

4.9 - Background on the Houses at Newtown and Leonardtown

Before the Suppression and Restoration of the Jesuit order in 1814, Maryland Jesuits regarded Newtown as central to their mission. It was the site of a school for the humanities, the first Catholic church in British North America, which operated between 1677 and approximately 1698; Superiors of the Maryland mission frequently resided at the manor; and in 1814 Newtown was considered as a site for a Jesuit novitiate.

Newtown also was intrinsically tied to the emergence of large-scale tobacco agriculture, which was highly dependent upon enslaved labor. In 1668, Henry Warren, S.J., purchased two tracts of uncultivated land totalling 850 acres from William and Temperance Britton for 40,000 pounds of tobacco. By the early eighteenth century, the Jesuits had created a plantation that exploited fifteen enslaved laborers. In 1717, William Hunter, S.J. issued a deed of gift to Thomas Jameson of all of the goods of the church and estate, including 15 enslaved people to form a trust that protected Newtown from confiscation because of the harsh penal laws aimed at prohibiting property ownership by Catholic churches and seminaries. (This deed is the earliest documentation of slave ownership by the Maryland mission within the MPA, 119_27_2). Several of the enslaved people who worked this plantation took the sacraments. The sale of 1838 separated 44 enslaved people from their families and community at Newtown. The Newtown sacramental records document the participation of several of these individuals in the Catholic Church.

As with the other plantations, Jesuits maintained their investment in commercial agriculture by renting out parcels of land to tenant farmers, and they continued to own enslaved people until emancipation. The priests of the Leonardtown residence also ministered to the tenant farmers of Bushwood Farms, a tract that had also been acquired by the Jesuits. The Jesuits continued to cultivate the lands at Newtown until 1967. They sold these lands to the Archdiocese of Washington in 1969.

Bibliography

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