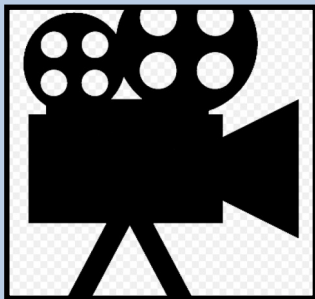




The Williamsburg Line



AND ACTION !!!

Thanks to your generosity this past May during Give Local 757, the WBA was able to raise funds for the creation of several short videos about different aspects of the Battle of Williamsburg and the town's Federal occupation. Here is an update on this project. Filming has wrapped on the story of 19-year-old Lt. William Disosway of the 1st NY Mounted Rifles who served as Williamsburg's provost martial in 1863. Images are now being selected to add to this video. Filming is underway for the story of Sarah Edmonds (a.k.a. Pvt. Franklin Thompson of the 2nd Michigan Volunteers) who participated in the 5 May 1862 battle. Other stories are in the pipeline, too, and we'll keep you posted as this project progresses.

Petersburg Battlefield News

The Petersburg Battlefields Foundation (PBF) has the opportunity to help save 2 tracts of vital battlefield lands tied to the "Fight for the Weldon Railroad". The 2 tracts that total 97 acres are in danger of development. The PBF assisted the American Battlefield Trust in reaching an agreement with the landowners after several years of negotiations. The PBF has also pledged to raise \$50,000 toward the purchase of the 2 tracts that were fought over during two separate offensives during the Peters-

burg Campaign: the Battle of Jerusalem Plank Road (June 21 – 24, 1864) and the Battle for the Weldon Railroad (August 18 – 21, 1864). The pledged \$50,000 must be raised by 8 November 2021. Thanks to

pledges from several PBF board members, additional donations will be matched to help meet this goal. If you are interested in assisting the PBF in its preservation effort, you can find out more information about these 2 tracts and several ways to give by visiting:

www.petebattlefields.org



Image from www.petebattlefields.org

Faces of the Fight

Today, Colonial Williamsburg is an amazing living-history museum with rebuilt and restored 18th-century buildings and costumed interpreters. Consequently, it is easy to forget that until 1926 when the restoration of Virginia's old capital began, Williamsburg was a living-reality town. The inhabitants didn't clock-in-and-out of a recreated, 18th-century environment. They traversed a complex, dynamic society. In previous *Faces of*

the Fight articles, we explored the lives of soldiers from both sides of the 1862 Battle of Williamsburg, including a regimental mascot. It is now time to consider the civilians impacted by the battle. Turn the page for the story of a Williamsburg woman who experienced the battle, ensuing Federal occupation, Reconstruction era, and early years of the restoration project.

"The battle of Williamsburg has received less importance in history than it has merited."

Edwin Brown- 1st Mass Vol Infantry

Eliza Baker ...

Ann Eliza Baker was born into slavery in Williamsburg on 2 July 1845, and her owner was her father. Like his daughter, Pleasant Baker was born into slavery. He was owned by Burwell Bassett, Jr., the Virginia legislator and congressman for whom Bassett Hall in Williamsburg is named. Bassett also owned Eliza's mother Arena who was hired out to the Galt family of Williamsburg. Three generations of Galts served as superintendents of the Eastern Lunatic Asylum in town.

Shortly before his death in 1841, Bassett freed Pleasant who then purchased his wife and children and labored to pay off the debt. The family was living together on the 1850 census, and in his will dated 1 October 1853, Pleasant confirmed his ownership of Arena and five children named Betsey, Mary, Ann, Sally, and John. A sixth child, a daughter named Grace, was born a year later. It is unknown if Pleasant hired out any of his children, but Arena continued to be hired out to the Galts in whose house Eliza was born. The Galt family home is now known as the Nelson-Galt House and is located on East Francis Street.

