of “Negroes.”

The two-thousand-plus registrations of term-enslaved people highlight the danger of relying on federal census records to analyze the transition from slavery to freedom in Pennsylvania during the age of gradual abolition. U.S. marshals, forced to choose between sorting Black people into the column for “slaves” or the column for “all other free persons,” obscured the existence of a generation whose legal status resembled lifetime slavery in its hereditary, longevity, and racist restriction. JATR is an argument for the transformation, rather than the elimination, of Black bondage in early national Pennsylvania.

The title of the project comes from a Cumberland County term slave registration. In late summer 1788, a Shippensburg farmer named Robert Peebles provided “a Just and true return of the names and ages of my Negro’s” to the county clerk. Under Pennsylvania law, Palm, Ruth, Nell, Pegg, and Jo belonged to Robert until they turned twenty-eight. While it is rare that these returns clearly identify family relationships, there are often clues. For instance, Robert only registered a single person as a lifetime slave in 1780: a twenty-three-year-old woman named Peg. This dataset, then, provides a rich starting point for the reconstruction of Black family trees. JATR is intended to serve as a kind of reparative justice. The data contained within these documents—these slave returns—must be returned to the descendants of those whom they purport to describe.

Dates of Data Collection

2016-2022

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Pennsylvania
Georgia
Maryland
North Carolina

Temporal Coverage

1780-1845

Documents Types (retain all that apply; delete rest)

- 1. Census or Register:** A document including an enumeration or survey of a population. Includes slave schedule.
These documents are clearly a register. If what follows is unclear or unhelpful, this is my principal answer.
- 2. Bill of Sale, Invoice, or Receipt:** A document that records the sale, transfer, or hire of enslaved person(s), labor services, real property, and other assets.
Pennsylvania's slave registries functioned as a kind of receipt that provided proof of the right of an enslaver to continue holding a person in bondage.
- 3. Freedom or Emancipation Certificate:** A legal document certifying the free status of a formerly enslaved person or persons.
By contrast, registered people and their allies looked for defects in individual returns, which, if found, could transform them into a kind of freedom certificate.

Sources

Register of Negroes and Mulattoes, 1800-1820, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA,
www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Adams/r47-SlaveRecords-AdamsInterface.htm#AdamsSlave

Schenkel, Edwin N. "The Negro in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania from 1789 to 1813."
Unpublished Manuscript. 1913. Detre Library and Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA

Bedford County Slave Registrations
Records of Negro and Mulatto Children and Miscellaneous Slave Records, 1780-1834, RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission,

Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Bedford/r47-SlaveRecords-Bedford3rdGroup.htm#bedford3

Schaeffer, Paul N. "Slavery in Berks County." *The Historical Review of Berks County* 9, no. 4 (July 1941): 110-5, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/siebert/id/18980>.

Bucks County Register of Slaves, [ca. 1783-1830], RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Bucks/r47-SlaveRecords-BucksInterface.htm

"A Census of the Slaves in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1780-1815," Box 3, Folder 8, Slavery Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection (MS 717). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library

Slave and Slave Owners Register, Clerk of Courts Records, Cumberland County Archives, Carlisle, PA <https://ccweb.ccpa.net/archives/Holdings?PSID=1819>)

Delaware County Slave Dockets, in the possession of the Delaware County Bar Association, on display at Delaware County Community College, 2022, <https://www.dccc.edu/dockets-exhibit>

"Negroes - Indentures & Manumissions, 1792-1854," Box 11A-B, Folder 2A, Historical Society of Pennsylvania miscellaneous collection (Collection 425), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Slaves in Lancaster County in 1780, MG-240: African American Records Collection, Series 1: Slave Register, Folder 17: Handwritten Copy of Slave Register, LancasterHistory, Lancaster, PA

Negro Register, 1782-1851 (bulk 1782-1820), RG-47, Records of the County Governments, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r47-SlaveRecords/r47-SlaveRecords-Washington/r47-SlaveRecords-WashingtonInterface.htm

Appendix A in Albert, George Dallas, ed. *History of the County of Westmoreland, Pennsylvania: With Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men*. Philadelphia, PA: L. H. Everts & Co., 1882

Methodology for Dataset Creation (footnotes can be used)

There is no single archive for Pennsylvania's extant county slave registries. Instead, records are scattered throughout multiple repositories, in multiple formats, in at least three states. The Pennsylvania State Archives provide the most centralized collection, having digitized the microfilm records from eight counties, but their website lacks metadata and search functionality. Ancestry.com, meanwhile, has made these records searchable, but locks them

behind a paywall. Moreover, both of these institutions are missing thousands of records from more than half a dozen counties. The purpose of this project, then, is to aggregate and make freely available data from as many county registries as possible.

