

Interview with Barbara Clark Smith (Curator, National Museum of American History)
Probate Record for Moore Fauntleroy (1791)

1. Introduction (2:28)

Right at the outset it lays out what this document is about. “In Obedience to an order of Richmond County Court bearing date the 7th day of February 1791.” The County Court has issued an order and says “We the Subscribers therein named met at the Clifts. . . and upon oath taken before Robert Tomlin, have appraised in Current Money all the Slaves & personal Estate of Moore Fauntleroy deceased, that was there produced to us.” And then the list begins.

This is a report then of the three gentlemen who sign their names at the very end of the document—Robert Mitchell, James Kelly, and Henry Sisson—who have been named and appointed by the court to go to the Clifts where Moore Fauntleroy had recently died and make a list of his estate. Not the real estate, not the land. The court already has records of what the land boundaries are that he owns. But the personal estate, the possessions that he owned, and the slaves. And the reason that they’re doing that is because so much wealth in this time period is in the form of these possessions.

And the court needs to know what this decedent owned, what it’s worth, in order to make sure that the will gets executed fairly and that the different heirs get the right division of the estate.

The men taking the inventories have been appointed by the court, but this isn’t what they do for a living. These are neighbors. They may be particularly knowledgeable neighbors who can figure out what the market price of these things would be. But it’s not always the same people inventory to inventory, so it’s a little bit haphazard: Where do you start? What you include?

Some inventories include artifacts you don’t find in other inventories. Some inventories will say, “there’s a group of books.” And some will list all the books. Sometimes that’s because these are valuable volumes, but other times it may just be this inventory-taker is more thorough.

They tell you what they wanted to know for their purposes as opposed to what you want to know for your purposes. You’re really eavesdropping on these people.

One of the questions we don’t know simply from the one inventory is where do these people fit. They own over a hundred slaves and my impression is that makes them pretty well off. This is a pretty big operation. But I’d have to go look at all the inventories and tax lists of the county and say, “where do they fit?” Does everybody that they know own these sorts of things or not? Like most inventories, I think this one answers a lot of questions, but it probably raises more than it answers.

2. Historical Context (1:34)

In the 1790s, northern Virginia is going through a transition. This whole mid Atlantic—Delaware, Maryland, Virginia—which have been tobacco centered, are shifting over to producing wheat. And they're doing that partly because the land is tired of tobacco. By 1790, it's over a century of tobacco cultivation in many places. But also because there's a market for wheat—both in the big cities (Philadelphia has grown by leaps and bounds), but also in Europe and the West Indies. And so it makes sense to shift from tobacco to wheat.

It has a couple of consequences. One is it's less labor intensive. And as they shift, the plantation owners and slave owners start shifting their way of life. You see this before the Revolution. It begins in some areas where the building of the big houses that we associate with later plantations starts because you've got the time to put workers to work on that. You're not constantly tending the tobacco. You've got money from the marketing of the wheat and livestock. So the building of these sorts of large houses and the furnishings, that's becoming much more common.

This house would stand out on the landscape. I'd be interested in knowing if there's architectural history, if it was a federal house in the new federal style. This is the new republic after the Revolution, after the Constitution. There's probably a certain pride in being these important people in this new young republic that's becoming prosperous, at least for some people in some places.

3. House Overview (1:55)

I like to start with an overview and just figure out how many rooms are there here. What were they called and, in general, what were they for? And this can be difficult because they called rooms by completely different names than we do. When they called something a hall, they usually meant a large room, not a passageway. And when they called something a closet, it could be either a small room—four walls, door—or it could be a piece of furniture or an armoire where you would keep clothes.

So sometimes you have to figure out: Is this a room when they call it a closet or is it a wardrobe that contains things? And you can figure that out in many of these cases by looking at what's in it.

So I've counted hall closet as one room, hall as another room. Dining room is a room and chamber is a room, four rooms. As well as a passageway and a closet on the first floor.

And then we go upstairs over the chamber and then it looks like another chamber even though there's only one bed and furniture in it. Chamber is usually the bedroom.

Then over the hall is another room upstairs. Over the passage, that seems to be a hallway or a passage. Over the dining room is a room and then in the hall closet, that might be a fourth room upstairs or that may just be a cupboard.

