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The Rush Family of Chestnut Grove

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Regina Rush at UVA's Special Collections, 2015

Photo by Molly Schwartzburg.

As the Reference Coordinator at the University of Virginia's Special Collections Library, Regina Rush has helped many people trace their family histories through the library's rich resources. This got her to wondering: what about my own family's history? She knew that the Rush family had been living for several generations in the Chestnut Grove area in southern Albemarle County, but what was their story?

As anyone who works in African-American genealogy knows, the quest can be frustrating. Black people who were slaves are just numbers before the Civil War. Their names appear for the first time in the 1870 Census. Regina asked, "Where were my ancestors enslaved?" In a chance conversation her cousin Gloria told her, "Honey, our people were owned by the Rives family." Here a light bulb went on. The Rives family was one of the richest families in antebellum Virginia with eight plantations in Nelson and Albemarle Counties. Nicey and Isham Rush, Regina's great-great grandparents were probably born at Oak Ridge Plantation and moved to South Warren in 1845. When the property was inventoried in that year, Isham was valued at \$500 and Nicey, along with her two children, Betsy and Sam, was valued

at \$600.

Looking through the plantation ledgers, Regina found that Nicey ran away in 1851, the same year that she gave birth to her daughter, Ella, Regina's great grandmother. An entry in the book notes that Mr. Rives paid Mr. H. D. Robertson \$7.25 for apprehending Nicey. The standard rate for a slave-catcher was \$5.00 plus mileage.

Ella was fourteen years old when the Civil War ended and the slaves were freed. At the 1870 census, we learn that she was 20 years old with an infant daughter, Sophronia, and was illiterate. Her occupation was listed as "Housekeeper." But Ella moved on. In 1896 she bought five acres of land in Chestnut Grove, land her family still owns today, and in the 1900 census she is described as a "Farmer" and can now read and write. She died in 1914 and is buried at the cemetery of Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Esmont.



Chestnut Grove Baptist Church, 2018. *Photo by Maxwell Johnson*

Regina writes: "Through my genealogical journey of more than fifteen years, I have been blessed to learn about some of the interesting people in my family whose shoulders I stand on. Great-Great Grandma Nicey, who did not let the restrictive confines of slavery diminish her vision of freedom or the fear of capture stand in the way of her attempting to obtain it. Nor did the obstacles of illiteracy, poverty, and raising a family on the wages of a domestic stand in the way of Great Grandma Ella's vision of becoming a landowner."

Ms. Rush first presented her research as part of a symposium organized by the Scottsville Museum in 2015. She was recently recognized by the *Magazine of Albemarle County History* with the 1857 Memorial Essay Award for her essay, "Over the Brick Wall: A Genealogical Journey to Discover My Family's Roots." Some of her research was conducted at the Scottsville Museum, and the first version of her essay was published in the 2015 Scottsville Museum Newsletter. See: [The Rushes of Chestnut Grove: One Family's Journey From Slavery to Freedom](#) .

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