

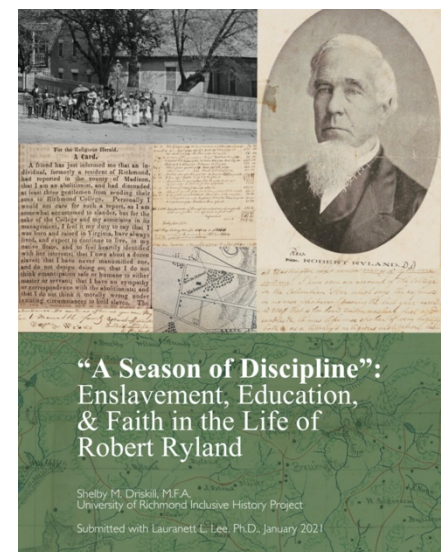
“A SEASON OF DISCIPLINE”: ENSLAVEMENT, EDUCATION & FAITH IN THE LIFE OF ROBERT RYLAND

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SUMMARY

In Fall 2019, following the July 8, 2019 release of [Making Excellence Inclusive: University Report and Recommendations](#), and supported by the findings of the Presidential Commission for University History and Identity, the University of Richmond established a research initiative organized by Dr. Amy Howard and led by Dr. Lauranett L. Lee. The Inclusive History Project was tasked with the study of three subjects: the burying ground on the campus of the University of Richmond; the first president of the institution, Robert Ryland; and former trustee and rector, Douglas Southall Freeman. The considerations of Robert Ryland and Douglas Southall Freeman were prompted by the joint resolution of the Westhampton College and Richmond College Student Government, “On Changing the Narrative: Regarding Building Names.”¹ In undertaking this research, the University of Richmond is committed to providing a more holistic narrative of its own history, one that is more complete and accurate. The reports are not intended to reach any conclusions nor are they meant to offer recommendations. They are designed to provide a thorough and accurate record that will augment existing accounts of institutional history and further future conversations centered on these subjects.



Robert Ryland (1805-1899), for whom a portion of Ryland Hall is named, was one of the institution’s earliest leaders. After serving as principal/superintendent of Virginia Baptist Seminary from 1832-1840, he became the first president of Richmond College and the president of the Board of Trustees. Both the seminary and the college were precursors to the University of Richmond. Ryland continued to lead the institution until his resignation in 1866 and over those decades he exerted a singular influence on its growth. His early efforts to stabilize and develop the seminary

¹ [“On Changing the Narrative: Regarding Building Names”], *The Collegian*, [n.d.], web, [link](#). The Joint Resolution was passed by the Richmond College and Westhampton College Student Government Associations on April 3, 2019. It was sent to the Interim Coordinating Council and to the Vice President for Student Development, Student Development Division. The resolution was co-authored by A. J. Polcari (class of 2021) and Caroline Schiavo.

and the college have been recognized as largely responsible for the existence of the university. Ryland was also a Baptist minister and a major figure in the history of Virginia Baptists. Between 1841 and 1865, he was pastor of Richmond's First African Baptist Church, and he served in leadership roles in numerous Baptist organizations.

Education and ministry were Ryland's twin commitments. From his earliest association with what would become the university, he believed that the strength of the institution was drawn from its commitment to a robust liberal arts education. His spiritual life and pastoral work were animated by his belief in equal access to biblical teaching and the equality of souls. These convictions were central to his work at First African Baptist Church, where he was and is credited by some with preserving a space for the self-governance and religious expression of the church's Black congregants despite what historian and University of Richmond President Emeritus Edward L. Ayers describes as a "compromised form of the church."² Ryland's convictions regarding spiritual equality did not extend to a belief in racial equality. He was, in the words of an 1867 item in the *Religious Herald* a "divine right of slavery" Baptist, and he, like a number of antebellum religious figures, viewed enslavement as an instrument of God.³ Despite antislavery leanings in his college years, when he once referred to enslavement as "legalized crime," by the time Ryland became affiliated with the institution he was both enslaving people and hiring them out, leasing them to others for profit. Virginia Baptist Seminary and Richmond College were among the entities that paid Ryland for the labor of those he enslaved. He and others working on behalf of the institution also paid "hire" for other enslaved people who worked on the campus, and enslaved laborers were vital to the day-to-day operations there. The institutional use of hired enslaved laborers who worked on the campus for faculty and students was also under the oversight of the Board of Trustees. No evidence has been located in the course of research for this study indicating that the institution itself enslaved people. Instead, it regularly used enslaved labor by, in effect, renting men and women from individual enslavers or hiring agents.