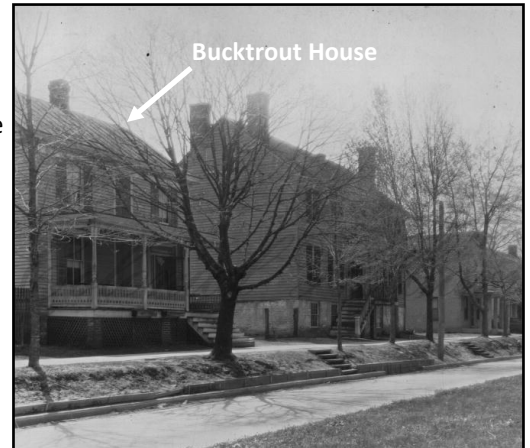


Nelson-Galt House with reconstructed Kitchen (Google Maps)

The Baker family is mentioned in the "Daybook and Ledger" of Richard Bucktrout, who lived in a house on East Main Street where the reconstructed King's Arms Tavern is today. He was a cabinetmaker who kept his workshop in the basement of his home. As a cabinetmaker, Bucktrout was also the town's undertaker. He recorded in his daybook on 5 July 1854 that he was making a coffin for Pleasant's deceased daughter Mary (Bucktrout 71). Per other entries, Pleasant performed jobs for Bucktrout such as killing hogs, delivering fodder, and putting up oats to pay off the coffin and other debts (Bucktrout 77, 90, 99). Those debts mounted until he feared his children would be taken from him and sold away to satisfy creditors.

In his will, Pleasant also stated that his wife and children were to be freed upon his death. On 26 February 1859, Bucktrout recorded in his daybook that he was "makeing a neat polished coffin for [Pleasant Baker who] cut his throat with a raisor on friday morning about [half] an hour by sunrise ..." (Bucktrout 148). Had Pleasant foreseen this event when he wrote his will six years earlier? Did he consider taking his own life as the only way to keep his family together?

Pleasant did not name an administrator in his will. As such, the court could have ordered the town's sheriff to publicly auction his property to satisfy his debts. Pleasant did not own any real estate, so his personal property (his family) would then have been considered despite the desire of his will. Bucktrout, however, posted bond and was granted administrative rights. It appears that he then purchased Arena and her children as his slaves and hired them out. (Betsey Baker, however, may have been freed. On the 1860 census, she was married to a farmer who was leasing land in what is now Toano in James City County.) It is hard to know Bucktrout's motivation for taking such action, but it is possible that he acted out of compassion and a desire to help the family stay united.

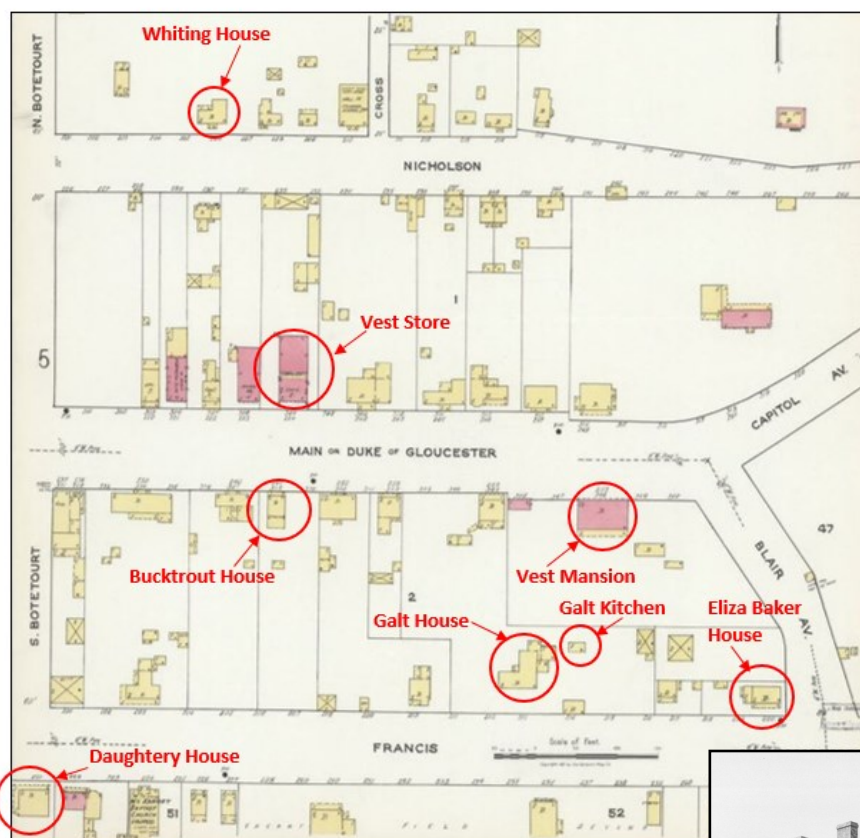


Richard Bucktrout House, 1928 (Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