Finally, you get in the kitchen. The kitchen might have been attached to the back of the house the way kitchens tended to be in Virginia or even a separate building because it's so hot that many people built their kitchens as a separate building.

I'm thinking about a house that contains seven or eight rooms, four downstairs and three or four upstairs. Many houses in the 17th century and on into the 18th century are two-room houses. This is a big house. It's so big, they list all of the rooms separately. Many inventories of middling farmers will simply list all the things. They won't even tell you they've moved from one room to another.

4. Dining Room (1:05)

In the dining room, there's the obvious dining table, other tables, leather-bottom chairs, one carpet, a pair and irons. They have it as if it's two words, but other places one word. Tongs and shovel and a white oak oval table. Also a clothespress which is a little wardrobe where clothes would be stored.

Then we get into the most interesting part of the dining room, the cupboard, which goes on for half a page. One Japand sugar box. It reminds us that sugar is a valuable thing. "Japand" means varnished, sometimes colored by a mineral or a pigment. It's a technique that was very popular in East Asia. This may or may not have come from East Asia, but it's in the style which became really popular in England and in the colonies in the 18th century.

Then we have "china deep plates." Here we come across an important thing, and that is abbreviations. That "14 do shallow do." The "do" is an abbreviation for "ditto" meaning the same as the above. You can spend a lot of time wondering what they're talking about in the 18th century if you don't know that. So 14, blue-and-white, shallow, deep plates.

5. Kitchen (0:59)

In the kitchen are all sorts of things you'd expect to find in the kitchen—lots of pots, a "Dutch Oven," which is a pot or a metal box. There's a "Copper Fish Kettle." I like thinking about the fish because they do live near the Rappahannock River, so maybe fish was a good thing to be able to cook.

"Water Tubs," "pales"—it makes you think about having to go and carry the water and bring it in to do any sort of cooking or cleaning. And then any number of utensils, "Grid Irons" and a "Homony pestle." Hominy is hulled corn and to get the hull off, the bran and the germ off, you've got to grind it to make hominy grits or hominy cakes.

There're a few things like the "Flat Irons" which you use for pressing clothes and that's not for cooking. So why is it in the kitchen? They have to be hot and the way you heat the irons is you put them on the stove or near the fire. And so the pressing of clothes would have gone on near the kitchen stove.

"Ladle," "forks," "Garden shares." It makes you realize there's going to be garden, a vegetable garden, right outside.

6. “Store House” (1:24)

As we go into the “Store house,” I think you get some more information about the work. How this whole plantation or farm is operating. How are they affording those beautiful things in the cabinet and the really nice dinners? We begin to get at that through these really ordinary things.

Just going down the list, “Canisters.” Then “1 box and 3/4 lb Shoe Thread.” So that’s probably thread for sewing shoes. And if you’re not a shoemaker, well you still might want to have shoe thread for repairing shoes because shoes come apart fairly often and you need to re-sew them.

Underneath that, though, are the “Weavers slays” and I looked that up. That’s a kind of reed. Elsewhere it says “Oznabrigs Thread.” “Oznabrig” is a kind of fabric. Maybe they’re making fabric or maybe they weave baskets. Or maybe they at least do a little of that. You don’t have a big loom listed, so that’s obviously not a big business. But they have some of the tools that you would use in weaving.

They also seem to have grown flax for the fabric because they owned “Swingle Trees” which are wooden instruments for beating the flax and opening it up. As well as a “Hackle.” And the hackle is a large comb that you pull the fiber through and it separates it and cleans it. You can later turn it into the threads. And there’s also “2 old Flax Wheels.” And so somebody turned the fiber into threads that you could then make into a flax or hemp fabric.

7. Imported Goods (1:28)

The “Queens ware” was imported from England and it was by this time, the 1790s, not the very expensive, new thing it had once been. Part of why Wedgwood did so well as a manufacturer was he came up with this kind of middling stuff. Stuff that the people who aren’t really wealthy can afford. And then to make it sound better, he called it “Queens ware.” It wasn’t the fine porcelain that a few people could afford. It was good porcelain that more and more people could afford. And starting in the 1760s and ’70s, more Americans owned that. During the Revolution, they stop importing all that, but after the Revolution they go mad importing this again.

