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**Poplar Neck and the Prince George's Slave Conspiracy of 1739**

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Poplar Neck and the Prince George's
Slave Conspiracy of 1739
by Alan Virta

A paper prepared for the Afro-American Institute for
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With Addendum, 2021
Abstract

During the late 1730 and early 1740s, enslaved African Americans in the British colonies of North America rose up in several independently organized revolts and conspiracies in vain attempts to win their freedom. Maryland was the scene of one of these acts of resistance. According to local contemporary accounts, Prince George’s County escaped massive violence in 1739 only because a conspiracy was discovered and suppressed before the revolt could be executed. The civil authorities apprehended the alleged conspirators and tried them for rebellion and attempted murder. The leader of the conspiracy, an enslaved man named Jack Ransom, was put to death. The events caused an immediate furor in the colony, including the mobilization of militia units, but as time passed the provincial legislature minimized the threat the conspiracy had posed, resisting calls by the governor for more taxation and expenditure for defense against future uprisings.
Addendum, 2021

At the time of the writing of this paper in 1978, I had not discovered when or how Jack Ransom’s death sentence was carried out. Since then, research by the late C. Ashley Ellefson revealed that Ransom was hanged and gibbeted in April 1740. Ellefson’s research on capital punishment in colonial Maryland was published online by the Maryland State Archives in 2009 as Volume 819 of the Archives of Maryland Online (aomol.msa.maryland.gov). The information on Ransom is recorded in an appendix of charts entitled “Charts on Criminal Prosecutions and Their Outcomes,” more particularly on the chart entitled “Capital Crimes: Hanged, Pardoned, and Reprieved, All Classes by Name, 1726-1775” (alphabetically at N, Negro Jack Ransom).

The printed volumes of the Archives of Maryland cited in footnotes 17-18, 22-24, and 33 are now online with the same pagination, at aomol.msa.maryland.gov.

Liber X (the letter X) of the court records of the Prince George’s County Court cited in footnotes 21 and 22 are kept at the Maryland State Archives as Series C1191-16. They are not online.

The Stephen Bordley letter books cited in footnotes 6, 8-12, and 19 constitute Manuscript Collection 81 at the Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore (formerly Maryland Historical Society).

The surroundings of the Poplar Neck plantation as described in the appendix to this paper have changed considerably since 1978, reflecting the relentless suburbanization of Prince George’s County. The Butler farm, which encompassed much of the Poplar Neck plantation, has been subdivided. The home the Butlers built in 1947 in the place of the Poplar Neck plantation house is no longer surrounded by a large farm. It now sits on a ten-acre lot with the street address of 9919 Frank Tippett Road, Cheltenham, Maryland. It is still owned by the Butler family.

Alan Virta
Boise, Idaho
Photo of the Poplar Neck plantation house taken by John O. Brostrup in the 1930s for the Historic American Buildings Survey, on file at the Library of Congress and on their website at https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.md0490.photos
March 29, 1978

Mr. Alan Virta
8244 Canning Terrace
Greenbelt, MD 20770

Dear Alan:

This short note comes to thank you for the fine essay and research you submitted on the Prince George's County Slave Revolt— in compensation for which is enclosed a check in the amount of

I have enjoyed our working relation and look forward to comparable ventures in the future.

Again, thanks—

Sincerely,

Joseph Scott Mendinghall
Director, Historic Projects
The Afro-American Institute for Historic Preservation and Community Development

Enclosure
Poplar Neck and the Prince George's Slave Conspiracy of 1739

by Alan Virta

Outline

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During the late 1730's and early 1740's, the British colonies in North America were beset by a succession of slave revolts and conspiracies. In September 1739, approximately eighty slaves engaged the local militia in a pitched battle near Stono, South Carolina. Less than a year later, a conspiracy was discovered in Charleston, and at least fifty slaves were hanged.2 During the Spring of 1741, blacks burned several barns in Hackensack, New Jersey. Shortly thereafter, when military installations and other buildings were burned one night in New York City, slaves were blamed, tried, and executed.3 Maryland, too, experienced slave unrest, and according to local contemporary accounts, Prince George's County escaped massive slave violence only because a conspiracy was discovered and suppressed before the revolt could be executed.