What is clear is that Arena continued to be hired out to the Galts. Her daughter Sally is believed to also have been hired out to the Galt family to keep her near her mother. On the 1860 census, John (10) and Grace (6) were living with Arena next to the Bucktrouts and possibly in an outbuilding on the latter's property. John was listed as a house servant. He may have been hired out to the Galt family as well or served in this role for the Bucktrout family. Eliza was initially a housekeeper and nursemaid to the Bucktrout family, but on the 1860 census, she was living with the Daughtery family in their house (now the Ewing House) on East Francis Street as a house servant. The 1860 slave schedule shows clearly that Bucktrout's daughter Delia owned Eliza and had hired her out to the latter family.

... from Slavery ...

By 5 May 1862 when the reality of the Civil War came to Williamsburg, Eliza was hired out to the Whiting family on East Nicholson Street. In a 1933 interview, Eliza still remembered the day of the battle vividly. She recalled how terrible it was “to see people’s heads and arms shot off.” It rained the entire day of the battle, and the “rain water in the road and street was all bloody” (Corporate 13).



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Williamsburg, Virginia from April 1921 (retrieved from the Library of Congress www.loc.gov/item/sanborn09092_003)

The Union occupation of the town after the battle brought other scenes more comical. Many Whites feared that their slaves would run away to the Union army. Mrs. Whiting discouraged Eliza by warning her “that the Yankees were devils, with horns on their heads, and that they would make us all pull the artillery guns.” When a man asked Eliza how she liked the Yankees, she responded, “I don’t know, Sir, since I ain’t seen none.” She was surprised to learn that he was a Yankee since he didn’t have horns on his head. The soldier reprimanded Mrs. Whiting and then asked for a drink from her well. He had second thoughts, though, as Eliza recalled that “he asked her did she have any strychnine in it?” Mrs. Whiting professed that she didn’t, but Eliza said, “He made her get a dipper and bucket and two glasses, and he made her drink two glasses of the water before he would taste it” (Corporate 1-2).

The Union occupation also restructured the society Eliza had formerly known. The Emancipation Proclamation was not legally implemented until 1 January 1863, but enslaved Blacks in Williamsburg received practical emancipation much earlier. When Eliza visited the provost marshal in the Robt. Saunders House (now the Robt. Carter House) to request a pass to visit family outside of town the next Sunday, the only day of the week she didn’t have to work for Mrs. Whiting, he told her, “You can go when you want to.” Then he added, “You are as free as she is.” Eliza left the Whitings that day and never went back (Corporate 2).

Many former slaves left town for good after emancipation, but the Bakers remained. Arena stayed committed to the Galt family and was employed by them. She and her children resided in the Galt’s kitchen outbuilding after emancipation. When Sally Galt died in 1880, her will deeded the kitchen to Arena for her lifetime. (A reconstruction of the kitchen now stands at the site.) After leaving the Whitings, Eliza worked at the Eastern Lunatic Asylum for seven years. During that time, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Lucy Jane Baker. Nothing else is known of Lucy. She appears to have died sometime between 1880 and 1892.



Vest Mansion, ca. 1907 (Tucker-Coleman Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)

In 1869, Eliza went to work for William Vest as a housekeeper. Vest, a 59-year-old widower by that time, was one of the wealthiest men in Williamsburg before and after the war. After the original Raleigh Tavern burned down in 1859, Vest built a general store on that site. (The reconstructed Raleigh

Tavern now occupies the site.) He resided at the southeast corner of Main Street in what is known today as the Palmer House. During Eliza’s lifetime, it was known as the Vest Mansion. It was twice the size as it appears today and had beautiful gardens. Eliza’s employment with Vest spanned over 20 years.