The Robert Ryland Study was charged with providing 1.) a comprehensive biography of Robert Ryland, with particular attention paid to the ways that his academic and ministerial work intersected with enslavement; 2.) a determination of the degree to which he used the labor of those he enslaved, or the enslaved labor of others, in the running of the institution; and 3.) an overview of his contributions to a.) the formation of the University of Richmond, b.) Virginia Baptists, and c.) religious freedom in Virginia. This report, "*A Season of Discipline*": *Enslavement, Faith & Education in the Life of Robert Ryland*, provides the requested information. This summary provides an overview of the report findings.

EARLY YEARS TO 1832

Robert Ryland's family was deeply connected to the local Baptist congregation at Bruington Baptist Church in King & Queen County, Virginia, and his parents also held daily worship in their household. His father, Josiah Ryland, often hosted Baptist leaders in his home and Robert Ryland

² Edward L. Ayers, "The Trials of Robert Ryland," *Baptist History & Heritage* 48, no. 2 (2013), 13.

³ "Anti-Slavery Baptists," *Religious Herald*, October 17, 1867, Virginia Baptist Historical Society (VBHS).

recalled that it was “a common resort for preachers whose discourse, in the private circle, often turned upon spiritual topics.” This environment, and the pastoral influence of Bruington Baptist Church pastor, Robert Baylor Semple, established a spiritual path for Ryland that would eventually lead him to the ministry. When he was sixteen, Ryland felt he had missed a calling from God when he chose to attend school rather than a week-day spiritual meeting. His regret over his choice was a pivotal moment and for “three years, without any change of purpose” he prepared for his baptism at the age of nineteen.⁴

Ryland was raised at Farmington, his father’s plantation in King & Queen County, which was operated using the labor of both enslaved and free people. According to the 1820 Federal Census, Josiah Ryland enslaved thirty-five people who were forced to provide domestic, agricultural, and other labor to the family. Nineteen free Black people also worked on the Ryland property.⁵ Ryland later recalled “about forty negroes of all ages between infancy and decrepitude” at Farmington, and he detailed his playing with enslaved children and being cared for by enslaved adults.⁶

Inspired by Robert Baylor Semple, Ryland attended boarding school at Humanity Hall in Hanover County where he studied the classics and other subjects. Thomas Nelson, the teacher who ran the school in the vein of Peter Nelson, Semple’s former instructor, enslaved thirty-one people in 1820. That number is likely reflective of the number who were there when Ryland attended the school.⁷ In 1823, Ryland wrote an emotional letter to his father, building a variety of arguments for why Josiah Ryland should send him to Columbian College in Washington, D.C. rather than establishing him with a farm or other means of income: “I can not [sic] value money so highly,” Robert Ryland wrote, “as to prefer it to education.”⁸

⁴ Robert Ryland, “My Experience and Call to the Ministry,” *The Colloquium*, clipping dated 1889 in appended document, Robert Ryland Papers (RRP), 51.044-045, VBHS.

⁵ United States, Federal Census of 1820, St. Stephens, King & Queen County, Virginia, “Ryland, Josiah,” 19; National Archives and Records Administration, Roll: M33_142; Image: 49. Nineteen people were included in the category “All other persons except Indians not taxed” which was added to distinguish between “the number of free colored persons and of slaves,” See “1820 Census Instructions to Enumerators,” United States Census Bureau, [link](#).

