

George Gilmore, Freedman

From *Encyclopedia Virginia*:

The George Gilmore Cabin

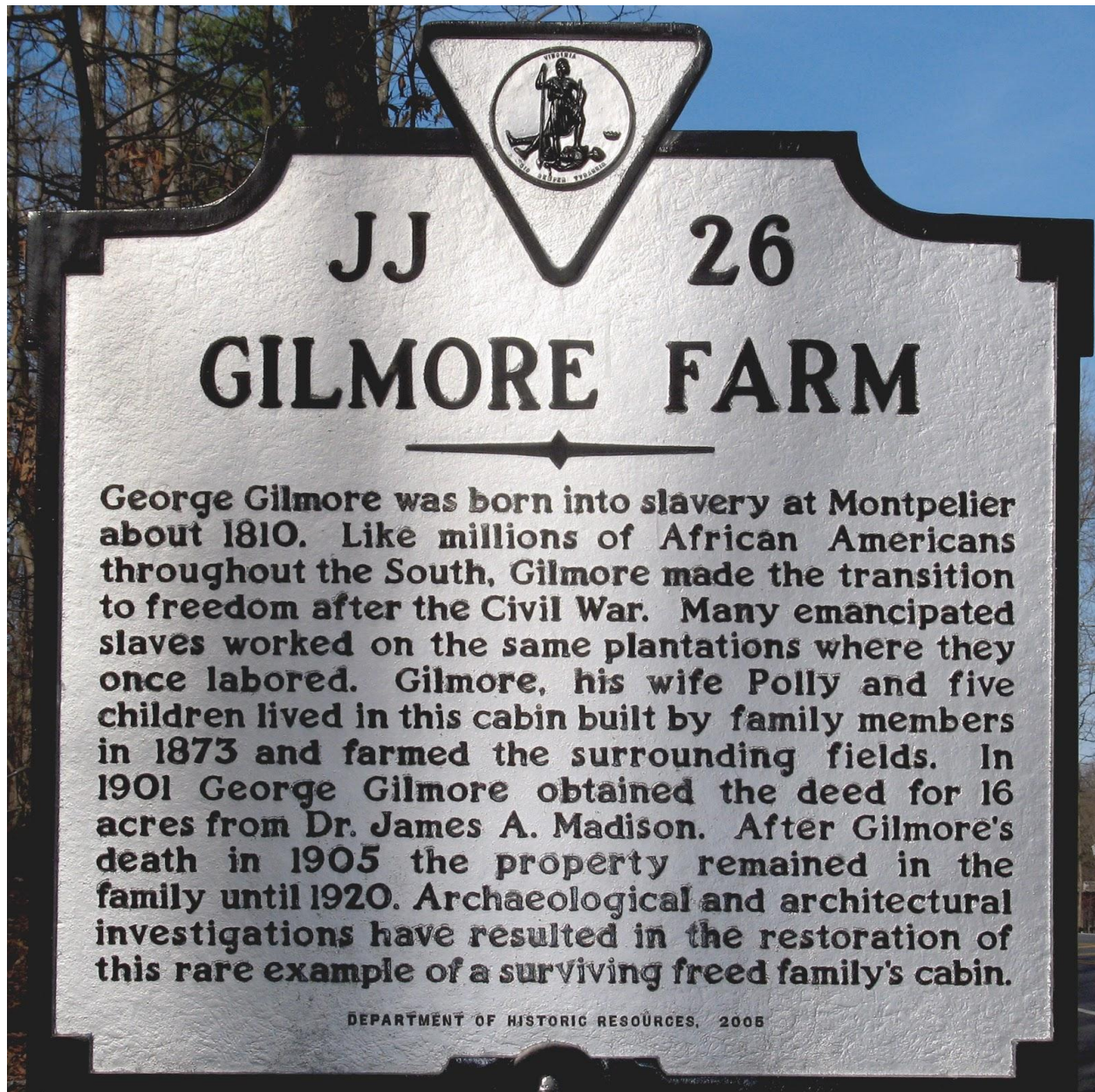


--The digital photograph is part of the Montpelier Foundation and courtesy of *Encyclopedia Virginia*

“This modern photograph shows the restored Gilmore cabin, the log residence built in 1873 that served as the residence for George Gilmore, a former enslaved worker at Montpelier, his wife, Polly, and their three children. After emancipation Gilmore worked as a tenant farmer, but in 1901 he purchased the cabin as well as 16.1 acres of land for \$560.”¹

¹ Glass, Jenn. “Gilmore Cabin.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Google, Accessed July 16, 2021, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/img-1756-1/>

From Virginia Department of Historic Resources:



“George Gilmore was born into slavery at Montpelier about 1810. Like millions of African Americans throughout the South, Gilmore made the transition to freedom after the Civil War. Many emancipated slaves worked on the same plantations where they once labored. Gilmore, his wife Polly and five children lived in this cabin built by family members in 1873 and farmed the surrounding fields. In 1901 George Gilmore obtained the deed for 16 acres from Dr. James A. Madison. After Gilmore’s death in 1905 the property remained in the family until 1920. Archaeological and architectural investigations have resulted in the restoration of this rare example of a surviving freed family’s cabin.”²

²Author and photographer unknown. “Gilmore Farm.” *Virginia Department of Historic Resources*, Google, Accessed July 16, 2021, <https://vcris.dhr.virginia.gov/HistoricMarkers/>

Excerpts from a 2016 article in the *Daily Progress*:

“Following the lineage of the Gilmore family”

By Amber Galavaz, reporter for the *Orange Review*

“One local woman hopes the story about how she discovered her Orange County roots will inspire people of all races to discover their history.