The revolt was planned in the plantations on the upper reaches of Piscataway Creek, approximately six miles southwest of Upper Marlboro, the county seat. The population of Prince George's County in 1740 was approximately 17,000.4 Approximately 5000 to 7000, or thirty to forty percent of the total, were black.5 Since the county’s borders in 1740 extended to the Pennsylvania border, and thus included vast areas of the rapidly growing, predominantly non-slaveholding Piedmont and back country, it is probable that in the Upper Marlboro area, one of the oldest sections of the county and one dominated by slaveholding tobacco planters, the percentage of blacks in the population could have reached or exceeded fifty
percent. Slaveholding families in the area, often outnumbered on
t heir plantations by their slaves, had due cause for alarm whenever
rumors of slave revolt spread.

The revolt was to have taken place in December of 1739. The
leader of the conspiracy, as determined by the county court, was
Jack Ransom, "a Clever and Sensible fellow between forty and fifty
years old," one of the several slaves of the widow Jane Brooke,
mistress of the tobacco plantation Poplar Neck.

According to Stephen Bordley, who would later become one of
Maryland's foremost political leaders, and whom the historian
John Thomas Scharf described as "one of the most prominent, wealth-
liest, and best educated men in the colony," the conspiracy had
begun eight months before and involved two hundred slaves. Their
plan was to meet on a Sunday afternoon (in violation of the 1725
statute prohibiting unsupervised meetings of slaves on the Sabbath),
return home, then kill their masters' families as soon as they had
retired for the night, "except the Young White Women only, whom
they intended to keep for their Wives."

After securing arms and horses from their plantations, they
were to meet for a night ride to Annapolis, where they would divide
into two parties and seize the powder magazine and Council chambers.
"When they had done [this] and sufficiently fortified themselves
with arms and ammunition, they were to disperse in several bodies
over the Town and Cutt the throats of Men, Women, and Children...."

Ransom then expected the remaining slaves of the Western Shore
to desert their plantations and hasten to Annapolis. From Annapolis
he would launch attacks to kill the remaining whites. When the
Western Shore had been taken, they would all return to Annapolis, divide up the houses, establish a government, and live like city gentlemen. If an army were raised on the Eastern Shore to oppose them, they would pack up everything worth carrying and flee with their young white wives to the back country. Bordley called the plot "as well laid as any of the kind that I ever heard of." 11

Both weather and chance, however, prevented the uprising. Bordley relates that the Sunday originally set for the revolt was so rainy that most of the conspirators, including many of the leaders, failed to meet. Rain also disrupted the plans on December 1, the only specific date documented as being set for the revolt, and on at least one other following Sunday. In the meantime, however, a loyal slave of Henry Brooke, Jane's son, discovered the plot and learned that his master was to be killed. He informed Brooke of the plan. Brooke went to the authorities, several slaves were jailed, and the revolt, postponed three times because of rain, was permanently extinguished.

Six slaves were initially jailed, and several more were probably seized later. 12 In January of 1740, John Hepburn and William Smith, justices of Prince George's County, recorded the depositions of several slaves concerning the conspiracy. The depositions were taken to Annapolis and read before the Council on January 22. The Council recommended that a special Commission of Oyer and Terminer be established to try the slaves. A 1737 law entitled "A Supplementary Act to the Act intitled An Act for the more Effectual Punishment of Negroes and other Slaves..." however required that the slaves accused of conspiring or attempting
to rebel be tried at county court. Therefore, Governor Samuel Ogle proclaimed that the slaves be jailed in Upper Marlboro until the next meeting of the county court and that the sheriff of Prince George's County apprehend any other slaves suspected of being party to the plot. He further authorized the sheriff to "press such and so many persons as shall be necessary to attend and Assist him...." The Prince George's authorities did pursue their investigations, recording more slave depositions.

The trials were held at the March 1740 session of the Prince George's County Court. Indictments were presented against five slaves: Jack Ransom, George, also a slave of Jane Brooke, Frank, a slave of Thomas Blanford, Peter, a slave of Richard Lee, and Will, a slave of Hyde Hoxton, all of Prince George's County.