⁶ Robert Ryland, *The Colored People*, Baptist Mission Rooms: Baltimore, Maryland, 1898, 4-5, RRP, 3.059, VBHS. While Ryland does not use the word “slaves” here, he described “sympathizing with the young under their [his family’s] discipline” and not being allowed to “treat the old servants with any disrespect,” indicating that he was referring to enslaved people. Ryland’s overall focus in *The Colored People* was a consideration of the post-emancipation lives of formerly enslaved people and their descendants.

⁷ United States Federal Census, 1820, “Thomas Nelson,” Hanover, Virginia; 63, National Archives and Records Administration Roll: M33_138; Image: 78. While there are several entries for Thomas Nelson and Thomas Nelson, Jr., that which shows thirty-one enslaved people also shows thirty-eight “Free white persons – Males,” indicating the student population at the school.

⁸ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, April 19, 1823, RRP, 11.005-006, VBHS.

At Columbian College, Ryland at times felt out of place socially and spiritually. He found the students there to be “extravagant & indiscreet young men,” declared his own class standing “not respectable,” and wrote that, “[a]mong the students I am unpopular.”⁹ Ryland eventually cultivated friends and acquaintances who were “pious” and who, he wrote, did not “retard me in my religious course.”¹⁰ Among them was Rollin H. Neale of Connecticut, who described Ryland as having given “the first anti-slavery speech I ever heard.”¹¹

Ryland’s antislavery leanings in his college years were captured in a college address he that gave on the subject of the American Colonization Society in 1824. The society was formed to transport free Black people to Liberia. Historian Samantha Seeley describes the organization as having “accommodated the varied interests of white slaveholders, ministers, reformers, and anti-slavery men who made up its founding members.”¹² Ryland was moved by the society’s work and, at the time, by the effect it might have on ending enslavement, ridding the United States of what he then called “legalized crime.” He only articulated full-throated antislavery sentiment a few times in his early adulthood, and his “Colonization Society” speech is the clearest example. In it he likened enslavement to a “devouring insect” that “continually riot[ed]” at the tree of liberty. He also hailed the role of education in marking an end to “this evil,” insisting that “the beam of science will chase away the gloom of ignorance, [and] peace & happiness will reign in the land.”¹³ Ryland’s vision of an ideal end to enslavement was contingent on the removal of Black people from the United States.

Throughout this period, Ryland honed his rhetorical skills and his ministerial thought by asking friends and family members to share their private religious struggles with him so he could guide them to a stronger relationship with God. His letters were sermon-like responses to deaths and other challenges they faced.¹⁴ He often expressed concern over the spiritual state of his mother and siblings, who at the time had not been baptized.¹⁵ After missionary work in eastern Virginia, Ryland had expected to teach at a school in Nashville, Tennessee. When the position promised to him was instead given to a friend who offered to accept a lower salary, Ryland shifted his focus to ministry.¹⁶ While his father offered him a farm and “all the appliances for its culture” if he would remain in King & Queen County and work under Semple, Ryland was concerned at operating in the pastor’s

⁹ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, February 25, 1824, RRP, 11.008-010, VBHS.

¹⁰ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, October 20, 1824, RRP, 11.011-013, VBHS.

¹¹ [Rollin H. Neale] R.H.N., “Reminiscence of College Days,” RRP, 10.010, VBHS.

¹² Samantha Seeley, “Beyond the American Colonization Society,” *History Compass*, 14 (3), 93.

¹³ Robert Ryland, “The Colonization Society,” RRP 26.026, VBHS.

¹⁴ Letter, Robert Ryland to “Baylor Semple, Jr.” [Robert Baylor Semple, Jr.], November 2, 1825, RRP, 14.004, VBHS.

¹⁵ Letter, Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, October 20, 1824, RRP, 11.011, VBHS.

