

### Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland

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## Review

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**Millward, Jessica** *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland*. University of Georgia Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780820331089

### Redefining Opportunity: Charity Folk's Life in Slavery and Freedom

The life of a woman named Charity Folks, who survived slavery and charted a path to freedom, anchors Jessica Millward's study of African American women's experiences in early national Maryland. The author applies biographical and genealogical approaches to craft a social history of the experiences of enslaved and free black women in the mid-Atlantic. Millward aligns her work with scholarship that looks to the claims of the enslaved as the most authentic source of freedom. In four thematically organized chapters, the story of Charity Folks offers broader glimpses into the ways enslaved and free black women envisioned and acted upon their claims to freedom in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maryland.

Laws designed to protect slavery made bondage inheritable through enslaved women. In the first chapter, Millward delves into a gender analysis of reproduction and the manner in which motherhood shaped the imperatives of black women in freedom. Probing questions interrogating the real logistical challenges of socializing children while at the same time being denied full authority over the lives of children, helps us to understand just how exceptional enslaved mothers were in exhausting every avenue to teach children strategies of survival and resistance. Thus, Millward captures the tensions between the profitable effects of reproduction on the slavery economy and the real human experiences of "the joys and heartbreaks" that accompany child bearing and parenting. The bond shared among families, and mothers in particular, led many women like Charity Folks to envision a life of freedom that included other family members.

Petitions for freedom reveal the legal strategies that black women employed to secure their freedom. Explored in the second chapter, Millward examines

petitions to show black women's desires to shape a legacy of freedom for family and loved ones. When petitions proved ineffective, women like Charity Folks found alternative routes to petitioning by negotiating privately with slaveholders to secure freedom. These negotiations could involve some form of payment, apprenticeship arrangement, or even years of building relationships with malleable slaveowners that agreed to gradually grant freedom. Subsequently, the next chapter segues into how such private negotiations manifested into possible windows of manumission, which some slaveowning families like the Ridouts and the Snowdens executed gradually or in groups that involved the freedom of close relatives. Likewise, Charity Folks became free along with members of her family, giving her the rare experience of preserving familial ties during an era when slavery threatened to tear families apart. Once freed, as Millward observes in the final chapter, free black women and men organized their families in close communities, and found work as washerwomen, apprentices, and wage laborers. In some instances, such as the case with Charity Folks, former bondwomen managed to acquire property that they would eventually bequeath to their progeny.

This study of the life of Charity Folks contributes to understandings of slavery and freedom in Maryland by offering important evidence of the possibilities and even exceptions that black women experienced in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maryland. As Millward demonstrates, these exceptional circumstances represented breakthroughs carefully conceptualized by enslaved women themselves. While Maryland continued to make efforts to circumscribe the lives of both free and enslaved black women, men, and children, black women such as Charity Folks charted a path that enabled a rich legacy for the Folks and Bishop families to thrive even today. While so many missing pieces of the story could have deepened the interventions of this study, Millward managed to take existing shards of evidence along with an intellectual ethos of prioritizing the experiences of black women, to craft an important contribution to the canon of African American women's history.

*Tamika Nunley is an Assistant Professor of History at Oberlin College. Her book manuscript "By Stealth": Black Women's Strategies for Survival, Resistance and Self-Making, 1830-1865, examines the manner in which free black women challenged race and gender based legal proscriptions by legally and illegally reconstituting their lives and labors.*