Jack Ransom, Frank, and George were charged with "Seditiously, Wickedly, Diabolically, and Horridly Contriving to Rebel and raise an insurrection within this Province of Maryland and to kill and murder a certain Jane Brooke, Henry Brooke, Joseph Brooke, and divers others...to overthrow and Destroy the Government there­of and retain it by force and Arms." All three pleaded not guilty. Ransom was convicted by a jury of twelve men and sentenced to be hanged. Frank and George were acquitted, as were Peter and Will, who were similarly charged but tried seperately. No other slaves were prosecuted. One slave, belonging to John Blanford, died in jail, and Mistress Brooke was compensated sixty pounds current money for the loss of Jack Ransom.

There is evidence to indicate that the extent of the conspiracy might have been exaggerated by men like Stephen
Bordley and the other Marylanders. Besides the five slaves prosecuted, Hepburn and Smith had bound only ten slaves to appear in court. That only five slaves were prosecuted and that the bills of indictment mention other "unknown" Negroes as participating in the plots indicate that the government could not identify the two hundred slaves claimed by Bordley to have participated in the conspiracy. Certainly the ten blacks, who must have attended some of the meetings to learn of the plot, could have given the names of more conspirators to the justices if there had been very many more. The jury, too, could convict only Jack Ransom. Indeed, historian Jeffrey Brackett maintained that the conspiracy was nothing more than a "local excitement." 16

Although the extent of the conspiracy might have been exaggerated, the reaction within the province indicates that the slaveholders were genuinely fearful of a slave uprising.

Two days after the depositions were read to the Council, Governor Ogle issued a proclamation ordering "all Officers as well Civil as Military within this province...to be particularly careful in putting the several Laws in Execution to prevent the Tumultuous meeting of Slaves...and to Apprehend all such Slaves as shall be found wandering who cannot give good and Satisfactory Account of themselves..." 17 He further exhorted "all his Majestys subjects to be upon their guard and to prepare in the best and most Expeditious manner they can for the defense of themselves and their Neighbours and for the better exacting an Obedience from the Civil Officers in the Execution of their Duty in the Premises." 18
Local militia units were quickly formed. Bordley, in a letter to a friend, said, "the time is Come (alas this day which I never thought to see!) of my being made a Soldier." He boasted that within fifteen minutes his unit could muster forty armed horsemen and sixty armed foot soldiers. Arms and ammunition were distributed, and a guard watched the Council House and magazine every night in Annapolis. The Council, remembering that their throats were to be cut, advised that slaves not be allowed to enter Annapolis on Sundays without passes from their masters.

The wording of the court proceedings and an address by Governor Ogle also indicate genuine fear. Jack Ranson, Frank, and George were charged with "not having the fear of God before them but being moved ad seduced by the instigation of the Devil." Peter and Will were charged with "Voluntarily, Maliciously, Feloniously, Seditiously, and Traitorously" conspiring with Jack Ransom "against the Peace of the Lord Proprietary." Ogle maintained that "if they had carried their Design into Execution, We should have been put to the cruel necessity of defending Our own Lives at the Expense of many of theirs, to the Entire Ruin of Numbers of particular Families, and perhaps of the Province in General." Ogle, then, believed that the colony had escaped total destruction.

The conspiracy played a prominent part in the politics of the province a year later. The Governor wanted a tax levied to support the war against Spain, but the Lower House refused. He therefore tied the war measure to a bill to raise funds to defend the province against its slaves. The Upper House supported him,
writing that "We should think ourselves too cool to the Publick Peace and Welbeing of the Province, if we were not heartily disposed to make any further and better Provision, than at present, for Our common Security as well against rebellious Designs of Negroes, as hostile Attempts of His Majestys Enemies."  

The Lower House could not be convinced to support the tax bill, though. They felt that "it will be sufficient with the Arms already purchased and the Money in Bank, to enable us to defend Ourselves against Roman Catholics, Negroes, and any other Enemies...." It is significant that even though they would not appropriate more funds for defense, the Delegates classified their slaves as among their enemies.

