

Robert Pearle
(c. 1685-1765)

Robert Pearle was born in Calvert County at the end of the seventeenth century, when Maryland was a British colony, tobacco was king, and slavery was legal. The son of an enslaved woman and Richard Marsham (c. 1640-1713), a free white Catholic planter, believed to be his mother's enslaver, Pearle spent the first half of his life in bondage laboring on the property owned by Marsham in southern Maryland, where he was trained as a carpenter and went by the name of Robin. Following the death of Marsham in 1713, Pearle received news that changed his life and that of his young family. According to the instructions of Marsham's last will and testament, Pearle, his wife, Ann (Nanny), and their son, Daniel, were to be given their freedom when Robert reached his 35th year in 1720. In a cruel twist that would keep the Pearle family tied to the Marshams for some years following their emancipation, the will stated that any surviving children born to Robert and Nanny during the interim were not to be freed but remain enslaved to Marsham's grandson and executor, Marsham Waring. It is not known how many children were impacted by this decision or under what conditions the enslaved children obtained their freedom, but Robert and Nanny, in order to keep their family intact, remained in Prince George's County near their enslaved children until all had been freed. It was at the time of his emancipation that he chose the surname Pearle and was known as Robert Pearle for the rest of his life. During this period, Robert supported his family through the carpentry shop he opened, soon gaining a reputation for his skill and craftsmanship, and purchased two tracts of land that were put under cultivation. (Despite race-based slavery being legal in Maryland, laws to prevent free blacks from owning property or enslaved people had not been enacted.) He also made use of the courts to pursue unpaid debts and protect his rights as a free person.

When the Pearle family had been made whole by 1744, Robert, Nanny, and their dependent children moved to what is now Frederick County, where Robert leased a 200-hundred-acre tract on the Carrollton Manor estate. Development of the land into a successful tobacco farm, which was worked by his fourteen enslaved laborers, was financed initially by the profits earned from his success as a carpenter and property he held in Prince George's County.

Carrollton Manor had been patented by Charles Carroll of Annapolis in 1723 and comprised over 10,000 acres (an area that covers over 15 square miles). Prior to the arrival of the Pearle family, the estate had been leased to tenant farmers, who were largely comprised of Irish and German immigrants. In time, families whose ancestors had settled in different regions of the colony moved there as well, frequently bringing with them their enslaved laborers. When the Pearle family arrived at the Manor, the community they joined was comprised of people of different ethnicities, religious denominations, and socioeconomic status. Despite this diversity, the Pearle's undoubtedly stood out from their neighbors as a free family of color. Robert must have been acutely aware that the safety and well-being of his family would be dependent on his ability to navigate in a society that was defined by race and enforced through a legal system that discriminated against people of African descent. Robert Pearle and his wife remained on Carrollton Manor for the rest of their lives. In time, they counted among their neighbors several adult children who had married into the community of families on the Manor and managed their own farms.

Within three generations, the Pearle's had established one of the largest extended families on the Manor. At his death in 1765, the personal wealth he had amassed would place him in the ranks of Maryland's wealthiest and allow him to provide for his widow and seven adult children that were named in his will. His descendants remained on Carrollton Manor until the end of the nineteenth century.

Beyond the worldly success he achieved as a free man of color – safeguarding the freedom of his family and building a successful career first as a carpenter and then as a planter – is his legacy as a man of faith. Born into an enslaved community owned by a Catholic planter, Robert and his wife, Nanny, were baptized into and raised as members of the Catholic Church. While he and his family lived near or on Richard Marsham's plantation in Prince George's County, they had access to the sacraments and Mass when a Jesuit missionary visited the private chapel that was maintained there. Conditions were quite different when the family moved to Carrollton Manor in the 1740s. The Pearles were among the first Catholics to reside in this part of the colony. There were so few Catholics, in fact, that the Jesuit missionaries did not begin to visit Frederick County until the 1750s and then only occasionally. Under these conditions, the home became the center of the family's religious practices, where prayers, spiritual reading, and religious instruction were conducted together as a household. When a priest was able to visit, Mass was celebrated in a private home until a church could be built. The Pearle family home became the center of the Catholic community on Carrollton Manor and the chapel they maintained in their home the first documented place of worship. Their home was used by the community until a freestanding chapel was built in 1811. This chapel grew into the parish of St. Joseph-on-Carrollton Manor, known today as Buckeystown. Although the exact location of their graves remains unknown, Robert and Nanny Pearle are believed to be buried on the land that became the church's cemetery.

To learn more about the lives of Robert Pearle and his family, see the article written by Mary Clement Jeske, Ph.D.: "From Slave to Slave Owner: The Life of Robert Pearle of Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* (Spring 2008), vol. 103, no.1, pp. 4-31.