... to Colonial Restoration

Early in her employment, Eliza went to Lexington, VA to serve as a nursemaid for the children of Vest's daughter Elizabeth Joynes, whose husband was a professor at Washington College (now Washington & Lee). Eliza was there on the 1870 census. In her 1933 interview, Eliza recalled taking the children to the college president's home to play with his grandchildren. The college president at that time was former Confederate General Robert E. Lee. What impression or thoughts did she have of Lee? She made no mention in her interview and only remarked that Mrs. Lee was an invalid in a wheelchair. Eliza spent two years in Lexington, but there may have been another reason she was there.

In September 1870, Eliza gave birth to her second child, a daughter named Anna who lived less than a year. During her employment with William Vest, Eliza gave birth to seven children: Anna, Sally, Arena, Katherine, William, John, and Irene. All survived except for Anna and Arena. Marriage and death records for William and Irene confirm that William Vest was their father. Most likely, he fathered the other children as well. Perhaps Eliza was initially sent to Lexington to reduce gossip in Williamsburg.

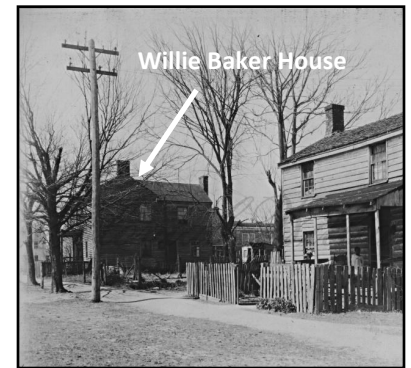


Eliza Baker House, 1928 (Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

Vest was more than 30 years Eliza's senior. While he was living, Eliza listed herself as single on census records. After his death in 1893, she listed herself as a widow. Marriage between Blacks and Whites was prohibited in Virginia until 1967. How the two privately defined their relationship is unknown, but Vest did provide for Eliza and the children in his will. During the 1880s, he built a house for Eliza on his property at the northwest corner of East Francis Street and Blair Avenue. In his will, Vest deeded the house and lot to Eliza for her lifetime. He also willed the interest from sixty bank shares and seven bonds to Eliza in semi-annual payments which were then to be divided between her children after her death.

Eliza was still living in the house as the restoration of Williamsburg began. She sold the house to Williamsburg Restoration, Inc. (now the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation) in May 1934, just seven months before her death on December 1. The house was demolished later during the restoration and possibly when Blair Ave. was reoriented perpendicular to East Francis Street.

Eliza outlived all but three of her children. Katherine E. Baker (1878-1966) married Arthur Harris and was a housewife in Williamsburg. The couple had no children. Widowed in 1938, she moved to Richmond where she worked as a seamstress. William Hayes Baker (1879-1960) was sexton at Bruton Parish Church for three decades. He owned the former Whiting house (now demolished) where his mother had once been a hired slave. He married Clara Olivia Byrd, who was an educator, civic leader, and suffragist. They had four children. John Pleasant Baker (1886-1952) was a mason in Williamsburg. He married twice but had no children. Eliza's adult children all learned to read and write, a privilege she never had.



Willie Baker House, 1928 (Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

In her 89 years, Eliza knew slavery, war, freedom, Reconstruction, and Williamsburg's colonial restoration. Reflecting on the present in 1933, she said that "all the people of the 'old times' are gone, and everything different now, and it is like a new world to [me]." "Aunt Eliza", as she was fondly called in her senior years, said she was "content to wait until the time came for de Lord to call her home to 'Glory'" (Corporate 16).

Works cited and consulted for this article included:

Bucktrout, Richard Manning. "Daybook and Ledger," 1850-1866. Bucktrout Collection, Digital Archives, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. <https://libraries.wm.edu/um/archive/bucktrout/cf.swem.wm.edu/exhibits/bucktrout/>.

Census, marriage, and death records at <https://www.ancestry.com/>.

Corporate Archives Collection, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia, Oral History Collection, Eliza Baker, "Memoirs of Williamsburg," transcription of interview with Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, 4 May 1933.

Will books and deeds in the Williamsburg-James City County Courthouse