“Rebecca Gilmore Coleman is the descendant of George Gilmore, believed to have been born into slavery at Montpelier in 1810. After Emancipation, he and his wife, Polly, raised a family on land they rented across the street from Montpelier. George Gilmore gained full title to his land in 1901, and three generations lived in the cabin until its sale to William du Pont in 1920.

“ ‘My father was born upstairs in the cabin,’ said Coleman, who grew up in Orange County not knowing about her deep local history. ‘I had no idea I was connected to the Gilmore family and the cabin until *Roots* came out in the '70s.’

“*Roots* intrigued her and made her question her lineage and heritage,’ Coleman said. After she asked her father about their history, he showed her Gilmore Cabin, which is **the only freestanding freedman’s cabin in the state today**. She’s thankful she asked her father about their history when she did, because he died a short time later.

“ ‘It’s really touching, and even now I find it brings tears to my eyes that my history was lost for so long — and it was almost lost completely,’ Coleman said.

“She became involved with Montpelier in 1999 after serving on the James Madison 250th Birthday Celebration Committee. It was then that she brought the cabin to Montpelier’s attention.

“Montpelier continually asked her about African-Americans and slave descendants,’ she said. At that point, she realized the lack of local resources and the importance of establishing an organization to facilitate that history. In 2000, the Orange County African-American Historical Society was formed. Coleman was instrumental in establishing OCAAHS and remains the president of the group, which celebrated its 16th anniversary this month [2016].

“OCAAHS has produced numerous exhibits and programs about local African-Americans in area churches, schools and the military. She said the group provides a place for people to gather and talk about their family history. The society, under Coleman’s leadership, also was the driving force behind getting the cabin restored.

“She credits Montpelier for seeing the significance of restoring the cabin and telling the complete Montpelier story from slavery, emancipation and beyond.

“Coleman said there’s a lot people can learn from visiting the cabin, such as the resilience of people like her grandfather — a former slave turned free landowner after Emancipation.

" 'I think it shows, too, if you do a little research on your history, you might be surprised at what you discover,' she said. 'And I think it not only shows how African-Americans lived back in the day, but also the white community; not everyone lived in a mansion, right?'

"She said she sees the cabin as a place people can go to talk about their history, because while the horror of slavery is a terrible thing to deal with in our history, many people of all races lived the way her ancestors did.

" 'Orange County is a small community, and I think most of us are connected in some way or another. It pulls us all together as a community,' she said. 'I wish I could get more people interested in telling their story.'

"She wants people to look at the Gilmore Cabin as a 'community house' that represents the history of more than the Gilmores.

"According to Coleman, people are like walking libraries, and if they don't share their stories, that history gets lost. She encourages families to document as much of their history as they can.

" 'It's so important,' she said. 'I feel like I finally have a sense of place.'

"As she remains proud of her history, Coleman said her family is proud of her for discovering it and of the Gilmore legacy.

"With the ongoing projects at Montpelier showcasing the enslaved community through the South Yard restoration, new tours on slavery and a slavery exhibit set to be open in 2017, Coleman said she thinks the reality of slavery and the contributions of African-Americans are coming to light.

" 'The enslaved were the reason why James Madison could do as much as he did. The enslaved freed him up to concentrate on the Constitution, to study and read,' she said. 'I've always felt the enslaved really built America'.... "³

Note: Montpelier's African American Descendants' Project can be found at <https://digitaldoorway.montpelier.org/project/montpelier-descendants-project/>

³ Galavaz, Amber. "Following the lineage of the Gilmore family." *The Daily Progress*, March 6, 2016, Google, Accessed July 16, 2021, https://dailyprogress.com/following-the-lineage-of-the-gilmore-family/article_b63dc7d4-0138-572e-9f35-135013c70a53.html

An article in *Garden and Gun* gives further details about Mr. Gilmore while explaining the collaboration of Montpelier with its enslaved population:

**“The Descendants”
By Randall Kenan**

“Montpelier, the Virginia home of President James Madison, has pioneered a bold approach to historical interpretation, thanks to its relationship with a key group: the families of the men and women Madison enslaved”⁴



“From left: Rebecca Gilmore Coleman in the restored cabin of her great-grandfather George Gilmore, a freedman formerly enslaved by James Madison; A house lock unearthed on an archaeological dig in Montpelier’s South Yard, where the domestic slave quarters once stood.”⁵

Photographs were taken by Bill Phelps courtesy of *Garden and Gun*

“Time had not been kind to the old Gilmore cabin.