What specific conditions, beyond a general dissatisfaction with the state of slavery, might bring these slaves in Prince George's County to plan a rebellion or make them think that one might succeed? Unfortunately, the answer is not documented in the extant court records or Assembly proceedings, save for the charge that they were inspired by the Devil. Several possibilities, however, are suggested by the social and political phenomena of the time and by Stephen Bordley's letters.

Bordley relates that a slave woman, hearing black men discussing the plot, related the story to her mistress. The lady did not believe her slave and did nothing to investigate her story. Bordley then adds, "Foolish Woman! That sooner than give herself the trouble of looking into the affair aforesaid, she ran the hazard of having her throat Cutt; but perhaps she had a mind
for a black husband." Although he never explicitly states it, this woman without a husband almost certainly was Jane Brooke. Her husband, Clement Brooke, Sr., had been dead for two years and her children were grown. Her will and her administrators' accounts indicate that she possessed at least seven slaves, and that at her death her estate was valued at £638, making it an above average, prosperous plantation. Bordley suggests she did not take the time to properly investigate the charges, and perhaps Jack Ransom thought she could not manage the plantation or her slaves without her husband. Perhaps, then, this uncommon situation—that of a widow managing a plantation—led her slaves to entertain thoughts of rebellion.

The war with Spain, too, may have contributed to the causes of the uprising. The War of Jenkins' Ear broke out in 1739 between England and Spain. News of the declaration of war, received in the colonies in December of 1739, as well as the tension which preceded it, created a climate of uncertainty in the colonies. There were rumors of Spanish invasion, Catholic plots, and French attacks from the West. The governors sought to increase defense appropriations while the assemblies resisted, creating an intense political situation at home. Historian Herbert Aptheker asserts that slaves were very much aware of current events and often planned uprisings in response to unsettling news. Perhaps the war and the uproar made Jack Ransom think a rebellion could be accomplished. The poor relations with Spain certainly influenced the slaves of Stono, South Carolina, to revolt earlier in 1739. The Governor of Spanish St. Augustine had proclaimed that runaways
reaching his province would be free. The Stono rebels were marching to join the Spanish in Florida when they were intercepted by the militia.  

Finally, the Great Awakening was occurring in the American colonies at precisely the same time the uprisings were breaking out. During 1739 and 1740 George Whitefield made a speaking tour through the colonies. In early December, he spoke in Annapolis and Upper Marlboro. The message of the Great Awakening was conveyed through emotionalism and "enthusiasm." It appealed to townspeople, the less-educated, and the back country farmers; it has been characterized as a "great democratic outpouring," and the emotions it generated "were to become an important and explosive element in the outlook on life of the eighteenth century." Winthrop Jordan suggests that the Great Awakening was "suggestive of widespread heightening of diffuse social tensions throughout the colonies." In the midst of these social tensions were those of the oppressed slave. The promises of the Great Awakening, particularly the condemnation of slavery by Whitefield, may have pushed the slaves to thoughts of rebellion. Rather than inspired by the Devil, as the bill of indictment against Jack Ransom proclaimed, the conspiracy might have been inspired by what the revivalist considered to be the word of God.

The Prince George's slave conspiracy of 1739 never became an open revolt. No whites were killed. One black was executed, and one black died in jail. The excitement and terror caused by the plot subsided, and just sixteen months after it had been discovered,
the Lower House could declare: "And notwithstanding the great Handle that has been made, and the Noise industriously spread over the province about our negroes, We must say, that from all the Enquiry We have been able to make, we could never discover anything which might in any Manner be presumed to endanger the peace or Welfare of this Province, especially since the very few who had dared to think over any such Attempt, by the prudent care of the Government, have been already punished and supressed." 33
The Significance of Poplar Neck

Two well known authorities have tried to count the number of slave revolts and conspiracies that occurred during the 250 years of slavery. Both exclude individual acts of violence or individual escape attempts. Both count only instances in which arms were taken up by a number of slaves or some sort of violence was committed in an attempt to secure liberty—or, in the case of a conspiracy, plans were made for such action. Herbert Aptheker counts both actual revolts as well as recorded conspiracies and finds 250.34 Winthrop Jordan limits his count to staged revolts and finds no more than a dozen.35 Aptheker required the participation of ten individuals to make a revolt or conspiracy; Jordan twenty.

