

This presentation will discuss death records in Fairfax County, Virginia during the period from 1853 to 1859. We intend to describe and record the death causes of slaves to honor a sliver of black history and give people who have been forgotten by history the acknowledgment they are owed. We will analyze the data by comparing the causes of death between slaves and free people, pulling from previous research to understand some of the differences we observe and critically questioning the data and its origin to better understand, demographically and socially the dynamics that perpetuated the exploitative system of slavery.

“Within sexist racist iconography, black females are most often represented as mammies, whores, or sluts. Caretakers whose bodies and beings are empty vessels to be filled with the needs of others. This imagery tells the world that the black female is born to serve—a servant maid—made to order. She is not herself but always what someone else wants her to be.”—bell hooks (1996)

The lives of mothers and their children are intertwined from conception until the child takes their last breath. When investigating the death records of enslaved and free people in Fairfax County between 1853 through 1869 and focusing our study on the age and cause of death, the stories of enslaved children, both in life and death, became a critical component of our data set that needed further analysis. The data confirms several facts, (1) enslaved children died before the age of one at higher rates than children born free, (2) enslaved children who died before the age of one often died of suffocation, and (3) the death of enslaved people were significantly less reported than that of free people. This data validates the harsh realities of life for the enslaved, particularly the lives of enslaved mothers and their young children.

Enslaved Black motherhood was capitalized during slavery in the United States and depended on the enslaved Black mothers' reproduction. It was established in 1662 under the Virginia law of *partus sequitur ventrem* or “offspring follows belly” (Morgan, 2015) that a child of any enslaved woman was enslaved themselves, and many other Southern colonies modeled this legislation. These laws resulted in enslavers viewing their enslaved women as a product of free labor and a source for the reproduction of free labor. As we analyzed the data from the Fairfax records, we also worked to find qualitative research that humanized enslaved women and children, and the act of enslaved mothering. The construct of Motherhood has historically been identified under western heteronormative ideologies as nurturing infants and children while living a domestic lifestyle, recognizing the maternal responsibility to lie exclusively with the biological mother (West, 2019). This narrative completely ignores mothering as it pertains to the unpaid and forced labor that Black women performed while enslaved in the United States and the larger Atlantic world. The narrative also sets up the stereotypical depictions of Black mothering that is still present in today’s culture (welfare queen, teen mothers, baby mama, etc.) and support bell hooks analysis of societal views of Black women.

Black enslaved women’s role of caregiving and mothering to white children caste them into the stereotypical depiction known today as “mammies,” as stated in the quote by bell hooks. As caregivers and field laborers for white owners, Black mothers were denied time to care for their own families and communities. The Fairfax data validates this analysis of Black mothering, showing a disproportionate number of Black children dying in infancy.

Methods:

We obtained data from the Fairfax County court Death Registry with the help of their senior archivist, Heather Bolinger. The records exist because, in the mid-nineteenth century, the state of Virginia mandated that all county courts would record births, deaths, and marriages in separate registries. The records spanned

from 1853 to 1869, with a few years missing due to the civil war. We transcribed the scanned documents into a spreadsheet while working closely with Heather whose expertise was instrumental to the project.

After transcribing the data, it became apparent that a portion of it was not suitable for use on its own. The Civil War had an impact on the court's ability to produce these documents. In addition, this paper pertains to the experiences of enslaved and free populations, which naturally lead us to the antebellum period. Therefore, we decided to select a subset of the data, from 1853 to 1859, that had enough consistency in it to draw conclusions. Nonetheless, the entire spreadsheet we produced will be made available on the Enslaved.org website to be complemented by other datasets, and for future reference.

The focus of this study is on the age and causes of death among the two categorizations used for race and status, as recorded by the census taker. With that in mind, we combined the ages of individuals into a measurement in years as a continuous variable, converting years, months, and days into years given:

$$Age = Years + Months \times \frac{1}{12} + Days \times \frac{1}{365}$$

We made this decision to accommodate for the high prevalence of infant deaths that were measured in months and days.