¹⁶ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, December 9, 1826, RRP, 11.017, VBHS; Ryland, “Call to the Ministry,” [1889?]; Robert Ryland, [Timeline], Ledger 1, 11, RRP, 55.1.011, VBHS.

shadow and being limited to part-time ministry. He instead sought a church in Lynchburg, Virginia.¹⁷ He began leading a small congregation that had broken away from the existing Baptist church there and also reached out to “poor families” in the city.¹⁸ After beginning his ministry by holding services in the Masonic Hall, Ryland was well positioned to capture the religious enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening, and his congregation grew quickly, expanding enough to justify the construction of a permanent church. Ryland preached before white and Black congregants during his Lynchburg years. One of his most vivid accounts of the period focused on York Woodson, a formerly enslaved Black minister, whom Ryland recalled being an extraordinary man and a talented speaker. When Woodson was forbidden from preaching after Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Southampton, Virginia, Ryland went to the city’s mayor on his behalf, hoping to ensure that Woodson could continue to preach freely.¹⁹ While the mayor said police would look the other way, he also made it clear that he would have to impose the “penalty” if Woodson were officially reported. The penalty was being whipped, “not exceeding thirty-nine lashes,” and this risk prevented Woodson from resuming his ministry. Ryland was convinced that Woodson’s loss of ministerial purpose resulted in the man’s early death “of a broken heart.”²⁰

Ryland married Josephine Norvell in 1830 after a courtship that was often focused on her spirituality. Their purchase of a home coincided with the appearance of enslaved people in Ryland’s highly detailed ledger of expenses and receipts. His expenses of 1831 show the purchase of shoes for an enslaved woman named Mary. A letter he wrote refers to her behavior being unacceptable and his hope that an enslaved man his father was sending to him would behave differently than Mary.²¹

¹⁷ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, August 1827, RRP, 11.024, VBHS; Robert Ryland, “An Historical Address,” 1886, RRP, 51.027, VBHS.

¹⁸ Robert Ryland, “An Historical Address,” 1886.

¹⁹ Nat Turner’s Rebellion began in Southampton County, Virginia on the night of August 21, 1831. Turner was an enslaved man driven by what were described as religious visions and potentially his reaction to his child being used by his enslaver as collateral on a debt (David Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2014), 63-67). Nat Turner enlisted a group of enslaved men in a plan to execute a targeted revolt, focused on killing white people “with their own weapons.” From the night of the 21st to the afternoon of the 23rd, the men killed fifty-five white people (Patrick H. Breen, “Nat Turner’s Revolt (1831),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, June 18, 2019, accessed Dec. 14, 2020). One of the key results of the rebellion was the crackdown on gatherings of free and enslaved Black people. Some believed that Black ministry was the heart of the rebellion, and when the Virginia General Assembly passed laws in response to it on March 15, 1832, constraints on preaching were mentioned first. Even ordained ministers were no longer allowed to assemble for religious purposes, whether free or enslaved. The punishment was “stripes... not exceeding thirty-nine lashes” (Commonwealth of Virginia, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, Richmond, Virginia: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 20–22).

²⁰ Robert Ryland, “York Woodson: The Colored Preacher,” in “The Co-Worker,” a column in unnamed publication, handwritten note from Robert Ryland, “Published by the First Baptist Church[,] Lynchburg, Va,” RRP, 08.033, VBHS; Commonwealth of Virginia, *Journal of the House of Delegates, 1831-1832*, Bill no. 18, Richmond: Thomas Ritchie (1832), 1 [printed page number; 759 in digital version of *Journal*]], Hathi Trust Digital Library, [link](#); Virginia, Laws Passed, March 15 1832, Chapter XXII, Nat Turner Project, [link](#).

²¹ Robert Ryland, Ledger 1, RRP 55.1.021, VBHS; Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, November 7, 1831,

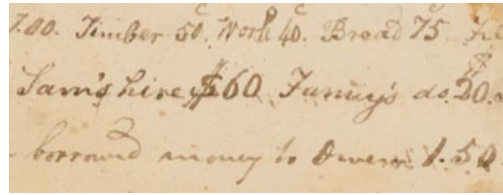
Ryland's February 1832 entries showed that Mary had been joined by two other enslaved people, Sam and Maria.²² All three of them relocated with Robert and Josephine Ryland when he accepted the position of Principal at Virginia Baptist Seminary in Henrico County, Virginia.

