

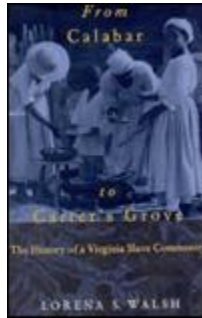


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From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community

Item Type	Book Review
Authors	Walsh, Lorena S.; Kelly, Kenneth G.
Download date	2026-03-11 16:08:49
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/1702

Book Review



Ken Kelly originally wrote the following book review for publication in a hard-copy edition of the *African-American Archaeology Newsletter* a few years ago. When that publication ceased operations, he saved the review, awaiting renewal of the newsletter. We all appreciate his patience, and now publish his review here in the new, online newsletter.

From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community.

Lorena S. Walsh

University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville. xiii + 335 pp., maps, figures, tables, bibliography, index. 1997

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From Calabar to Carter's Grove is the inaugural volume in a new series of Colonial Williamsburg Studies in Chesapeake History, published with the University Press of Virginia. The book's origin lies the conscious decision of Colonial Williamsburg to actively engage in the historical interpretation of the African American experience, particularly as depicted through the venue of the reconstructed "slave quarter" at Carter's Grove Plantation. Walsh's work specifically attempts to satisfy the need to develop a more site specific historical account than the more general regionally focused investigations of enslaved African American experiences that predominate in the historiography of African America. Indeed a reliable hallmark of Colonial Williamsburg's presentation has been tightly researched historical accounts of specific individuals important in the regions' history, and Walsh initially hoped to accomplish a similar treatment of the African American residents at the Carter's Grove quarter. However, as Carter's Grove is a relatively poorly documented plantation, and thus detailed individual histories are elusive, Walsh has instead concentrated on portraying the history of the community of Africans and African Americans who lived for some 125 years on a series of properties owned by the Burwell family, in the vicinity of Williamsburg.

The community's origin lies in the melding together in 1738 of two branches, one recently enslaved, and the other a creolized group of African American pioneers with several generations of links in the colony. The creolized branch was descended from that group of African Americans assembled by Lewis Burwell II, the first "creole" Burwell, who

witnessed the fundamental transformation of late 17th century Virginia from a region where those who toiled were primarily indentured servants, to one where enslaved Africans made up a substantial proportion of the population. Walsh uses the existing records to discuss the demography and origins of this creolized group. Some were probably acquired from the Caribbean, but others were transported directly from Africa. Interesting discussions include findings about acquisition patterns, the sex ratios and childbearing patterns on the various properties, and their possible implications for linguistic and cultural developments within the various quarters. Walsh also develops a strong contextual history of the first group, the recently enslaved Africans based upon her ability to trace specific individuals. Using these individual histories, coupled with conjectural interpretations for those not specified in the records, she is able to suggest a range of lifestyle possibilities Africans from the Bight of Benin and Bight of Biafra might have possessed.

With this demographic foundation, Walsh then launches into an exploration of the next 150 years of African American experience on the Burwell properties between the James and York Rivers. She discusses the consequences of population stabilization in the mid 18th century, as sex ratios evened out, and family based reproductive and, more importantly, social units became the norm. These family groups, and the corresponding webs of kin relations they represent, indicate the growing strength of a sense of community in the region. She argues that the decrease in frequency of names imposed by the owners, and the corresponding increase in African-American chosen names suggests a trend towards a greater degree of autonomy within the quarters.

The period of relative stability that had developed in the mid 18th century came to an end with the American Revolution. Whereas previously the community had suffered relatively few disruptions through the breaking up of kin units, the political and economic turmoil of the revolution meant that some family groups were torn asunder, as enslaved people were sold, or moved to new properties further from the centers of revolutionary conflict. This trend was further exacerbated after the revolutionary war, as economic transformations throughout the region led to the great migration of enslaved laborers to new agricultural enterprises further west.

Throughout Walsh's discussion we are reminded that the usefulness of this study is that it is an exploration of specific events on particular properties, yet that the processes described are not unique. They are indeed common to the region, and thus the strength of the book is that it so engagingly uses the experiences of a relatively few identifiable people to illustrate the social history of tidewater plantations from the perspective of the laborers bound by law to work out their lives on those farms.