“Vines and brush crept up and along the crumbling cottage, covering the wood-slat walls and fieldstone chimney. It was 2000, and for decades the structure had sat abandoned across from

⁴ Kenan, Randall. “The Descendants.” *Garden and Gun* (February/March 2018), Google, Accessed July 16, 2021, <https://gardenandgun.com/feature/the-descendants/>

⁵ *Ibid.*

the mile-long driveway that led to Montpelier, the Virginia estate of the fourth president of the United States, James Madison.

“George Gilmore, a farmer, saddler, and carpenter formerly enslaved by Madison, had originally built the home after the Civil War from the remains of Confederate officers’ huts that had been on the property, making payments on the land and eventually obtaining the deed, in 1901. Of Gilmore’s children with his wife, Polly, who were born there, one of the sons begat a son who took *his* first breath there, too. That son in turn had a daughter, whose married name is Rebecca Gilmore Coleman.

“Coleman, a native of the same county, only became aware of the cabin’s existence, however, in the 1970s, when her father pointed it out to her. The Montpelier estate had long since reclaimed the land, and even though the cabin had been modified over the years, the underlying structure remained intact, and that was significant—her great-grandfather’s home was one of the few surviving freedman dwellings in the nation.

“By the time the new millennium rolled around, Montpelier itself was coming back to life after more than two centuries in private hands, and Coleman saw her chance. The newly created Montpelier Foundation had just agreed to operate the estate, owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and was raising millions of dollars for the Madison home in the lead-up to the 250th anniversary of the president’s birth, in March 2001. *Why*, Coleman wondered, *shouldn’t they also restore my great-grandfather’s house?*

“So she asked them. The estate said yes.

“ ‘That’s how it all started,’ Coleman says. In the eighteen years since, Montpelier has become one of the most inclusive historic estates in the country, a reputation that traces back directly to her request. With the restoration of the Gilmore cabin, Montpelier began to embrace and engage the African Americans who consider the people once enslaved there their ancestors. In turn, that relationship revolutionized the historical interpretation of the estate, helped fund archaeological digs and genealogical discoveries, and inspired and guided the opening last year of reconstructed slave quarters and *The Mere Distinction of Colour*, a permanent multimedia exhibit that confronts the contradictions and atrocities of slavery. It’s a tribute to Montpelier’s enslaved population that not only radically rethinks traditional interpretation, but also integrates the voices and perspectives of their African American descendants—a group too long excluded from the stories of grand mansions and American presidents.

“In truth, Coleman caught Montpelier at precisely the right moment. For much of the twentieth century, the Du Pont family, whose wealth flowed from a gunpowder dynasty that became the chemical and plastics giant, had owned the estate, and had no qualms about altering the historic property. They added thirty-three rooms to the modest layout of Madison’s Georgian-style home, and tinted the stucco—overlaid on the handsome bricks by a previous owner—pink. The heiress Marion du Pont Scott also expanded the grounds with a school and stables; an avid horse breeder and racer, she hosted an annual steeplechase at Montpelier that still goes on today.



“The view of Madison’s Montpelier home, as seen from the reconstructed stables in the South Yard.”⁶

--Photo by Bill Phelps courtesy of *Garden & Gun*

⁶ *Ibid.*

“James Madison, however, had known a quieter life there. His grandfather Ambrose had been granted the then-2,850-acre tract in 1723, and when the future president inherited the estate, the property included a tobacco plantation and a blacksmithing operation. The Madisons owned around a hundred slaves who worked the grounds—an irony, historians have noted, considering Madison was one of the most outspoken public critics of slavery. Privately, he did little better than his Southern contemporaries. An intellectual with a library of some four thousand books, he did allow those he enslaved to read and write—a rarity, even before harsh slave codes made it illegal. Once free, Paul Jennings, Madison’s valet, even published the first memoir of life inside the White House, *A Colored Man’s Reminiscences of James Madison*. George Gilmore, Rebecca Gilmore Coleman’s ancestor, was literate, too.

“But Madison also posted ads for his escaped slaves, offering rewards for their return, and when he died, in 1836, his will did not stipulate the release of his slaves, as George Washington’s had. Instead, after his death, his wife, Dolley, went bankrupt and sold most of them, as well as the home, which changed hands several more times before the Du Ponts took control in 1901.

“After Marion du Pont Scott died, in 1983, her heirs transferred the twenty-five hundred acres left of the estate to the National Trust. When Coleman made her request in 2000, the home was finally finding its footing as a presidential site open to the public. The Montpelier Foundation planned to begin an expensive restoration of the main house, one that would shed the stucco and the extra rooms the Du Ponts had added. It was only fitting, the foundation concluded, to revive the Gilmore cabin, too. Soon, James Madison University students and professors began researching and analyzing what life had been like for the freedman and his family, while the Montpelier staff shored up the home. All the while, the estate turned to Coleman for her perspective....”⁷

Note: the link below is to the complete article which concludes by telling the story of Montpelier’s inclusive approach to developing descendant engagement--rare for most historic estates:

<https://gardenandgun.com/feature/the-descendants/>

⁷ *Ibid.*