RRP, 11.044, VBHS.

²² Robert Ryland, Ledger I, RRP 55.1.021-023, VBHS.

INSTITUTIONAL BEGINNINGS

While the Virginia Baptist Seminary began at Spring Farm in Henrico County, it grew out of two home-based education centers. One was at Dunlora plantation in Powhatan County, which was operated by Edward Baptist on the land of his sister, Ann Hickman.



"Expenses of the Boarding Department... 1834,"
Ledger I, 55.1.033, VBHS

According to the 1830 Federal Census, Hickman enslaved fifty-seven people on the property.²³ The other center was operated in Henrico County by missionary and minister, Eli Ball.²⁴ Spring Farm was purchased to provide education to potential ministers, but Ryland's emphasis was on the liberal arts, which he believed would "prepare the student for those sacred subjects."²⁵ The seminary was established on a manual labor system which required students to contribute three hours of labor a day to the farm, and they were then paid out of the proceeds from the sale of farm yields.²⁶ The labor of students did not substitute for the use of enslaved labor. Before the arrival of the first seminary students, Ryland had agreed to serve in an additional role as steward of the institution, overseeing its buildings and operations and managing the board of the students. As part of his employment agreement with the Baptist Education Society he provided the labor of Sam, an enslaved child who had been given to him by his father. Ryland described Sam as a "boy" at the time, and census data indicates that he was fifteen at the oldest.²⁷ At the seminary, both Sam and Ryland's furniture would be "used... as common stock" by the institutional community.²⁸ The next year, Ryland asked his father to give him more "servants" to labor at the seminary. In a letter to his wife, who was then staying with her Ryland in-laws, he wrote,

I wish you to ask Papa to let me know distinctly and as soon as possible how many servants he can let me have at the beginning of next year. He did not say positively that he would not give me any at all, so I will thank him to say what servants he will give, that I may make my

²³ United States, *Federal Census of 1830*, "Ann Hickman," Powhatan, Virginia; Series: M19; roll: 193; page: 258; Family History Library Film: 0029672.

²⁴ Reuben E. Alley. *History of the University of Richmond: 1830-1971*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia [Published for the University of Richmond] (1977), 14.

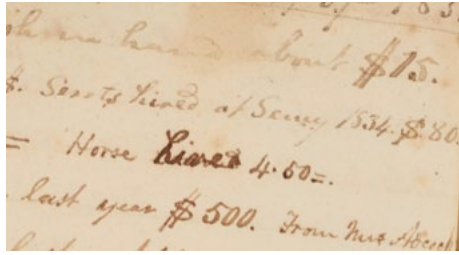
²⁵ Robert Ryland, *A Sermon Delivered Before the Baptist Education Society of Virginia*, July 4, 1836, Richmond: Wm. Sands (1836), 15, VBHS.

²⁶ Robert Ryland, *The Society – The Seminary – The College: An Address*, Library: Richmond College (1891), 11-12; Ryland, Ledger I, RRP, 55.1.06.

²⁷ United States, *Federal Census of 1840*, "Robt Ryland," Henrico County, Virginia; Series: M704; roll 561 of 580 rolls; page 264; Family History Library Film: 0029687, Ancestry.com. Among those Ryland enslaved in 1840, there were two males, one under the age of 10 and one between 10 and 23. That information only narrows Sam's age to being between 2-15 years of age in 1832 when Ryland wrote of his use at the seminary. Research has not yet yielded additional means of specifying his age.