Clearly, then, of the millions of men and women who endured slavery in America, only a very small percentage participated in a recorded conspiracy or rebellion. This is not to say that they might not have expressed discontent with their condition in other ways—it is to say only that participation in large scale movements was extremely limited. And of these movements, we know the identities of only a few of the participants. Jack Ransom is one. For this reason, his conspiracy and the Poplar Neck plantation should be noted.

The conspiracy at Poplar Neck is significant for a number of other reasons as well. From contemporary sources and what knowledge we have of the political and social climate of the time, we can identify several conditions which might have spurred Ran-
som to plan a rebellion. His conspiracy is not one that can only be attributed to a general dissatisfaction with the state of enslavement. There are several known conditions—the war with Spain and the other revolts of the time, the religious excitement of the day and Whitefield's visit, and perhaps the widow Brooke's difficulties—that might have led Ransom to think of rebellion.

The conspiracy has a local significance, too, because only one other major insurrection in Prince George's County has been recorded by historians of slave revolts. That occurred in 1845, when slaves from Prince George's County joined an armed march of slaves from other counties headed toward Pennsylvania and freedom.

Finally, although the Poplar Neck plantation has been divided into many parcels over the years, its location is still known. It is still a partly rural area. If you drive a little off the main road into the woods, you can see the land of Poplar Neck as Jack Ransom might have once seen it. If only for that reason, we should take note of Poplar Neck.
Poplar Neck plantation, the home of Jack Ransom, leader of the planned revolt, was granted to Major Thomas Brooke in 1671. It remained in Brooke hands until 1870, when Araminta Brooke, widow of Major Thomas Brooke's great-great-grandson John Brown Brooke sold it to Adam Diehl. It had reached the size of 890 acres during the lifetime of Clement Brooke, Jane's husband, but it comprised only 452 acres when it was sold to Diehl.

Adam Diehl did not keep the plantation intact, but sold it in several pieces over the course of thirty years. The two largest tracts, 215 acres and 126 acres, were sold to Adam Diehl, Jr., and Nathan Diehl. In 1909 Adam Diehl, Jr. sold his 215 acres to G. Irene Tippett and it became part of the Tippett farm. Today that portion has been further subdivided. The U.S. Navy maintains a right of way to the Naval Communications Station across the southernmost section, the National Rifle Association maintains a shooting range just north of that, and a housing development another part. Nathan Diehl's 126 acres has not been subdivided. It is now operated as a farm by the Butler family, who acquired the land in 1927. Adam Diehl sold the remaining acreage in several smaller pieces to various individuals, most of them blacks.

And what of the Poplar Neck plantation house? It was located on the 126-acre portion sold to Nathan Diehl. It was in poor repair by the time of the Historic American Buildings Survey (which listed it) in the 1930s, and the Butlers destroyed it in 1947 to build a new home on the site. The HAES survey dated the house from the late 18th century. If that is correct, then the Poplar Neck
they recorded was a successor to Jane Brooke's house. However, historian James Wilfong believes the house recorded in HABS is much older than they allow. He believes it is at least mid-18th century, and holds out the possibility that it was built soon after the original grant in 1671. We cannot know for sure when it was built, but we know that it is a strong possibility that the HABS house was also Jane Brooke's. A photo, from the HABS collection in the Library of Congress, is included with the paper.

To reach Poplar Neck from Washington, D.C., take Branch Avenue (Maryland Route 5) south out of Washington approximately seven miles from the D.C. line to Woodyard Road in Clinton. Turn left (east) onto Woodyard Road and follow it about two miles until it meets Rosaryville Road. There is a stop sign there. Turn right (south) onto Rosaryville Road and follow it about one mile to Frank Tippett Road. Turn right (south) onto Frank Tippett Road and drive about one mile. The Butler farm is on the right; it was the northermost portion of Poplar Neck. There are several barns on the property, and the house sits about 200 years off the road. It is easy to spot: the land slopes away from it, leaving it the highest point on the farm. The mailbox along the road reads Emily Butler, although she is now dead.

