

The Chew family and slavery

The Cliveden line of the Chew family has a documented history of slave ownership extending from 1651 to 1831, and the leaders of the family were among the largest slaveholders in Delaware and Pennsylvania during that period.¹ The first Chew to come to America mentions four slaves in his 1651 will, and the last known reference is the ominous accounting notation in 1831, stating: "\$1: Cash gave Phillis to buy necessaries for Delia to keep her from starving".

The most famous of the Chew slaves is Richard Allen, who went on to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church and become its first Bishop. Paradoxically, no Chew records have been found to substantiate Allen's claim of Chew ownership, which appears in the first sentence of his autobiography.² It is still possible that evidence will be found in the unprocessed Chew Family Papers relating to Kent County, Delaware, and especially the Chew's Whitehall plantation. In the meantime Cliveden's staff is collaborating with researchers from Philadelphia's Mother Bethel Church, and will continue to share any newly discovered information.

During the period from about 1740 to 1803 the "Cliveden" Chews were responsible for and benefited from the lives and labor of forty to one hundred seventy five slaves at any given time. The majority worked and lived on plantations in Kent County, Delaware, as well as numerous locations in Maryland's Kent, Cecil, Queen Anne and Anne Arundel Counties. A small number of slaves were selected for household service, and other were leased out as laborers for periods of a year at a time. But by 1800 it appears that both of the Benjamin Chews were interested in getting out of the farming business, and their last plantation, Whitehall, was sold in 1803. (It is still unknown whether its 40+/- slaves were dispersed or sold with the property.) However, a few slaves were retained for leasing and work in the Chew homes in Society Hill and Germantown. The 1800 census lists one in each home, but by 1810 only the elder Chew still had an enslaved servant at home.

A new second chapter in this story began with the death in 1809 of the Chief Justice's brother Samuel Chew, who had named his nephew Benjamin Chew executor of an estate that included seven plantations and 161 slaves. Along with this responsibility came instructions to establish a "rest home" for some of the eldest men and women, although the bulk of the estate was to be managed and sold to provide income for division among Samuel's legatees.³ This left Benjamin Chew with the temporary management of a string of plantations and a long list of debts and bequests to settle. While many of his uncle's slaves had been sold by 1812, Chew was still making payments for support of the elderly ones as late as 1821.⁴

Yet another example of "executive" slave ownership was discovered just recently. In 1827 Benjamin Chew was again named executor, this time for childhood friend and distinguished jurist, William Tilghman, whose estate included the custody of at least twenty five slaves. Their disposition is not currently known, although Chew clearly intended to move them from Maryland to Delaware for an unknown reason. It must have been important, however, as he had to obtain permission from the Maryland Legislature to make the move.⁵ More information on this and many related stories will undoubtedly arise in the future.

Phillip Seitz, Curator of History
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¹ 1651: Will of John Chew, York County [Virginia] Deeds, Orders, Wills, Etc. 1: 1633-1694, Reel 1, pp. 132-132; 1831: "Mr. Benj Chew--Philadelphia, in acct. with Dr. George Vickers, his agent in Kent County" (1829-1831)(HSP Collection 2050, Box 96); largest in Delaware, see William H. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1685* (Wilmington: SR Books, 1996), p. 16; largest in Pennsylvania, see Gary Nash, "Slaves and slave owners in Colonial Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 30 (1973), p. 250.

² Reverend Richard Allen, *The life experience and gospel labors of the Rt. Reverend Richard Allen* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 15.

³ *Will of Samuel Chew*, Kent County, Maryland Register of Wills, 12 Folios 227-411, 414-422 (1809).

⁴ *A further or second account of Benjamin Chew executor of the last will and testament of Samuel Chew Esq. late of Kent County deceased* (February 26, 1822). Kent County, Maryland Register of Wills, 14 Folio 61, p. 69.

⁵ *Archives of Maryland*, Volume 540, pp. 343-344.