²⁸ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, July 7, 1832. RRP 11.048-049, VBHS.

arrangements accordingly - i.e. hire others if necessary. Ask him to say the same as to the cows. I can't think he will decline giving me some servants and some cows.²⁹



"Receipts (on private account) of 1835," Ledger I, 55.1.036, VBHS

By 1835, Ryland was recording "Sam's hire" and that of Fanny in the expenses of the institution's Boarding Department and the payments for their "hire" in his personal receipts.³⁰ Three years later, Ryland attributed the stillbirth of one of his children to his wife's exhaustion caused, he wrote his father, by "several of the negroes pretend[ing] to be sick."³¹ It appears that Mary was the caregiver for his youngest child. Mary was never indicated in Boarding Department expenses, so she was evidently not formally

hired out to the seminary. She died in 1837.³² Recalling his time as a student at the seminary, Charles Lewis Cocke, who was later a professor at Richmond College as well as the campus steward, described the very early seminary students as not receiving the sort of "attendance" they would later be provided, and wrote that at the time the "servants" only entered students' rooms to fill the lamps "with an inferior grade of oil."³³

Ryland's thoughts on enslavement during the seminary period were distilled in an open letter published in the *Religious Herald* and republished in the *Christian Watchman* in 1835. He had written it in response to the publication of Francis Wayland's textbook, *The Elements of Moral Science* in which Wayland devoted a section to questioning the morality of enslavement. Ryland wrote that he found parts of Wayland's thoughts on enslavement to be "manly and just," and that he himself considered enslavement wrong "in the abstract;" however, he then outlined what he believed to be three "difficulties" associated with manumission and an end to "domestic slavery":

1. Some enslaved people could not care for themselves and "benevolence" required that they remain enslaved;
2. Virginia law demanded that freed people leave the state and "servants of humane masters... prefer their present bondage to expatriation and freedom;"
3. The labor most often done by enslaved people had always been done by them. Referring to "the drudgery of domestic business," Ryland wrote, "slaves have always performed it." It would be "impossible to find white persons among us who can be obtained on wages to do

²⁹ Robert Ryland to Josephine Ryland, October 7, 1833, RRP 16.069, VBHS.

³⁰ Robert Ryland, "Boarding Department of 1835," Ledger I, RRP, 55.1.033; "Receipts on Private account for 1836" Ledger I, RRP, 55.1.041, VBHS.

³¹ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, July 17, 1835, RRP, 11.055, VBHS.

³² Robert Ryland to Elizabeth Ryland Willis, December 26, 1838, typescript, RRP, 15.044, VBHS.

³³ Charles L. Cocke, "Incidents in Early Life," *The Richmond College Messenger*, March 1900," Charles L. Cocke Papers, Hollins University.

this work” because “respectable” white people were “too high-minded” for this sort of labor and the “indolent and vicious will come and receive the wages but will not do the work.”³⁴



“Columbia,” in *A Richmond College Picture Book* (1911)

At the institution, the seminary’s “farm experiment” had not succeeded. Spring Farm was at a significant distance from the city and the crops planted there had not thrived. In 1835, Virginia Baptist Seminary relocated to the Columbia estate formerly owned by the Haxall family, and it remained there until 1914 when Richmond College moved to the current site of the University of Richmond. At the new location, Ryland and his family lived in the main college building along with members of the faculty. Crops were planted around the property and enslaved people continued to work at the seminary, both those who were enslaved by Ryland and those who

were hired from other enslavers or agents. For some people recorded on the ledger pages showing expenses of the Boarding Department, Ryland used the term hire, as in paying “Caroline’s hire,” while for others he simply noted a payment or a wage. Among those for whom he used the term “hire” were the people he himself enslaved, Sam and Fanny. Others for whom he paid “hire” during the seminary period were Caroline, Isabella, Nancy, Celia, Albert, Abby and Christian.³⁵

Between 1836 and 1837, Ryland spent one year as the Chaplain of the University of Virginia. There he advocated for temperance among university students and, while a congregant at Charlottesville’s Baptist Church, he waded into a doctrinal controversy. He was referred to as a “young hero” by Peter Fossett, a man formerly enslaved by Thomas Jefferson, for his leadership during a reform crisis in the church.³⁶ During this period Ryland’s wife and his mother-in-law ran the boarding operation at the seminary. In 1837, the child of a woman who was hired out to the institution visited his mother there and brought smallpox to the campus. In an item placed in the *Religious Herald* by Ryland and other members of a Virginia Baptist Education Society committee, the child was described as having been hired out to “one of the factories” in Richmond.³⁷ No information has been found on who enslaved the mother and child and hired them out to the seminary and the factory.

