Mamout Yarrow: The Man in the Knit Cap
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Yarrow was the “best swimmer ever to swim in the Potomac River.”

From a distance, the canvas portrait of Yarrow Mamout looked oddly modern. Something about the man's casual attitude and his enigmatic expression made me wonder why this painting of an ordinary-looking African American man with a stocking cap and smoking pipe was in the Peabody Room of the Georgetown Public Library. Then I got closer and read the date: 1822.

Now I was really puzzled. When I got home, I Googled Yarrow's name and found something even more astonishing: a portrait of this same man by none other than Charles Willson Peale, one of the most respected early American painters, a man who fought in the Revolution under George Washington and later painted celebrated portraits of Washington and other Founding Fathers. One explanation for Peale's interest in Yarrow was his belief that the former slave, who followed Muslim convention of putting his last name first, was well over 100 years old.

When I mentioned encountering two early 19th-century portraits of the same largely unknown black man to Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, she said any portrait of an African American from this period was rare.

Then I was hooked. I would spend the next three years tracking any lead I could find about who Yarrow Mamout was and why his legacy was committed to canvas nearly 200 years ago.

I soon learned that the canvas of Yarrow in the Peabody Room was painted by Georgetown artist James Alexander Simpson three years after Peale's portrait of Yarrow, which hangs at the Atwater Kent Museum in Philadelphia.

The Peale portrait is famous in art history circles, and for good reason. Sidney Hart of the National Portrait Gallery and editor of the Peale Family Papers called Peale's painting "the most sensitive portrait in early America with an African American as the sitter."

Curiously, after Peale died, the subject of the unlabeled painting was identified as George Washington's personal servant, Billy Lee — the only African American a limited imagination
could conceive Peale would have seen fit to paint. The confusion lifted in 1948, when an art historian, looking through Peale's diary, figured out that the painting must be Yarrow Mamout, not Billy Lee.

Yarrow himself, though, has been largely ignored by history. The Georgetown library has a few manuscripts, clippings and books that mention him, but I had to sift through government records, manuscripts, books and newspapers, and take oral histories, to reconstruct his life and legacy in detail. I also needed a little help from friends -- and luck.

The earliest narrative mention of Yarrow is in a book titled A Chorographical and Statistical Description of the District of Columbia by David Warden. Published in Paris in 1816, the book was intended to describe the new capital of the United States to Europeans. In the course of writing about African Americans in Washington, Warden recounted what Gen. John Mason of Analostan Island (now Roosevelt Island) told him about Yarrow in an 1811 visit to Georgetown.

According to Mason, Yarrow had "toiled late and early, and in the course of a few years he had amassed a hundred dollars" on which to retire. He gave it to a merchant for safekeeping, but the entire sum was lost when the merchant died insolvent. Yarrow worried because he was no longer young and strong. Still, he went back to work, laboring for fixed wages by day, and weaving nets and baskets to sell by night. When he'd saved another $100, he gave the money to a different merchant with the same result: Yarrow lost his savings a second time when the merchant went bankrupt.

Going back to work a third time, Yarrow saved $200. This time, according to Warden:

"By the advice of a friend, who explained to him the nature of a bank, he purchased shares to this amount in that of Columbia [Bank of Georgetown], in his own name, the interest of which now affords him a comfortable support. Though more than eighty years old, he walks erect, is active, cheerful, and good-natured. His history is known to several respectable families, who treat him with attention. On Christmas, his great delight is to fire a gun under their windows at break of day, which is intended as a signal for his dram. When young, he was the best swimmer ever seen on the Potomac; and though his muscles are now somewhat stiffened by age, he still finds pleasure in his exercise. Fond of conversation, he often, in broken language, thus relates the story of his life, which we insert as a specimen of curious dialect: -- 'Olda massa been tink he got all de work out of a Yaro bone. He tell a Yaro, go free Yaro; you been work nuff for me, go work for you now . . . Yaro work a soon -- a late -- a hot -- a cold. Sometime he sweat -- sometime he blow a finger.'"

In 1819, eight years after the Warden interview, Peale came looking for Yarrow. Peale had come to Washington to paint President James Monroe for the collection of presidential portraits at Peale's museum in Philadelphia. Vice President Daniel Tompkins, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford, House Speaker Henry Clay and a bevy of senators, congressmen and commodores also sat for the painter. Most paid for the privilege.

Money was not what attracted Peale to Yarrow. The elderly Yarrow could hardly afford someone of Peale's stature. Besides, Peale kept the painting, so he obviously didn't charge.