Beyond the Butler farm is the subdivision Rolling Acres, then the NRA range, and the access road which leads back to the Naval Communications Station, on the other side of Piscataway Creek. Poplar Neck included some acreage below the road and across from the NRA range, as well. You can turn down the USNCS access road and drive to the creek.
APPENDIX

Documenting the location of the plantation Poplar Neck

1) Poplar Neck was granted to Major Thomas Brooke on June 10, 1671. This was before the establishment of Prince George's County, when the land in question was still part of Calvert County. Calvert County land patents, Liber 14, folio 302, as recorded by Louise Joyner Henton on her map of tracts laid out prior to the establishment of Prince George's County in 1696. The maps accompanies her Prince George's Heritage. It shows Poplar Neck lying on the south side of Piscataway Creek.

2) The plantation was handed down from Major Thomas Brooke to his youngest son Clement Brooke, who was the husband of Jane Brooke. In 1706, Poplar Neck reached the size of 890 acres. It was inherited by Clement and Jane's son, Henry Brooke, and successively by Henry's son, grandson, and great-grandson--Henry Jr., Henry III, and John Brown Brooke. Source: Effie Gwynn Bowie's Across the Years in Prince George's County.

3) The widow of John Brown Brooke, Araminta Brooke, purchased in 1860 "the tract or parcel of land called Poplar Neck," comprising 452 acres, from the estate of her late husband. Prince George's County land records, Liber CSM no. 3, folio 204.

4) Araminta Brooke sold the same 452 acres on November 12, 1870, to Adam Diehl. P.G. County land records, Liber HB no. 4, folio 94.

5) Adam Diehl sold off Poplar Neck in several parcels, the two largest being 215 and 126 acres.

A) 126 acres to Nathan Diehl. Liber JWB 13, f. 529. 1889.
B) 215 acres to Adam Diehl, Jr. Liber 5, folio 131. 1898.

Tracing parcel A:

i) Nathan Diehl and his wife mortgaged the land in 1908. Mortgagee Samuel Townshend. Liber 46, f. 62. Same metes and bounds as above.

ii) The Diehls defaulted on the mortgage and Townshend sold the 126 acres at public sale to P. Frank Tippett and G. Irene Tippett. Liber 102 folio 13. (Note: this was not to be part of the Tippett farm.) Year: 1914.

iii) The Tippetts sold the 126 acres to Roscoe L. Cone and his wife, Cornelia S. Cone, in 1916. Liber 117, f. 216.

iv) The land came next under the ownership of the Eastern Shore Trust Co., which sold it in 1927 to Sydney, Alfred, Fletcher, John, and Archie Butler. The Butlers still own it. Archie still lives there. Liber 313, f. 85.

Tracing parcel B:

i) Adam Diehl, Jr. sold the 215 acres to G. Irene Tippett in
1909. Liber 52, f. 143. This was part of the Tippett farm, most of which was across Piscataway Creek on what is now the U.S. Naval Communications Station.

ii) In 1935, the Tippetts sold 9.05 acres to the U.S.A. Part of the property which "G. Irene Tippett obtained from Adam Diehl... in 1909." It was a strip of land 100 feet wide running from Piscataway Creek, boundary of the station, to Frank Tippett Road. It serves today as right of way for an access road to the station. It was the southernmost part of the farm. Liber 426 f. 435.

iii) Wilfred Tippett, their son, sold 97 acres to the NRA in 1964. This acreage lies directly north of the access road. Liber 2936 f. 597.

iv) Wilfred Tippett still lives on part of the land. There is a subdivision on another part.

MAPS:

1) Historic Sites in the Bi-County Region, by Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 1969, indicates the general vicinity of Poplar Neck. The work sheet for Poplar Neck, kept at the Surratt House with the county historian John Walton, Jr., indicates that the house stood on the property of Emily Butler. It says foundations are visible south of the house presently occupied. Archie Butler disputes that. He says the present house is built right on the old site.

2) Hopkins Atlas of Prince George's County, 1878, edited by Frank White (1975) shows the location of Nathan Diehl's home in about the right spot for Poplar Neck. Evidently he occupied the home before he bought it from Adam Diehl. Adam Diehl is always referred to as "of Frederick County" in the deeds.