Categories:

Given the data available and the question at hand, there are two relevant categories we could use to study causes of death:

Table 1: Distribution by Status of the Deceased		
Status	Percentage of Recorded Deaths	Count
Free	70.29	317
Slave	29.05	131
Not Recorded	0.67	3

Table 2: Distribution by Race of the Deceased		
Race	Percentage of Recorded Deaths	Count
White	69.40	313
Colored	30.38	137
Not Recorded	0.22	1

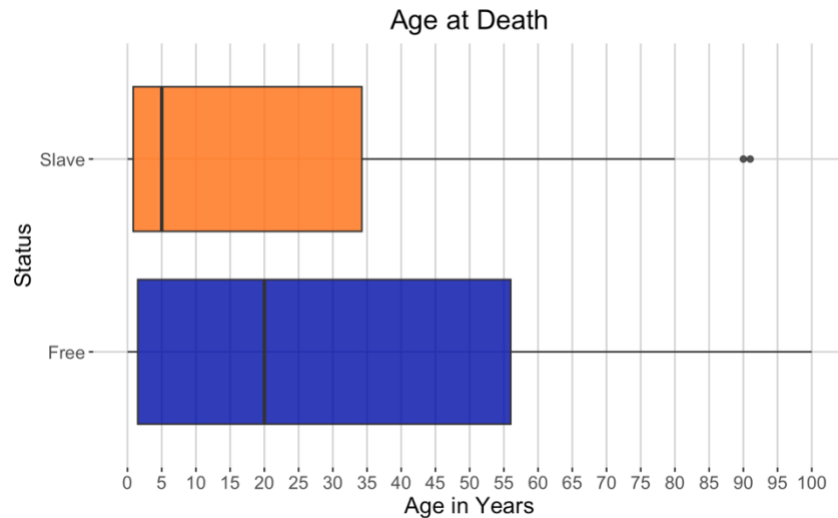
The above table shows the demographic composition of our data set as grouped by race or status. Notably, the values don't match exactly since there are 6 occurrences, about 1.33% of the total, that correspond to people of color with "Free" as their status. Although this will not alter our results significantly, we believe it is important to acknowledge their presence in the records.

For the sake of conciseness, our analysis will focus on comparing the individuals identified by the record keeper as "Slaves" or "Free", which corresponds to the category of Status. This means that free people of color are included in the "Free" category, who generally experienced poor living conditions. Although this may lead to minor differences in some statistics, given the previous considerations, the analysis would almost perfectly transfer to the category of Race.

Furthermore, to perform meaningful cause of death analysis, the population will be divided into 4 aged-based categories as follows:

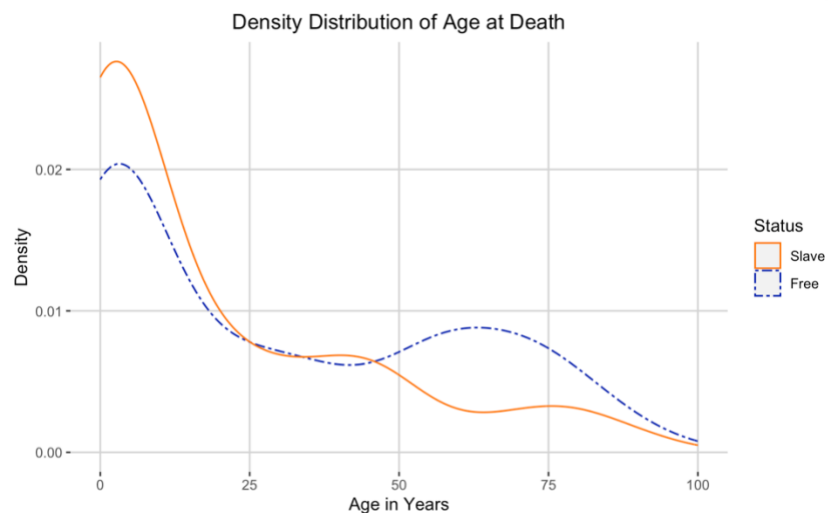
Table 3 Percentages of Deaths for Slaves and the Free by Age Categories		
Age group	Percent of Total Deaths among Slaves	Percent of Total Deaths among the Free
$0 < Age < 1$	25.19	21.14
$1 \leq Age < 10$	29.01	18.93
$10 \leq Age < 20$	10.69	7.89
$20 \leq Age$	32.82	48.58
Not Recorded	2.30	3.46

The categories are largely inspired by Steckel, R. (1986) and his findings surrounding childhood mortality among slaves, as the highest mortality rates are found before the age of 1. The cutoffs also respond to the distribution of our data. As can be observed in the diagram, the median age at death for slaves was 5 years old and 20 years old for free individuals, four times higher.



Analysis:

Similarly, when plotting the density distribution of age at death for slaves and free people, the difference is clear. Although deaths in the early stages of life are the most frequent in both groups, slave deaths are much more concentrated below 25 years old than deaths of free individuals.