Peale seemed interested in Yarrow for two reasons. First, Peale fancied himself a scientist as well
as an artist. He had studied longevity and, for a time, theorized that human beings could live to be 200. Peale's diary suggests he thought Yarrow proved his theory: "I heard of a Negro who is living in Georgetown said to be 140 years of age . . . He is comfortable in his situation having Bank stock and lives in his own house . . . I propose to make a portrait of him should I have the opportunity." Peale later revised Yarrow's age downward, but only by six years.

Second, although Peale once owned slaves, he had come to oppose slavery and may have been hoping for an opportunity to paint a prosperous African American to make a point about racial equality. In 1810, Peale's son, Raphaelle, had painted a dignified portrait of the Rev. Absalom Jones, an African American minister. A portrait of a man like Yarrow, who had gone from slavery to relative wealth, would complement Raphaelle's work.

But the real Yarrow might not be quite the man you see in the Peale painting, at least not if you compare it with Simpson's portrait. Simpson taught art at Georgetown College and earned money by doing portraits. He painted Yarrow in 1822, just three years after Peale did, but Yarrow looks much older and far less prosperous. The Simpson painting was called "an admirable likeness" by the Rev. Thomas Bloomer Balch in an 1859 lecture. Balch's opinion deserves weight. He grew up in Georgetown and succeeded his father as minister of the Presbyterian church two blocks from Yarrow's house.

There is another reason the Peale painting may be too flattering. An inspection of Yarrow's clothing shows that he is wearing what appear to be the same blue jacket and red waistcoat in both sittings. In the Peale painting, Yarrow has an expensive leather coat draped over his shoulders. It contributes to a look of achievement and wealth. He isn't wearing it in the Simpson portrait. Perhaps the coat belonged not to Yarrow but rather to the wealthy artist who, according to his diary, traveled around Washington in the winter in a horse-drawn cab. Since he went to Yarrow's house in Georgetown in January, he may have put his own coat over Yarrow's shoulders for artistic purposes.

Washington was a very different city then, one that could be terrifying for African Americans. Men and women were bought and sold as slaves every day. A freedman might be indistinguishable from a slave on the street, and any difference might be unimportant to slave traders. Based on a manumission paper first filed in Maryland, Yarrow was freed in 1796 and bought his house four years later, but he was an exception. The 1800 census counted 400 "free persons of color or Indians not taxed" and 2,072 slaves out of a total Georgetown population of 8,144.

Peale's diary tells us more about the man. "I spend [spent] the whole day & not only painted a good likeness of him, but also the drapery & background." The next morning, Peale went back to Yarrow's house to touch up the painting and to investigate further. His diary continues:

"Yarrow owns a House & lots and is known by most of the Inhabitants of Georgetown & particularly by the Boys who are often teasing him which he takes in good humour. It appears to me that the good temper of the [man] has contributed considerably to longevity. Yarrow has been noted for sobriety & a chearfull conduct, he professes to be a mahometan, and is often seen & heard in the Streets singing Praises to God -- and conversing with him he said man is no good unless his religion comes from the heart . . . The acquaintance of him often banter him about eating Bacon and drinking Whiskey -- but Yarrow says it is no good to eat Hog -- & drink whiskey is very bad. I retouched his Portrait the morning after his first setting to mark what
rinkles & lines to characterise better his Portrait."

Whatever Yarrow told Peale, he wasn't 134 years old in 1819. He was in his eighties. This more plausible age comes from two sources. First, after Yarrow's owner died, the 1796 inventory of his estate listed Yarrow's age as 60. Second, when David Warden visited Georgetown in 1811 for his book, he was told that Yarrow was older than 80. This may not have been the only instance of Yarrow pulling Peale's leg. He told Peale that he didn't drink whiskey, but Gen. Mason had told Warden that Yarrow fired a gun on Christmas morning as a signal for his "dram," by which Warden presumptively meant alcohol.

After finishing the portrait, Peale went to the bank in which Yarrow owned stock "to see some of the family [who] had knowledge of Him for many years & whose Ancesters had purchased him from the Ship that brought him from Afreca -- a Mr. Bell in a Bank directed me to an ancient Widow who had set him free."

Peale wasn't the best of orthographers. In addition to the obvious misspellings, he got the name of the bank officer wrong. The president of the Columbia Bank of Georgetown then was not "Mr. Bell" but rather Thomas Brooke Beall. He was a member of the prominent Beall family of Maryland. His great-great-grandfather, Ninian Beall, had come from Scotland and purchased property along the Potomac River that he called the Rock of Dunbarton. Today it is called Georgetown. Peale's spelling error is understandable, though. The name Beall is often pronounced "Bell." Ninian himself reportedly told strangers to pronounce his name "like a ringing bell."