Tea is imported from the Indies or a variety of places. Coffee is imported. So, many of these social activities that are suggested by these possessions in the cupboard—tea drinking, coffee drinking, use of “Queens ware”—suggest not just that there are these occasions, but there’re occasions at which the family indulges in imported goods. It shows they’re members of this cosmopolitan world. They have access to tea. They have access to coffee. They have the latest French dessert dishes. They think in terms of the consumption of European goods.

Certainly much of the furniture would’ve been made in the colonies, partly because it’s just very expensive to import something big. Really well-to-do people might have

furniture from Europe, but in general, you could imagine the chairs made locally. Philadelphia or some town nearby in Virginia.

8. Social Life (1:23)

They obviously either drank a lot of tea or had a lot of people over for tea. They have a lot of teacups. Coffee cups, a butter saucer, mugs, tumblers, more teacups, white Queensware, a tea board which would be a tray for serving tea. And then they also have their coffee set: coffee cups, pot, milk pot, a parcel of old saucers, a slop bowl for spilling.

Looking over at the prices, one of the most valuable things in the cupboard, the “Pyramid of Salvers and Glasses complete.” Salvers were little footed servers. They have these little feet and then a little tray at the top of it. And you stacked them in a pyramidal form and you put on them fruits, either fresh or dried fruits, and nuts and candies. It was known as the French style or *a la Français*. This was a very fashionable and valuable thing to have.

This whole cupboard I find quite interesting. It’s clear they have some lovely things, they have some imported things. They have things that suggest they do a lot of entertaining. These meals are important. And display of these possessions is important. The cupboard doesn’t have a separate value, so it may be a built-in cupboard. So it’s built in a house on the assumption that you will want to display something.

You can imagine some of these arranged nicely, especially that “Pyramid of Salvers and Glasses complete.” So that even when you weren’t using that or serving that, your guests saw that you owned this very nice thing.

9. Daily Life (1:33)

One thing in many of these rooms are the “andirons” or “And irons” and “Irons Tongs & Shovel.” And that’s reminding us how did they get heat. They had fireplaces. And any room where people were going to spend any length of time needed a fireplace. So you were likely to have andirons, iron, tongs, and shovel. That’s an ordinary part of life in a way that it isn’t for us today. They may be decorative, but they’re really just making life possible, especially in the winters.

The other item that shows up in the dining room and in the hall and over the hall are looking glasses. The one in the upstairs room is called a “dressing glass,” so that tells us probably somebody used this to dress and see how they looked. The looking glasses in the hall and the dining room are on the first floor and those are reasonably valuable items. They’re also very popular at the time.

You also see lighting—“candlesticks”—here and there. And the fireplaces, of course, shed light. But the mirrors do have an important function in these rooms of reflecting light from outdoors, reflecting the light from the fire, and increasing the amount of light in the room which in the evenings is really important.

You may have very specialized “pickle plates” and “tea cups,” but in the closet in the chamber, you’ve got your “Stone pots & mugs” and “lard pots & bottles.” Stuff that is not elegant in the least. I can’t imagine the pot containing lard is a beautiful thing, so you keep it in the closet. You don’t put it in your dining room.

“Mortar and pestle” remind us how importance spices were when you don’t have a refrigerator to keep your meat fresh. You’ve got to put a lot of spices on it or you won’t be able to eat it.

10. Family Life (1:09)

I did notice what’s not in here. There’s no suggestion of children. There’s no child’s bed. There is one trundle bed—although they call it a “Truckle” bed—which is one of those low beds that you store under a bed that is lifted higher by the wooden frame. And sometimes those would be occupied by children. But they might also be occupied by a nurse or older person or servant or slave. Or just be a spare bed.

I would want to know how old Moore Fauntleroy was when he died and you could find that out in the court records. If he’d been married, had children, then perhaps those children were now adult and had moved away. So that any children’s furniture would now be with them and the grandkids.

You see artifacts here that clearly represent women’s work and I assume at some point he’s likely to have been married. But you don’t actually see evidence that there’s a wife or children.

You don’t find things like toys, but then in general, you wouldn’t find that anyway. First, because people didn’t own as many toys. And second, because toys wouldn’t have been worth all that much money. We’re stuck with what the inventory-takers think is important and that’s not an important part of the estate.