In early studies, and as will be explored later, high infant mortality was attributed to “Smothering”. According to Steckel, R. (1986), enslaved women were characterized as careless mothers that would suffocate their children while asleep. Although infanticide is a possibility, and there are recorded instances of this behavior elsewhere (Age of Revolutions, 2022), Steckel, R. (1986) points out that low birth weights resulting, likely, from prenatal malnourishment, physical exploitation of pregnant mothers, and poor living conditions are more reasonable explanations. We should bear in mind that our data set does not include stillborn infants, we would expect their

inclusion to augment the mortality rates that we have measured, driving the median age at death even lower and exacerbating the differences we observe between the groups.

Infancy is a time when mothering and caregiving are most important, and the absence or inability of a mother to care for her child at this time would likely result in the untimely death of the child to illness, unwarranted neglect, or inhumane living conditions.

Table 4 10 most common causes of death among Slaves under the age of 1		
	% of Slave deaths under 1	Count
Not Registered	60.61	20
Smothered	15.15	5
Croup	9.09	3
Whooping Cough	6.06	2
Cold	3.03	1
Lockjaw	3.03	1
Scrofula	3.03	1

Table 5 10 most common causes of death among the Free under the age of 1		
	% of Free deaths under 1	Count
Not Registered	50.75	34
Diarrhea & Dysentery	13.43	9
Whooping Cough	10.45	7
Cholera	2.99	2
Tuberculosis	2.99	2
Accident	1.49	1
Asthma	1.49	1
Bilious Fever	1.49	1
Bowel Disease	1.49	1
Cold	1.49	1

As described in Steckel, R. (1986), in Fairfax County, Virginia we find that “Smothering” is the main, recorded, cause of death among slaves under the age of 1. The table also shows a significant difference when it comes to blank records, although more than half of the data is missing in both cases, Slave death causes were reported 9.86% less. We hypothesize that the large amount of data missing, for both categories, can be due to a multitude of factors. According to studies of death causes in Virginia by Todd L. Savitt (1975), a large percentage of the missing records can be explained by a lack of rigor, as they often didn’t perform autopsies and a lack of knowledge or interest in finding the actual causes of death. We believe that this phenomenon is aggravated by the methods used to gather this information since heads of households -slave owners- were most

often the source, which probably lead to some loss of information as there wasn't any incentive for plantation owners to report on the death causes of children. Further, as Savitt discusses in his article, "Smothering" was stigmatized among the white population. This would explain the lack of this cause of death in their records, even if it was used as a catch-all term for sudden infant passing. A number of scholars, Savitt among them, maintain that Sudden Infant Death Syndrome is also to blame for the frequent reporting of Smothering.

In our data, smothering was the second leading cause of enslaved children's death (15.5%). This data implies that enslavers, who reported the cause of death, believed Black women were careless/cruel when caring for their infant children. However, the data for free infants' causes of death was never reported as smothering and was most often reported as unavoidable childhood diseases. An analysis of this depiction of Black mothers as unable to care for their children, curated by white enslavers, is an intentional act of white supremacy that shaped the current white patriarchal society. Creating a fantasy of white motherhood as natural/instinctual, feminine, and easy; while Black mothers are seen as "lazy" and unable to "properly" care for their children. These contradictory ideas not only erase the labor that Black mothers did/do to care for white children and keep them alive and healthy, it also does not support the sanity of white enslavers who often depended on enslaved mothers to care for their own children.

It is important to point out the high incidence of infectious diseases for both groups. This trend carries on to the next age group:

Table 6 10 most common causes of death among Slaves between 1 and 10		
	% of Slave deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Not Registered	31.58	12
Croup	18.42	7
Whooping Cough	7.89	3
Burn	5.26	2
Diarrhea & Dysentery	5.26	2
Smothered	5.26	2
Tuberculosis	5.26	2

Table 7 10 most common causes of death among the Free between 1 and 10		
	% of Free deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Diarrhea & Dysentery	23.33	14
Not Registered	11.67	7
Croup	11.67	7
Fever	11.67	7
Scarlet Fever	8.33	5
Typhoid	6.67	4
Brain Disease	3.33	2

Worms	5.26	2
Catarrhal Fever	2.63	1
Dropsy	2.63	1

Inflammation	3.33	2
Tuberculosis	3.33	2
Accident	1.67	1

The prevalence of bacterial or viral diseases is clear. Interestingly, slaves seemed to suffer more from respiratory diseases, which Todd L. Savitt (2002) attributes to poor, crowded, living conditions, especially during the colder months which increased the chances of contagion and made the diseases more deadly. Among free people, the high frequency of diarrhea and dysentery, much like the absence of Smothering, appears to have its roots in social dynamics. During that period, cholera was considered a disease of the poor, those with loose morals, and poor hygiene (Harris Jr, R. L., 1983) Therefore, symptoms of cholera would be written off as diarrhea or dysentery to avoid the humiliation that came with having the disease.

