The Carter Family
and the
Deed of Gift
An Account for Fifth Graders Based on the Book:
The First Emancipator:
The Forgotten Story of Robert Carter
The Founding Father Who Freed His Slaves
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In 1635, twenty-two year old John Carter sailed from London to the new English Colony of Virginia. As the youngest son in his family, he had little opportunity to inherit much from his father's estate so he chose to take his chances in the New World. He was the first from the Carter family to live in the colonies in North America.
John Carter settled in Jamestown and was soon elected to the newly-formed House of Burgesses. He purchased 1,300 acres of land in Northern Neck on the Rappahannock River, which he named Corotoman. Here he grew tobacco. Carter had white indentured servants and African-born servants who did not have contracts that would guarantee freedom. John Carter's arrival in the colonies was the start of the family's involvement in land-ownership, politics and slavery.
When John Carter died in 1669, most of his estate passed to his eldest son, also John. But, when John the son, died in 1690, the youngest son, Robert Carter I inherited the property. Before long, Robert was heavily involved in politics. He served in the Virginia House of Burgesses like his father and held other political offices, including Governor of Virginia. Robert Carter I acquired so much land and wealth that he was nicknamed *King Carter*.

![Robert “King” Carter](image)

**Figure 5 Robert “King” Carter**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Virginia began importing slaves at a higher rate. Robert Carter I became both a slave trader and a slave holder. He was known for treating slaves with cruelty. However, Carter did offer his own slaves some conveniences that other slave owners did not. In the slave cabins, Carter gave his slaves beds and places to store their personal belongings. He also listed the slaves by family in his ledges increasing the chances that they would not be separated.
Robert Carter I was married twice and he had fifteen children. One of these children was Robert Carter II. When Robert II married Priscilla Churchill, Robert I gave the couple a plantation along the Potomac River called Nomoni named after the local Nomony Indians. Robert and Priscilla had two children, Elizabeth and Robert III. At the age of three months, Robert I gave his grandson his first slave.

Robert II did not have the same political aspirations as his father and grandfather and did little to enhance his estate. He died at the age of twenty-nine. Robert Carter the grandfather made sure that his daughter-in-law and grandchildren were protected. Within a year of his son's death, however, Robert I also died. His four-year-old grandson Robert inherited one of the largest fortunes in the colonies. With it, he was also heir to the Carter family name, which in itself was wealth.

Figure 6 Nomoni Hall (Also spelled Nomony and Nominy)
In February of 1749, Robert Carter III turned twenty-one years of age. He inherited one hundred slaves and sixty-five thousand acres of land in the Northern Neck area of Virginia. Without a father or grandfather to guide him, Carter was a young man without direction. He spent time in London where he studied law and then returned to Virginia where he ran for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Although he was unsuccessful in this election, he acquired a seat on the Governor’s council. He became known as Councillor Carter.

Fellow Virginians, who were Carter’s peers, were successful in being elected to the House of Burgesses. They included James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington.
On April 2, 1754, Robert Carter III married Frances Tasker. They moved into Nomoni Hall for the first few years of their marriage.

Together, they had seventeen children. Only twelve would live to adulthood, but this was not unusual in the eighteenth century.

For fourteen years, while Carter served on the Governor's Council, his family lived in Williamsburg, Virginia. During this time, the colonists were having trouble with their mother country of England. Carter's service ended in July of 1776 when America declared its independence from England and the family moved back to Nomoni Hall.
When Carter's father-in-law, Benjamin Tasker died, he left slaves as part of his inheritance. Both Robert and Frances Carter requested that the slave families be kept together when they were sold and that the slaves have the option of staying in Maryland instead of being forced to move to Virginia. This was the first outward sign that Robert Carter's view of slavery was changing.

_Councillor_ Carter worked his slaves hard. During the tough economic times throughout the American Revolution, Carter added different crops to his plantations. This made life more difficult for his slaves who were always tending to one crop or another. Tobacco was a challenging crop to grow and Carter's slaves spent about fifteen hours a day in the fields.

Hemp and wheat were also grown on Carter's plantations.
Robert Carter III had much faith in the ability of his slaves. Slaves were trained to be house servants, blacksmiths, coach men, seamstresses, brick-makers, and sailors. Others knew how to take care of livestock, run a bakery, operate the Iron Works and cut hair. Carter’s personal valet, Samuel Harrison, acted as a doctor for his fellow slaves. When there was trouble in the slave quarters, the residents went to Carter and knew they would be dealt with fairly. He allowed the slaves to design and build their own homes. Carter did not oversee his slaves directly but he insisted that his overseers follow his orders when punishing the slaves. He was not an advocate of whipping and he often took the side of the slave over that of the white employee.
Carter’s view toward slavery began to be tied to his religious pursuits. He was born into the Church of England but he pursued an interest in other forms of Christianity. He became a Baptist with many of his less wealthy neighbors and his slaves. Although religion influenced Carter’s treatment of his slaves, it is also possible that he was affected as well by the message of freedom that had launched the American Revolution.

Carter continued to pursue other religious denominations. He discovered that being a slaveholder was very much a part of every aspect of his life and he began to view slavery as just another sin or an opportunity to do wrong. This realization was very difficult for Carter because this meant he had to change his whole life if he wanted to remove slavery from it.
The Deed of Gift

On August 1, 1788, Robert Carter III wrote his Deed of Gift. In the first paragraph, Carter wrote:

"I have for some time past been Convinced that to retain them in Slavery is contrary to the true Principles of Religion and Justice, and that therefor it was my Duty to manumit (release) them."

Carter's Deed of Gift provided for a gradual emancipation of his slaves. He listed the names of 452 slaves with their ages and the plantations, which had named after the signs of the Zodiac, on which they lived.

Figure 21 Partial List of Carter's Slaves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Zodiac</th>
<th>Planted</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*3 Mary (mother of Baptista Billy)
* Burke relatives

*4 Winney Burke (daughter of Baptist Billy Burke and Hannah Burke)
*5 Mary Burke (son of J.B. Winney Burke)
On February 28, 1792, Carter began the largest emancipation of slaves in the new United States. He went to the Westmoreland County Court in Montross with some of his slaves to give them their freedom.

Many of Carter’s neighbors and family members were unhappy with his freeing of the slaves. The manumission of Carter’s slaves would take years, but other slaveholders were worried about how his actions would impact their slaves and their plantations. Carter was not discouraged and he worked to make sure that his *Deed of Gift* was protected by law. He also offered his freed slaves land of their own so they could take care of themselves.

Robert Carter III died on March 11, 1804. His descendants continued to free his slaves as was directed by the *Deed of Gift*. In fifty years, Carter emancipated over five hundred slaves. Carter was a revolutionary. He freed his slaves when it was not popular to do so and he did this long before the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation would liberate the remaining slaves in the United States. Carter should be remembered for his courage and his willingness to do what was right.
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