11. Slave Life (2:30)

Right up front, it faces us with the most difficult job which is to reconcile this list of human beings and then across the page, values. It always stops me just for a minute to see a person’s name and then a value next to it because it’s really hard to think about human beings as property and to be reminded that that’s what they were to the people taking this inventory.

This document’s only meant to tell the court two things about these people—their names and the value in the market so you can divide up the estate appropriately. They’re not really interested in telling us much else.

Some inventories will tell you precisely who lives at this quarter or who lives in this area, but this doesn’t tell us a lot. We have to speculate based on what limited information we have and the way that it’s organized.

It's not just a single list. There's a listing and then a line. And then another listing and a line. The largest group is 13 and then the smallest groups are two. We see some of the groups of two where you have Eve listed and Daniel, and then Dinah and Vincent. And, again, separated from the people above and below them with the lines over on the right. And that suggests to me that those might be family groupings—a mother and a child.

That's supported when we look at the market values. We might think the amount someone was valued at in the market would have to do with their age and their gender and their health. If you're an adult healthy male, you're going to be worth more than if you were either very old or very young and less productive. Eve is valued at 45 pounds sterling and Daniel at 8. Eight seems to be a repeated amount which suggests to me that that might be a child's valuation.

They may not be families in the sense of a nuclear family. They may include brothers and sisters, or aunts and uncles, grandparents. We don't know. But they do range in number from 2 to 13. And it's interesting that they are listed in these groups which means that the inventory takers recognize them in this way and they [are] presenting themselves in these groups. And that does suggest something to me about the importance and identity of the family group to the slaves themselves. They understand themselves and identify themselves as members of something—a household and maybe a family.

On the other hand, I would expect at least some of the women to have occupations that were specific—nursing or healing or taking care of children or working in the house. And they don't indicate any of that.

12. Slave Names (1:40)

This is such a tricky document. These are the list of names given by the inventory takers and so it's a name presumably given to them either by the slaves or by the white heirs. You don't quite know whether are these the names that the slaves identified themselves by or the white people identified the slaves by? Or both? These are mostly English names. You don't see a lot of names that are reminiscent of Africa, which you do in some plantations.

There're 107 people divided into 20 groups. Fifty-eight names seem to me the names of males, and 42 that seem the names of females. There were several names I just couldn't tell. Jessie—that could be male or female. Easter. But it looks like roughly even genders.

There are a few who have a second name which is maybe a surname. There's Molly Pecure. And then there's James Crank and then Billy Pecure and Betty Pecure. You'd want to know why do some slaves have surnames and most don't. Why would they think of themselves as having that name? Why are they recognized as having that name? Billy and Betty could be the parents of Molly who is now living in another household or Molly's the parent of Betty and Billy. You'd certainly suggest a family connection that's important.

One thing I'd want to do is look at other records in the neighborhood and see if there's a Pecure family, African American or white, and wonder what these connections are.

The other thing I noticed about these names is some are repeated and that suggests possible family connection. There seems to be three Manuels. It doesn't strike me as a very common name. Maybe we have here a father and son or at least someone who's named for someone else.

13. Household Work (2:14)

As you go further into the storehouse, there are other suggestions of the work that's going on. To begin with, I asked the question, "what sort of crops were they growing here?" There is "1 Cotton Gin." It's not worth too much—2 shillings and 6 pence. And then on the next page, there's "35 lb Cotten in Seeds." So they were probably growing cotton, although that's not all that much cotton. This is not primarily a cotton plantation.

There are some hoes—"10 hilling Hoes," 20 shillings, and "10 broad" ditto, 25 shillings. Hilling hoes are hoes for building up a little hill of dirt around the young plant. They did that for tobacco, but they also did that for corn. And that's where that whole list of livestock comes in. Corn is what you needed to feed livestock, so there must have been a lot of corn being grown.

Under the livestock, they have "Hogs," "breeding Sows" and "pigs," "Cattle," "Steers," a variety of horses, "Mares," "Ewes and Lambs," "Sheep." "33 head of Cattle." That's pretty many. So I connect the hilling hoes with growing corn for the animals. Also because there's no suggestion here of tobacco drying houses or anything else connected with tobacco.