Another interesting observation in these tables is that the amount of missing data went down significantly with respect to infants. Nevertheless, the causes of death for slaves are missing almost three times the data in percentage terms. This is a continuation of the trend we highlighted before and supports our thesis of disinterest in the causes of death among slaves as well as the impact that the informant has on the accuracy and completeness of the reports.

Finally, we must address the causes of death among adults. As the density distribution above shows, deaths among free people are highly concentrated after the age of 20.

Table 8 10 most common causes of death among Slaves 20 and above		
	% of Slave deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Not Registered	25.58	11
Old Age	16.28	7
Dropsy	9.30	4
Childbirth	6.98	3
Tuberculosis	6.98	3
Apoplexy	4.65	2
Pneumonia	4.65	2

Table 9 10 most common causes of death among the Free 20 and above		
	% of Free deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Tuberculosis	16.88	26
Old Age	16.23	25
Dropsy	8.44	13
Not Registered	6.49	10
Apoplexy	5.84	9
Typhoid	5.19	8
Childbirth	3.90	6

Typhoid	4.65	2
Accident	2.33	1
Cancer	2.33	1

Fever	3.90	6
Heart Disease	3.25	5
Pleurisy	3.25	5

We first noted that, despite being the largest group of free individuals, it has the lowest percentage of missing data at 6.49%. Again, we suspect that this is due to the closer relationship that free adults would have with the heads of households who were interviewed by the record keeper. We encounter our first similarity, as deaths due to old age represent about the same percentage for both groups, with the consideration that there is no clear definition of what old age constitutes. Although it seems like slave mothers die more frequently from childbirth, considering that enslaved people make up about 29.05% of the data, the rates seem to even out. In this case, tuberculosis played a very important role for the free population.

The difference we observe in age at birth is made evident in the table above as free people die predominantly of old age and tuberculosis. In fact, on aggregate 10.41% of the recorded deaths among the free population are due to tuberculosis, the leading cause of death. This is especially significant when considering how high the mortality rates were in the early stages of life. In the case of slaves, the most frequent cause of death was croup (7.63%), due to the incredibly high death rates among infants and young children.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate just how staggering the differences in causes and age at death are between slaves and free people. With a median age at death four times bigger, free individuals enjoyed longer lives. Slave children suffered predominantly from respiratory illnesses, like croup. Infections spread due to poor living conditions and overcrowded sheds. The physical exploitation of their mothers during the gestation period and malnourishment also had devastating effects on the survival rate of infants and young children. Fevers appeared frequently among free children, but their longer life spans meant that, on aggregate, tuberculosis and old age were the most common causes of death.

More than medically insightful, we believe that this dataset is a clear example of how society and its norms shape the way we record history. In this case, prejudice against enslaved mothers inflated the occurrence of smothering among infants. Similarly, the negative connotation of cholera played a role in making diarrhea and dysentery appear more frequent than they probably were. A distinct disinterest in slaves and their causes of death is clear as about twice as much information is missing from slave records (36.65% compared to 17.35%). There were few incentives for slave owners and heads of households to accurately report information and, given that the records were taken annually instead of at the moment of death, one can expect to encounter difficulties with the precision of the data.

We believe that this reflective exercise will help further studies on this subject by complementing existing data sources and instantiating a thoughtful meditation on the nature of records and how accurate they may be. As a historiographic exercise, we found significant overlap with work done previously and were able to pull from several sources that provide a foundation to study the social dynamics that shape the data we obtained and the conclusions we were able to draw from it

A qualitative analysis of the data supports the accuracy of scholar Moya Bailey's term misogynoir, defined as a hatred exclusively directed at Black women. Misogynoir began to form long before a term was created to identify the dehumanizing cruelties exclusively reserved for the oppression of Black women. Misogynoir explores the intersectionality of anti-Blackness and misogyny that structure mainstream ideas and representations of Black women and uphold the stereotypical depictions that deepen the oppression of Black women. The transparent bias in the data is an example of misogynoir. The white supremacist views on motherhood and mothering perpetuate the inaccuracies of Black motherhood and continue to villainize Black women.

As stated previously, historical evidence suggests that infanticide was a very rare action taken by enslaved mothers—whether from a false accusation by enslavers or the fear of being severely punished; reproductive resistance among enslaved women has been documented and narrativized as an act of ultimate mothering and love/care for a child. As we continue to analyze and uncover this data, we must also consider the patterns in causes of death that shape our results and recognize the struggle, fear, and circumstances of the enslaved people represented by the data, and we can never lose sight of the fact that these are real people, and the data is only a small part of the lived experience.

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