

# Ulysses S. Grant

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site  
7400 Grant Road  
Saint Louis, MO 63123



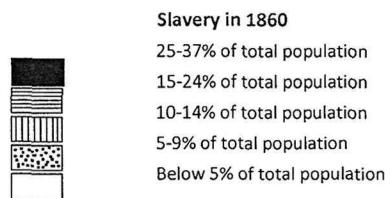
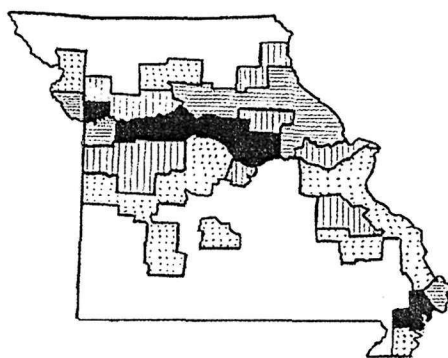
## Slavery at White Haven



### Introduction

The interpretation of slavery at White Haven is an important part of the mission of this historic site. Enslaved African American labor was central to the financial success of the plantation, and each white family that lived at the home prior to the Civil War owned enslaved humans. That includes Ulysses S. Grant, who lived at White Haven during the years 1854 to 1859 with his wife Julia, their children, and his in-laws. While Grant struggled to support his family as a farmer at White Haven, the enslaved laborers of White Haven endured their own struggles, including the pain of family separations, harsh work conditions, and legal restrictions that prevented them from enjoying basic human rights to education, movement, and self-ownership.

### The Setting



Most Missouri slaveholders owned less than ten enslaved laborers. In the Bootheel area, and along the fertile Missouri River valley known as “little Dixie,” there existed some large plantations with an intensive use of enslaved labor. Elsewhere, farms produced hemp, wheat, oats, hay, and corn. On many of these estates, the owner worked alongside his slaves to harvest the greatest economic benefit from the land.

Slavery was less entrenched in St. Louis city, where the African-American population was 2% in 1860, down from 25% in 1830. Enslaved people were often “hired out” by their masters. A portion of the wage was sometimes paid to the enslaved, allowing a measure of self-determination and in some cases the opportunity to purchase their freedom.

### Early Farm Residents and Slavery

Each of the farm’s early residents owned slaves during their tenure on the Gravois property. When Theodore and Anne Lucas Hunt purchased William Lindsay Long’s home in 1818, there existed “several good log cabins” on the property – potential quarters for the five slaves purchased earlier by Hunt. The work of Wallace, Andrew, Lydia, Loutette, and Adie would be an important part of the Hunts’ farming venture.

The Hunts sold the Gravois property to Frederick Dent in 1820, for the sum of \$6,000. Naming the property “White Haven” after his family home in Maryland, Colonel Dent considered himself a Southern gentleman with enslaved laborers to do the hard work of maintaining the plantation. According to the 1850 census, Colonel Dent owned thirty enslaved African Americans.

## Growing Up as a Slave

In 1830, half of the Dent slaves were under the age of ten. Henrietta, Sue, Ann, and Jeff, among others, played with the Dent children. Julia Dent recalled that they fished for minnows, climbed trees for bird nests, and gathered strawberries. However, the enslaved children also had chores such as feeding chickens and cows, and they mastered their assigned tasks as the white children went off to school. Returning home from boarding school, Julia noted the transition from playmate to servant. She recalled that the enslaved girls had “attained the dignity of white aprons.” These aprons symbolized servitude and a departure from the less structured days of childhood play.



Photo by L.D. Andrew, 1936, from an older image taken ca. 1880, Reproduced in John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House*

## Household Responsibilities



Enslaved adults performed household chores on the Dent plantation. Kitty and Rose served as nurses to Julia and Emma, while Mary Robinson became the family cook. The variety of foods prepared in her kitchen were praised by Julia:

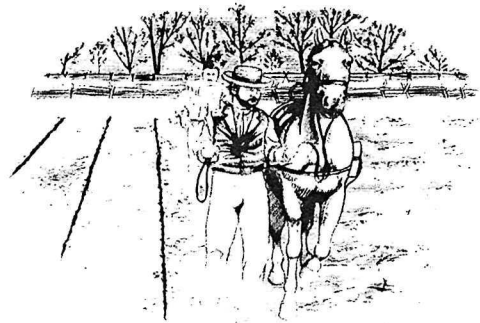
“Such loaves of beautiful snowy cake, such plates full of delicious Maryland biscuit, such exquisite custards and puddings, such omelettes, gumbo soup, and fritters.”

An enslaved man named “Old Bob,” who travelled with the Dents from Maryland in 1816, had the responsibility to keep the fires going in White Haven’s seven fireplaces. Julia thought Bob was careless to allow the embers to die out, as this forced him “to walk a mile to some neighbors and bring home a brand of fire from their backlog.” Such “carelessness” provided Bob and many other slaves an opportunity to escape their masters’ eyes.

## Tending the Farm

Enslaved labor was also used extensively in the farming and maintenance of the 850-acre plantation. Utilizing the “best improvements in farm machinery” owned by Colonel Dent, field hands plowed, sowed and reaped the wheat, oats, Irish potatoes and Indian corn grown on the estate. They also cared for the orchards and gardens, harvesting the fruits and vegetables for consumption by all who lived on the property. During Grant’s management of the farm, he worked side by side with Dan, one of the Dents’ enslaved people. Grant, along with Dan, felled trees and took firewood by wagon to sell to acquaintances in St. Louis. More than 75 horses, cattle, and pigs required daily attention, while grounds maintenance and numerous

remodeling projects on the main house and outbuildings utilized the skills of those in bondage.



## Personal Lives

Enslaved people claimed time for socializing amidst their chores. Corn shuckings provided one opportunity to come together to eat, drink, sing, and visit, often including enslaved people from nearby plantations. Participation in religious activities, individually or as a group, also provided a sense of integrity.

Julia remembered “Old Bob” going into the meadow to pray and sing. According to Lorenzo J. Greene, “St. Louis... was the only place in the state where the organized black church achieved any measure of success.” Whether the enslaved at White Haven were allowed to attend services is unknown.

## Freedom

In Mary Robinson’s July 24, 1885 recollections during an interview for the St. Louis *Republican* memorial to Grant following his death, she noted that “he always said he wanted to give his wife’s slaves their freedom as soon as he was able.” In 1859, Grant freed William Jones, the only slave he is known to have owned. During the Civil War, some slaves at White

Haven simply walked off, as they did on many plantations in both Union and Confederate states. Missouri’s constitutional convention abolished slavery in the state in January 1865, freeing any slaves still living at White Haven.

“...I Ulysses S. Grant...do hereby manumit, emancipate and set free from Slavery my Negro man William, sometimes called William Jones...forever.”

### Further Reading

- Grant, Julia Dent. *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant (Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant)*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.  
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Hurt, R. Douglas. *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri’s Little Dixie*. University of North Carolina Press, 1993.  
Wade, Richard C. *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860*. Oxford University Press, 1964.