They were also definitely growing wheat. And we see that in the fact they own a dozen "Sickles" and "2 long Scythes" with "Cradles." Those are really nice things to own if you're growing and harvesting wheat because the scythe will do the cutting and then the cradle catches the grain in it as you cut it. And then as it piles up, you can just take a straw, take it under your arm and draw it into a little sheaf. If you don't have that, then you've cut it and it lays on the ground and you or somebody else has to come around and bend all the way over and pick it up and make it into a sheaf. So this'll save you a lot of time. And they have two of those, as well as a dozen of the less efficient, just plain sickles. So wheat is definitely being grown on this farm or plantation.

There're a few other tools. "3 Wheat Riddles, of oak Splits." You put the wheat in there and you turn it and out flies the gravel. So it's a way to clean out the wheat and that suggests wheat culture, too. So a lot of these people who were listed, "Jacob" or "Jesse," may have spent their time growing wheat.

14. Skilled Work (1:32)

Some of the tools suggest trades. There's "3 black Smiths flat files." Flat files would've been a metal hand tool which you use to file down wood or metal or horses' hooves. And, again, it makes sense. They have a "Gray horse," a "Bay" horse called "Cyder," a bay

horse called “dabster,” a “Bay Mare, Polly,” a “Gray Mare,” and “2 Bay Colts.” So they would’ve needed some blacksmithing, making shoes for horses. Also, all the small metal work that you have to do around the farm might be done by somebody with blacksmith skills.

Another trade that may have gone on was nail-making. There is on the list “230 lb Iron” and 1,500 “Nails.” When we think of nails, we wouldn’t do it by numbers. You buy nails usually by weight. But nails are valuable things at this point. Presumably some of the slaves are doing this on the side. In the evening around the fire you could make nails and it’ll eventually be worth something when you get enough of them.

There’re “Sheep Shares.” They’ve got sheep, so they probably produced some wool. You could market the wool or trade it with somebody. You could give it to a weaver who had his loom nearby and sell it to him or exchange it to him.

None of these trades—the shoemaking, the weaving, the wool, the blacksmithing, the nail-making—none of that is really a business proposition. They don’t own enough of those things. These are skills that the workers have and for which they’re valuable and in which they probably took pride. But it’s all part of an operation which is supporting a large farm which is primarily producing, I would conclude, wheat, livestock, and then the corn to feed the livestock.

15. Household's Larger Role (1:21)

The “Scales & weights” and the “Steel Yards”—those are also balances for weighing—I don’t know whether certain kinds of trade are taking place here. That people come and you’re trading the corn to them and you’re selling them nails and so we have to weigh to make sure that the exchange is equal.

It’s possible in an operation this size that someone’s being very careful and trying to keep track of loss of material from one part of an operation to another. After all, your workers don’t have a lot of reason for being totally careful, making sure that everything ends up in your pocket. But it does to me suggest some exchange, whether for cash or even within the community of the plantation or farm.

The wheat would probably be harvested and sent to a town nearby where it might be ground and it would very likely be exported to the West Indies. And the livestock also. It might be butchered and salted, put into barrels, and sent out to the West Indies where there was a demand. Particularly this being 1790s. This is just the beginning of a real boom in the trade with the West Indies.

After the Revolution, the Americans are barred from trading with the British West Indies although they still do ‘cause they want to do it and the people in the West Indies want these goods. This plantation is well placed to make money off of this combination of wheat and animals.

16. Missing Information (0:59)

There's none of the stuff that you think is around a house. It's just furniture. It's not the books, small decorative items. You wonder what else was in these rooms, decorative things, perhaps. Or small tools or small items. They seem awfully empty.

There's no prints on the walls, decorating works of art. In many houses, you might find that in the 1790s. They're becoming popular as the new technologies of reproducing prints made them cheaper. You might frame a print, maybe one that's hand-colored. And those aren't listed.

We don't seem to have curtains around the windows in the dining room. If so, they're not listed. They may have been taken down.

I think if you looked at a hundred or five hundred of these, there might be something that leapt out at you about what really is missing. But the inventory-takers are so different from place to place and time to time that you can't be sure that that means something wasn't there.

17. Additional Sources (2:20)

I always start with my trusty dictionary at hand because there will be things I don't understand—preferably an *Oxford English Dictionary* that gives you historical meanings—and try to figure out what's on the list.

Maybe I'd get a map and figure out where that is. It's in eastern Virginia between the Potomac and the Rappahannock Rivers. I might want to look at secondary work about agriculture or social life in the area. Just to make sure that it fits with what I'm concluding based on what's in the inventory.