3) The best map was drawn for the U.S. Naval Communications Station in 1952. It shows the boundaries of adjacent properties, with the names of their owners. Those include the 126-acre Butler brothers property and the 215-acre Tippett tract (in three pieces: 203.99 ac. held by Wilfred T. and P. Franklin Tippett, 9.05 ac. as USNCS right of way, and 2.34 by J.R. Garner=215.38 acres.) I have a copy of this map.

4) Another USNCS map helps identify the property. The southern boundary of the 9.05-acre right of way is shown to be 3541.56 ft. long at a bearing of N 78 degrees 45 minutes from Frank Tippett Road. Liber 5, f. 131 (deed for the 215 acres from Adam Diehl to Adam Diehl, Jr.) identifies the southern line of the tract as 214 and 16/25 perches long at bearing of S 78 degrees and 3/4 minutes from Piscataway Creek. The bearings are about the same, and knowing that a perch equals 5½ yards, we see that 214.6 perches equal 1180.3 yards which equal 3540.9 feet. Close enough!
Conversations:

I spoke to Wilfred Tippett, son of G. Irene Tippett and P. Frank Tippett. He said old Poplar Neck home was on the Butler property. He said they knocked it down.

I also spoke to Archie Butler and his sister. They confirmed that information, and said the new house was built exactly on the spot of the old in 1947. They were familiar with the term Poplar Neck, and described the old house as 1½ stories, with dormer and a cat-side roof on the back. That matches the HABS photo.
FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid., pp. 187-189.


5 Winthrop Jordan, p. 103.


8 Stephen Bordley letter book, p. 56.

9 Ibid., p. 56.

10 Ibid., pp. 56-57.

11 Ibid., p. 56.

12 Ibid., inferred from his comment on p. 57 that the sheriff expects eight or ten more.

13 Archives of Maryland, XXVIII, p. 189.

14 Prince George's County Court Proceedings 12, Liber X, f. 573. At the Hall of Records, Annapolis.

15 Archives of Maryland, XLII, p. 248.


17 Archives of Maryland, XXVIII, p. 190.

18 Ibid.
20 PG Court 12, Liber X, f. 573.
21 PG Court 12, Liber X, ff. 575-576.
22 Archives of Maryland, XL, p. 425.
23 Ibid., p. 426.
24 Ibid., p. 460.
27 Aptheker, p. 79.
28 Jordan, p. 120.
31 Jordan, p. 120.
32 George Whitefield, "A Letter from the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield to the inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania Gazette, April 17, 1740.
33 Archives of Maryland, XL, p. 449.
34 Aptheker, p. 162.
35 Jordan, p. 113.
36 Aptheker, p. 337. Several slaves broke jail in 1738 and harassed outlying settlers in Prince George's County, but this does not seem to have been an action on the magnitude of the Ransom plan or the 1845 rebellion. Cited in Aptheker, p. 191.
37 Ownership of Poplar Neck plantation is documented in appendix.
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Part two: Other sources consulted


Archie Butler stands in front of his farm which is on the site of the Poplar Neck Plantation.

By Peter D. Pichaske
Journal Staff Writer

On the land where the Poplar Neck tobacco plantation once stood, there is nothing to show that it was the site more than two centuries ago of a daring slave conspiracy to kill their masters and seize Annapolis.

Today, part of the land is a shooting range operated by the National Rifle Association, part is the U.S. Naval Communications Station, and another section is occupied by a housing development. Much remains wooded and undeveloped.

But 250 years ago the land — located six miles southwest of Upper Marlboro along Frank Tippet Road — was a prosperous tobacco plantation owned by the widow Jane Brooke. It was also the site of one of Maryland’s best-recorded slave conspiracies, and one of the few slave revolts or conspiracies where the names of the ringleaders have come down through history.

The significance of the Poplar Neck slave conspiracy has gone largely unnoticed by historians. But recently, the site was one of two in Prince George’s County included in a study by the Afro-American Institute for Historical Preservation and Community Development. The second Prince George’s site is Bowie State College, hailed as one of the oldest educational facilities continuously serving blacks in the state.