From the bank, Peale went to visit the "Widow Bell," who had freed Yarrow. She was in fact Margaret Beall, widow of Brooke Beall; he was a distant cousin of bank president Thomas Beall. A Montgomery County researcher, Eleanor Vaughn Cook, discovered this 20 years ago when she saw Yarrow's name in the inventory of Brooke Beall's estate. Another researcher, Diane Broadhurst, discovered Yarrow had a son named Aquilla.

According to Peale's diary, Margaret Beall told him that Yarrow came from Guinea when he was about 14 years old and was purchased by the Beall family from a Capt. Dow. She said her husband planned to build a new house in Georgetown and asked Yarrow to make the bricks for it. He told Yarrow that he would free him when the house was finished. Yarrow made the bricks, but Brooke Beall died before the house was completed. So, Margaret Beall freed Yarrow.

Thus, the basic facts seem to be these. Yarrow was born in Guinea about 1736. He was brought to Maryland as a slave and purchased by Brooke Beall's father, Samuel. Brooke Beall inherited him. Yarrow was freed after nearly half a century of servitude and four years later bought the house and lot on a street now called Dent Place in Georgetown. He was about 83 when Peale painted him, and died four years later, on January 19, 1823. This last was documented in an obituary in the Gettysburg Compiler of February 12, 1823. The obituary's wording is so similar to Peale's diary entry that Peale himself may have written it:

"Died -- at Georgetown, on the 19th ultimo, negro Yarrow, aged (according to his account) 136 years. He was interred in the corner of his garden, the spot where he usually resorted to pray . . . it is known to all that knew him, that he was industrious, honest, and moral -- in the early part of his life he met with several losses by loaning money, which he never got, but he persevered in industry and economy, and accumulated some Bank stock and a house and lot, on which he lived
comfortably in his old age -- Yarrow was never known to eat of swine, nor drink ardent spirits."

Yarrow's Dent Place property, where he died and was buried, stayed in his son's name until 1838, when the city of Georgetown auctioned it to recover unpaid taxes of $100.

Two townhouses now occupy Yarrow's lot. They have large back yards where the garden and grave must have been. In the mid-1950s, then-Sen. John F. Kennedy and his new wife, Jacqueline, rented the house across the street from Yarrow's property.

Early last December, I went to Dent Place with Nancy Kassner, archaeologist for the District of Columbia. We wanted to see if ground-penetrating radar could be used to spot an underground anomaly indicative of a grave. The current owners had consented. But, unfortunately, the back yards are landscaped, and the lots themselves have been terraced. Radar couldn't be used in most spots and might not do any good in any event. Yarrow's body may have been moved or buried under fill dirt too deep for radar to penetrate. We abandoned the plan. Besides, as Kassner pointed out, after almost 200 years, Yarrow's body has probably "returned to the earth."

At the office of the D.C. recorder of deeds, documents show that, although Yarrow purchased the Dent Place property in 1800, he worried that he did not have clear title. Perhaps this was because he had not yet recorded, in D.C., the manumission paper that freed him. So, in 1803, he and Francis Deakins, the man who had sold him the property, re-deeded it to Yarrow's son Aquilla.

The procedure for recording a transfer required the deed be taken to the recorder and copied by hand into a large ledger, and then returned to the owner. The original has disappeared.

However, the old ledger book, Volume 10 of Liber K, is at the National Archives. Yarrow's deed is recorded on page 71. Opening the cumbersome book, I expected to see "Francis Deakins" and perhaps an "X," indicating that Yarrow was illiterate, in the signature block of the deed. Deakins's name was there all right, copied in the legible hand of the recorder of deeds. But in place of "X" or "Yarrow Mamout" were foreign-looking words.

Kevin Smullin Brown, a scholar of Arabic and Islam at University College London, looked at a copy that was e-mailed to him. He guessed that the recorder of deeds was trying to copy a signature that was in Arabic. And, given that the signer was Yarrow Mamout, Brown speculated the original may have read, "Mahmoud Yaro, God Willing."

Sulayman Nyang, a professor of African Studies at Howard University, also looked at an e-mailed copy. He called the signature "distorted Arabic," also speculating that the recorder had attempted to copy the foreign signature. Nyang concluded that Yarrow was probably literate in Arabic and of Fulani heritage, among whom the name Yaro may be found today.

The house on Dent Place wasn't Yarrow's only real estate undertaking, nor was Aquilla his only heir. Court records at the National Archives show that in 1843 a woman named Nancy Hillman of Frederick filed a lawsuit in the District to collect on an unpaid loan that Yarrow had made in 1821 to help a merchant buy a "two story brick dwelling and store house with extensive back buildings, situated on the west side" of what is now Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown.