JATR began with my discovery that the lifetime and term slave registries as well as hundreds of individual registrations exist for Cumberland County. Not only have these materials survived, but hardworking county archivists have digitized them all—both manuscripts and each return. Their labors made this project possible, as my initial lack of anything resembling a data collection plan meant that I had to return to the sources several times. Only once I learned that Lancaster County also boasts a complete set of records did I begin to develop a deliberate method, hoping to facilitate comparative analysis. It was also at this point that I began to search for other county slave registries, my interest piqued by their seeming rarity in scholarship on Pennsylvania slavery. One explanation for this oversight is that the registry for Philadelphia has not been located, meaning that the majority of existing studies have relied on a different set of sources.

This search for extant registries required creative guesswork. I mined local histories, county journals, and regional scholarship for citations. I searched databases for references to “RG47,” Pennsylvania’s code for the records of county governments. I checked the Library of Congress, WorldCat, and ArchiveGrid, and emailed archivists and librarians, clerks and prothonotaries. Each effort pointed in a new direction. Some registries were preserved in historical societies, others in university libraries, and others still in nineteenth-century publications. The lack of uniformity made the process laborious, but the payoff energizing. The dataset has grown fivefold since its inception, expanding from around 1,250 entries in 2016 to more than 6,300 as of publication.

This is a dataset of Pennsylvania’s surviving county slave registries, meaning that the data currently replicate the shortcomings of their sources. Since an incomplete registration could be deemed defective, generating a cause of action for a registered person to sue for freedom, I have tried not to obscure this fact by supplying missing data from other sources.

Acknowledgments (esp. sources of funding)

Berks History Center
Cumberland County Historical Society
Cosmos Club Foundation
Historical Society of Pennsylvania
LancasterHistory
Library Company of Philadelphia
McNeil Center for Early American Studies

Data Documentation for “A Just and True Return: Pennsylvania’s Surviving County Slave Registries, 1780-1826” by Cory James Young

Heading	Definition
identifier	unique identifier assigned by project
registration county	county in which the registration occurred can differ from place of residence; and modern county. Spelling standardized.
place of residence	city, town, or village in which the registered person resided; can differ from registration county and modern county. Spelling standardized.
modern county	county in which the place of residence is located in the present, which helps to account for the fact that there were only eleven counties in 1780, while there are sixty-seven now. For example, Lebanon, now the seat of an eponymous county, was initially located in Lancaster and then Dauphin counties and consequently appears in both their registries. Distinguishing between “Registration County” and “Modern County” helps convey the geographic breadth of this data.
registration date	date when the enslaver registered the person they claimed as their property (occasionally only the year is known)
name of registered person	name of the registered person transcribed from the sources. Spelling clarifications are occasionally provided in brackets. Since the sources only supply the surnames of a few registered people, the data in this column are presented first name last name so as to reflect

	<p>the majority of entries, which are first name only.</p>
sex of registered person	<p>sex of the registered person (male, female, or unspecified) according to the registration taken from the sources. First name is a useful proxy when sex is unspecified.</p>
race of registered person	<p>race of the registered person according to the registration taken from the sources with standardized spellings. One exception is the designation "Likely Negro." This refers to individuals in Bucks and Westmoreland counties who appear in registries that only specified when a person was "Mulatto," which suggests that all others were "Negro."</p>
status of registered person	<p>legal status of the registered person under Pennsylvania gradual abolition law; nearly every registered person in this dataset was claimed as a lifetime slave or a term slave for twenty-eight years.</p>
date of birth of registered person	<p>date of birth of registered person according to the registration; nearly every instance of day-month-year comes directly from the sources. However, when only the year is supplied, this was calculated by subtracting a person's stated age from the registration year. For example, if a 1780 registration identified a person as thirty years old, their date of birth is given as 1750.</p>
name of enslaver	<p>name of the enslaver or their agent transcribed from the sources. Spelling clarifications are occasionally provided in brackets. Since the sources supply the surnames of nearly every enslaver,</p>

	the data in this column are presented last name first name.
occupation of enslaver	occupation of the enslaver according to the registration transcribed from the sources with standardized spellings