



Ralph Anderson (1790 – unrecorded)

Ralph Anderson was born prior to February 27, 1790, to enslaved parents Agnes and Sambo Anderson, at George Washington's River Farm in Fairfax County, Virginia.¹ Ralph's mother Agnes, a field laborer, was enslaved to Martha Washington, as part of her dower from her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis. Ralph's father, Sambo Anderson, was a carpenter enslaved to George Washington living across Little Hunting Creek on the Mansion House Farm. Ralph lived at River Farm with his mother and his siblings, Heuky/Hugo (born around July 12, 1784), Cecelia (born about 1785), Anderson (born about 1788), Charity (born in February 1797), Charles (born in December 1798) and Sambo (born about 1801). As a child, Ralph likely performed simple chores such as gathering wood and water, and later, learned to work in the field at River Farm with his mother and his elder siblings. When Washington died in December 1799, his will called for the manumission of the enslaved he held outright, including Ralph's father, to be freed at Martha's death. As he did not hold title to the Custis enslaved, Washington had no authority to free Ralph, his mother, or Ralph's siblings. Martha did not wait and freed George Washington's enslaved one year after his death; however, the Custis enslaved she held remained on Washington's farms, leading to the physical separation of parents and children of the enslaved and freed families. In the case of Ralph Anderson's family, his father Sambo was free, while Ralph's mother, Ralph and his siblings remained enslaved.²

In 1802, Martha Washington died, and the Custis enslaved held by her were divided among her four grandchildren, including Martha Peter of Tudor Place. Ralph Anderson, his mother Agnes, and his siblings were part of Martha Peter's inheritance of 48 enslaved people. The family likely remained on Washington's River Farm until January 1803, when her husband, Thomas, moved several members of the family into Montgomery County, Maryland, to work on Seneca Farm. A deed recorded four of the siblings' importation into Maryland: Hugo/Heuky (age 20), Celia (age 19),

¹ "Ralph A, Farm Reports, 27 Feb 1790," Mount Vernon Slavery Database, <https://www.mountvernon.org/kiosk/slavery-database/?purpose=&person=Ralph+A&skill=&time=&owner=&gender=&location=>, accessed 30 Dec 2023. This farm report indicates Agnes was in childbed for 6 days; previous reports do not exist. Later reports no longer indicate Agnes was out sick indicating Ralph was likely born in the 3 weeks prior to this report as Washington generally afforded his enslaved women four weeks of bedrest after giving birth.

² George Washington's Mount Vernon has written extensively on Sambo Anderson and his wife Agnes, before and after Sambo's manumission. Please see the following on Mount Vernon's website: Jessie MacLeod, "Sambo Anderson," Mount Vernon's *Digital Encyclopedia*, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/sambo-anderson/>; Mary V. Thompson, "Slavery and Family," <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/slavery-and-family/>, accessed 30 Dec 2023.



Anderson (age 14), and Ralph (age 12). Although Agnes, Charity, Charles and the infant Sambo are not listed in this deed, it is likely that all were moved to Maryland, eventually.³

For the next seven years, Ralph worked at Thomas Peter's plantation, Seneca Farm, in Montgomery County, Maryland. In May 1810, Ralph self-emancipated. The following advertisement was placed by Thomas Peter in the *Alexandria Daily Gazette* in June 1810:

Twenty Dollars Reward – Absconded from my farm at the mouth of Seneca, about the 7th of last month, a man whose name is RALPH, 21 years of age, between a black-and-yellow color, nearly 6 feet high, very stout made, yellowish eyes looking heavy, he has but little to say. His apparel was oznaburg shirts, a negro cotton overjacket, and trowsers. It is likely he made away with them and procured other clothing. A free negro man by name Sambo, living on Judge [Bushrod] Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, is his father, and it is very probable he is thereabout or in Alexandria, and with little trouble may be found. The above reward will be given to secure him in Washington City or Alexandria Jail.⁴

Thomas Peter seemed confident that Ralph sought to be reunited with his father, Sambo Anderson. Sambo's home near Mount Vernon was over forty miles from Montgomery County, Maryland, and Ralph would have had to traverse dense forests and follow the Potomac River south, likely crossing at a narrow point, all the while avoiding detection. Ralph's physical description provided by Peter stands out – that he was a quiet man, with heavy eyes. It is possible that his short life of hard field labor and a prolonged separation from his father, and mother and siblings, had taken a toll on Ralph's body. Ralph's arrest or capture date is unknown, but the advertisement ran through December 1810. At some point, Ralph was caught and returned to Thomas Peter.⁵

Little is known about Ralph's life in the intervening years after his self-emancipation in 1810, and his subsequent arrest, other than he likely returned to work as a field laborer on Seneca Farm. In 1830, Thomas Peter manumitted Ralph, who was about 40 years old, for a profit. Ralph Anderson is the only known enslaved person inherited by Martha Peter to have been manumitted. It is unlikely that Thomas Peter manumitted Ralph for sympathetic reasons; the entry in the *District of Columbia Free Negro Registers* indicates that Thomas Peter was paid \$200 for Ralph's freedom. It is very possible that Ralph's father, Sambo Anderson, who had been manumitted in 1801 after George Washington's death, paid Thomas Peter that \$200. As a free man, Sambo purchased the freedom of several members of his family, including his daughter Charity, his grandchildren William and Eliza, and three of Eliza's children, Sambo's great-grandchildren.⁶

³ "A Community Divided," Mount Vernon's *Digital Encyclopedia*, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/a-community-divided/#->, accessed 31 Dec 2023; "Certificate of Importation, Thomas Peter," Montgomery County Deed Book K, page 460, 2 April 1803, Montgomery County Land Records, Montgomery County Circuit Court.

⁴ "Twenty Dollars Reward," *Alexandria Daily Gazette*, 10 June 1810.

⁵ The date and location at which Ralph Anderson was "caught" or arrested is unknown at this time.

⁶ See MacLeod, "Sambo Anderson"; "Registration No. 557," *District of Columbia Free Negro Registers*, page 122.



Throughout his life as an enslaved man, Ralph experienced the cruelty of repeated forced separations from his family members. After his manumission, Ralph disappears from the records. Where might Ralph have gone with his freedom? If he had a spouse or children nearby, would he have stayed close to Seneca Farm or would he have moved to Alexandria to be closer to his free father and siblings? Everything about his life as a freed man, and those of his siblings and mother who remained in bondage, is unknown.

---Heather Bollinger, Research Archivist & Historian⁷

⁷ Heather Bollinger gratefully acknowledges the research and editorial assistance of Molly Kerr, Founding Director (History Revealed, Inc. Alexandria, VA).