The study is the third and final volume in a series begun six years ago and concentrates on black historical sites in the Washington suburbs. The study lists some 34 sites, including the two in Prince George’s.

According to the study’s project director, the county has “hundreds and hundreds” of sites important in black history, but only two were chosen because of the strict criteria for inclusion.

“We didn’t include an old church just because it was old, for example; that wasn’t good enough,” explained historian Joseph Scott Mendinghall. “Each of the sites we included explains one aspect of Afro-American history. It speaks to a general theme.”

In the case of Poplar Neck, the theme is slavery, and specifically, slave revolts.

The leader of the aborted revolt at Poplar Neck was one Jack Ransom, a “clever and sensible fellow between forty and fifty years old,” according to county court documents from the period.

Ransom hatched his plan in early 1739, and according to historical sources, some 200 slaves were involved. After several months of planning, Ransom and his co-conspirators had decided to carry out their plan in December. The plan was to meet on a Sunday afternoon, return home, and then kill their masters as soon as they went to bed for the evening.

The young white women would be spared, however, as the slaves planned “to keep them for their wives.”

Once the masters had been eliminated, the slaves planned to take their weapons and horses and then head in a group for Annapolis, where they were to split into two groups and seize the powder magazine and state council chambers.

Once they had control of Annapolis, Ransom hoped other slaves from the western shore would desert their plantations and join him. From Annapolis, he planned to launch attacks to kill the whites remaining in the area.

After the whites had been eliminated and the western shore taken, the blacks planned to divide up the houses, establish their own government, and “live like city gentlemen.” If they were attacked by an army, they planned to flee to the back country with their young white wives.
A noted white political figure of the day termed the plot “as well laid as any of the kind that I ever heard of.” But in spite of the cleverness of the plan, it was doomed to failure.

The revolt was postponed three times because of heavy rainstorms. And then, before it had the chance to begin, one loyal slave got wind of the plan and reported it to Brooke. Brooke went to the authorities, several slaves were jailed, and the revolt was aborted.

Ransom and four other slaves went to trial in March 1740, accused of “seditiously, wickedly, diabolically, and horridly contriving to rebel and raise an insurrection within this province of Maryland and to kill and murder a certain Jane Brooke ... and diverse others ... to overthrow and destroy the government thereof and retain it by force of arms.”

Two of the slaves were acquitted, two were sentenced to jail, and Ransom, the ringleader, was executed.

The conspiracy also had the effect of sparking apparently genuine fear among the white population, at least for a time. Local militia were formed, arms and ammunition were distributed, and a guard was ordered to watch the Council House and magazine at night. Council members told the slaves they were not allowed to go into Annapolis on Sundays without special passes from their masters.

The terror caused by the conspiracy did not last long. Just 16 months after the revolt was discovered and effectively squelched, the lower house of the state government declared: “Notwithstanding the great Handle that has been made, and the Noise industriously spread over the province about our negroes, We must say, that from all the Enquiry We have been able to make, we could never discover anything which might in any Manner be presumed to endanger the peace or Welfare of the Province.”

The story behind Bowie State's inclusion in the study is not nearly as dramatic, but probably just as important in the history of blacks in the area.

The school's roots go back to 1864, when the Baltimore Association for the Improvement of Colored People was founded for the purpose of improving the lot of the recently freed blacks. In 1893, the school was reorganized as the Norman Institute for the education and preparation of black elementary school teachers. Fifteen years later, the state agreed to fund the institution and it became a public school.

Not until 1914 did the school move to Prince George's County, at its present location in Bowie. At that time, it was known as the Maryland Normal and Industrial School at Bowie.

In 1935, a full four-year curriculum was introduced, and the school was renamed Maryland State Teachers College at Bowie. It was then, according to the study, that the school became “the most widely known school in the State for the preparation of the State's Black teachers.”

The school was finally given its present name in 1963, when it expanded its curriculum from only teacher preparation to liberal arts.

According to Mendinghall, Bowie State has a “unique place in the history of this state. . . . I have not run across any other black school whose history extends back further than this school.”

The study recommends listing the school in the National Register of Historic Places.

As for Poplar Neck, the study recommends that the state place some sort of commemorative marker along Frank Tippett Road, explaining the site's significance.