³⁴ Robert Ryland, “To Dr. Wayland,” *Christian Watchman*, August 21, 1835, Early American Newspapers, Newsbank.

³⁵ Robert Ryland, Ledger I, “Boarding Department of 1835 (second term),” RRP, 55.1.039; “Expenses of the Boarding Dept 1838,” RRP, 55.1.057; “Expenses of the Boarding Department 1839 2nd Session,” 55.1.062; Ledger II, “Expenses of the Boarding Department 1840 1st session,” RRP, 55.2.006, VBHS.

³⁶ [Peter Fossett] in “Once the Slave of Thomas Jefferson,” *The World* (New York, NY), January 30, 1898, Newspapers.com, and at “Recollections of Peter Fossett,” Monticello.org, [link](#).

³⁷ “Notice,” *Religious Herald*, January 13, 1837, 7, col. 2, VBHS.

The use of enslaved labor on the campus continued after the institution's charter as Richmond College in 1840.

AT RICHMOND COLLEGE (1840-1861)

1840-1849

ADMINISTRATION

Following the charter of the college, Ryland was president of both the institution and its Board of Trustees. He worked as the General Agent, seeking funds for the college, and wrote frequent items in the *Religious Herald* sharing news of the institution and reaching out to potential students and their parents.³⁸ In his fundraising role, he recorded financial gifts to the college in regular items placed in the newspaper. In 1845, he contributed a series of letters to the *Religious Herald* detailing a combination vacation/fundraising tour, and in one he wrote of the contribution of a Black man named Ralph Perry. He also noted the contribution of twenty-five cents given by an enslaved woman named Sophy. Ryland wrote that she gave him the money saying, “Take this – I have no learning myself but I want others to have it.” He then described her as being “among the founders of Richmond College.”³⁹

Ryland recruited new faculty members, including the proslavery writer George Frederick Holmes, who only spent two years at Richmond College but was viewed as a highly significant hire.⁴⁰ Holmes was awarded an honorary doctorate by the institution in 1859.⁴¹ During the 1840s, Ryland was often a parental figure to students, encouraging self-reliance and discouraging the consumption of alcohol. Former students recalled him as blunt at times, but kind. One remembered often seeing Ryland through his office window at night and thinking, “[I]f I had to live the life he is leading, life would hardly be worth the sacrifice he is making.”⁴²

ENSLAVEMENT

Students and faculty at Richmond College would have interacted with enslaved people on campus in almost every aspect of daily life. They performed domestic labor including cooking and cleaning. They attended to students in the dining room, worked in the garden, tended their fires, filled the lamps in their rooms, and also cultivated and harvested the crops that were grown on the campus in its earliest years. At Richmond College, Ryland continued to fill the role of steward between 1840 and 1842 and recorded the names of additional people for whom the college paid “hire”: Nathan, Abbey, Rachel, Miles, Peter, and Hannah. These men and women were enslaved by unknown people. One woman who worked on the campus, Aggy Cooper, is known to have been a free Black person. Others referred to in the ledgers by first name only but without the “hire” distinction may

³⁸ Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, June 7, 1842, University Archives, VBHS.

³⁹ Robert Ryland, [Letter to the Editor], *Religious Herald*, December 4, 1845. The details Ryland provides on Sophy include a description of her family and the name of the man who enslaved her which aligns with the federal census and other data. Details are included in the body of the report.