To really make sense of Moore Fauntleroy's life and his household, I'd really want to know who else lived here in all these beds and sat around the dining room table. And also of the slaves.

I'd want to know a lot more about him. He probably left a will. That would tell us names of heirs, if he has a widow, if he has children. I'd want to know what age he was. Is this the amount he owns at the end of his life? If he's a young man when he dies and he owns this much, then he obviously inherited a lot. This isn't something you could get in a short amount of time. He probably inherited a fair amount to begin with anyway, and built it to this.

I'd be real interested in earlier records of his family, what he started out with. And then records during his lifetime—marriage records, maybe from a local church. I'd love to know if there were letters that he or his family members wrote. I would look at inventories of neighbors because sometimes you can get a sense of the neighborhood.

Sometimes you can go to legal records. If you're lucky, somebody got mad at somebody and sued them over a transaction or an inheritance. And then you can get people in the neighborhood coming and testifying about how people interacted, who owned what, who

did what to whom, and how you knew it. Somebody thought that Fauntleroy charged too much money, didn't deliver as much wheat, and here's how we know. We'd get a much closer look at the operations, regardless of who was right in that lawsuit.

I'd also love letters from people who had been to dinner at the Fauntleroy's house, mentioned what it was like in that dining room. They might say what they had eaten, what had been served.

Another angle would be to look at tax lists and see where Moore Fauntleroy is in the county, in the state. He's clearly one of the better-off people in his area. We know that simply because he has an inventory. Many, many households don't have inventories.

18. Activities With Students (1:41)

On the one hand, it's very rich. On the other hand, it's very spotty. It tells you a few little things about this and it tantalizes you about that. I would think about focusing on just a few things to bring students' attention to.

Certainly slavery and work and the basic economic way this farm or plantation operated. The production of wheat, the importance of the animals. To stop and think about the kinds of jobs involved in that, the kind of work involved. Picking out tools to see what sort of work went on.

A second thing would be to look at the house as its own world and in particular, the public life of the house. What happens in the dining room? What happens in the hall? And that dining room seems to me a real focus of activity. And I might want to ask: Who sat in this dining room? Who came to visit? The dining room is a whole other world from the kitchen and the storeroom and yet they're so totally connected. And the fields and the barn. They're obviously connected.

So I'd be interested in focusing on specific places and trying to see what we can tease out about what happened there. How are things used? Who do you think spent most of their time there? A lot of these people listed, these enslaved people, probably spent no time in this dining room in this house. But maybe some did because some were serving. Many more spent time in the kitchens.

I would even think about drawing a map of the plantation and you can make up where things are. We don't have to know that the kitchen was on the left or the right side of the house. Maybe make a map and think about where most people spent most of their time. Where what kinds of work went on. Where, if you were a guest, you'd be invited to spend time. What you would see and what you wouldn't see if you were a guest.

19. Teaching Tips (1:32)

What do you need to have in most rooms? How did they heat this house? Students could go through and find the andirons. And they find a warming pan, something you put in a bed. Think about the day-to-day.

You could ask what are the most valuable things. The most expensive thing is often the bed and bedding. That's an expensive item because it's big, uses a lot of wood. And it uses a lot of fabric. And fabric was expensive. Maybe ask them what were the valuable things at this moment. Sometimes it's hard to tell because if something's old it might have started out valuable and it isn't now. But is there a pattern?

I also might ask what are the little, inexpensive things. Three tackleblocks with hooks worth 1 shilling and 3 pence—doesn't seem like a lot of money in terms of the whole total.

You might want to go through and ask what things were purchased from elsewhere and what things might've been made on this plantation or farm.

I often want them to think about the artifacts in their house or their room. Which artifact in your room would tell us the most about you? Would it be your soccer uniform? Your MP3 player and your choice of tunes? One big difference is this is a working farm and plantation and not many of our students live in a place like that now.

You could get kids interested in what possessions they own or their family owns. What it would tell a historian if what they've got in a hundred years is just a list. What the historian could figure out. And what the historian maybe couldn't figure out. And then realize that we're in that same position of that hypothetical historian in the future. Here's all these people and their lives and all we've got is little hints of what this means to them.