Hillman said in the suit that she was the daughter of Yarrow's sister and his only surviving heir.
In 1850, the court awarded her $451 in unpaid principal and interest on the loan. Hillman died a year later. She apparently had no heirs. The copy of her will, which was filed with the Frederick County probate court, left her entire estate to two lawyers in Frederick. The reason for this is unknown. Nor is anything more known about Yarrow's sister. She presumably came from Africa as a slave and stayed in touch with her brother.

During the proceedings, Hillman told the court that Yarrow's son Aquilla died in Harpers Ferry in 1832. The 1830 census showed Aquilla Yarrow as a freedman living in rural Washington County, Md. Records at the county register of wills confirm that Aquilla died in 1832. His estate was valued at $170, but his debts exceeded his assets. There is no mention of heirs.

I shared the probate records with Diane Broadhurst, the Montgomery County researcher. She noticed the word "Polly" next to an entry for fabric in the inventory of Aquilla's estate. Broadhurst pointed out that the 1850 census for Washington County listed a 45-year-old black woman named Mary Yarrow. Broadhurst suggested that this Mary and Aquilla's Polly were the same person, noting that Polly was often a nickname for Mary. Polly, who was about 15 years younger than Aquilla, undoubtedly was his wife.

Looking at a contemporary map of Harpers Ferry, W.Va., I made an accidental discovery. Among the roads across the Potomac four miles away in Washington County, Md., was one named "Yarrowsburg Road."

Yarrowsburg isn't a town; it's just a collection of old, and older, houses at the intersection of Yarrowsburg, Reed and Kaetzel roads. It lies in Pleasant Valley, nestled against the hulk of Elk Ridge. The surrounding countryside is birthplace and battlefield of the Civil War and of significance in African American history. Before seizing the arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859, abolitionist John Brown and his men lived for several months on a farm they rented only a mile over Elk Ridge from Yarrowsburg. In the summers of 1862, 1863 and 1864, Union and Confederate armies clashed repeatedly throughout Pleasant Valley. The Battle of Antietam took place six miles as the crow flies from Yarrowsburg. It was after this battle that Lincoln brought forth the Emancipation Proclamation.

In Yarrowsburg one day last fall, I ran into William Mullenix, whose family has lived there for generations.

I casually asked Mullenix: "How did Yarrowsburg get its name?" He answered immediately. "It was named after a woman named Polly Yarrow, who lived here a long time ago. My grandfather told me."

Minutes later, Mullenix volunteered the clincher: "She was black, you know. My grandfather said the place was named after her because she was the midwife for the area. Delivered all the babies, black and white. She was old, but I don't know when she died."

Local historian John Frye, a lifelong resident of Pleasant Valley and director of the Western Maryland Room at the Washington County Free Library in Hagerstown, furnished me with a copy of an 1877 atlas of Maryland. It marks the location of "Mrs. Yarrow's house." The house is gone now, but it had once stood across the road from where I met Mullenix. He remembered being told that it was a tiny two-room house that had burned to the ground.
In an archival copy of the Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light dated November 26, 1885, this obituary appeared: "An old colored woman, named Polly Yarrow, whose exact age is not known, but was over 100 years, died on last Saturday, at a little village, called Yarrowsburg, near Crampton's Gap, in Pleasant Valley, in this county." Mullenix said that Polly Yarrow was buried in a field down the road. He recalled there had once been a marker for her grave, but he hasn't been able to find it lately.

The Rev. Sherman Lambert is pastor of Mount Moriah Baptist Church in nearby Garretts Mill, Md. Its congregation draws from a small African American community a mile from Yarrowsburg. Lambert invited me to Sunday services to talk with church members. I hoped to get more oral histories about Polly Yarrow, but no one had heard of her. Everyone at the church was surprised to learn that Yarrowsburg was named for a black woman and to hear the story of Charles Willson Peale and Yarrow Mamout, because Yarrowsburg itself has never been considered an African American community.

After services, church trustee Jim Brown and I strolled through Mount Moriah Cemetery with Lambert. It was a crystal-clear fall afternoon. Pleasant Valley was earning its name. We talked about the many graves dating back more than 100 years and the need to find out who was buried in the unmarked ones.

At the end of our walk, I asked Brown: "There weren't many at church today. Judging by the graveyard, the black community here used to be larger. What happened to all the people?" Brown answered: "Brown v. Topeka Board of Education is what happened. Once the schools were integrated, the kids here went to the big high school in Hagerstown. A diploma from that school meant something. It allowed the young people to get jobs in the city or go to college. Black people finally had opportunity."

America was hardly the land of opportunity for Africans when Yarrow first set foot here more than 250 years ago. Nonetheless, he worked hard and overcame not only slavery but also financial setbacks to win the respect of those who knew him. He left behind two remarkable paintings and this, his story. And then there is Yarrowsburg, that rarest of American villages bearing the African name of a man who was brought here in bondage.

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