⁴⁰ “Southern Quarterly Review,” *Richmond Whig*, April 3, 1846, Early American Newspapers, Newsbank.

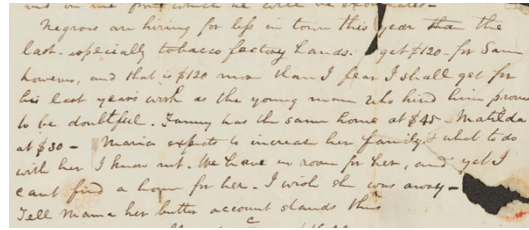
⁴¹ Alley, 40; Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, October 7, 1845 and March 2, 1847.

⁴² William F. Fleet to Robert Ryland, March 10, 1889, RRP, 40.128, VBHS.

have been paid a direct wage. Some of these people could have been free. It is just as possible that they were “self-hired” enslaved people.

In the census of 1840, Ryland was recorded as the “head of the family” for the campus. His entry shows the students, his own family, and the teachers, totaling seventy-one “Free White Persons.” It also enumerates two “Free Colored Persons” and nine “Slaves.”⁴³

Ryland’s records indicate that he stopped hiring Fanny and Sam out to the institution in 1840. The two were instead hired out “in town.” By 1842, Sam was working in a tobacco factory while Fanny and Matilda were hired out to homes.⁴⁴ He was also hiring out the labor of John, Matilda, Lucy, Maria, Thom/Tom, and Louisa between 1840 and 1849. In 1849, Ryland recorded that Sam had died of pneumonia after he had been unable to “get a home in town,” indicating that he may have been self-hired at that time. Ryland had brought him to Richmond College to work in the dining room and in the garden. After detailing Sam’s death, Ryland relayed that a man named John had also died. He had purchased John to prevent his being separated from his wife and the man was then attempting to purchase his freedom from Ryland. Ryland wrote that he had previously bought people in such situations but had decided to stop because he saw such purchases as an investment, expecting repayment with interest, and found that he was not repaid.⁴⁵



Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, January 4, 1842, RRP, 11.066, VBHS

In 1842, Charles Lewis Cocke was hired as College Steward and took over the management of the enslaved and free workers on the campus. After handing the stewardship to Cocke, Ryland wrote that he was now relieved to “have less money to handle, less to do with Negroes, less collecting, less vexation of the spirit, but more leisure, more time to read & visit with friends.”⁴⁶ From a letter that Cocke wrote following his departure from Richmond College to assume the administration of what would become Hollins College, it appears that he was using those he enslaved or controlled in the operations of Richmond College: “I do not know yet whether I shall bring any of the servants

⁴³ United States, Federal Census of 1840,” “Robt Ryland,” Henrico, Virginia, National Archives Records Administration, Roll: 561, 264, census page 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Family History Library Film: 002968, Ancestry.com.

⁴⁴ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, January 4, 1842, RRP, 11.066, VBHS.

⁴⁵ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, May 5, 1849, RRP, file 11.074, VBHS; Robert Ryland to unknown recipient, January 11, 1848, American Colonization Society, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress; also accessed through Fold3.com. The date of the Ryland’s letter to his father relating the details of Sam and John letter appears to be 1849, however the last digit is incomplete. “1849?” was written at a later date on the outside of the letter. Details such as the pending graduation of Ryland’s nephew Josiah Ryland (1830-1903) and Poindexter S. Henson align with events in 1849.

⁴⁶ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, January 4, 1842, RRP, 11.066, VBHS. This excerpt appears in Alley, *University of Richmond*, 33, which was cited by Jennifer Oast in *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680-1860* (2016).

from Richmond College or not. I had much rather do so but the expense of getting them here will not justify my bringing them.”⁴⁷

On May 19, 1844, when the campus was still quite isolated and considered to be “in the country,” an enslaved infant was killed at Richmond College at 2:00 a.m. The child’s mother was accused of the murder. She was enslaved by “Mrs. Fox,” of King William County, formerly of Henrico County. This appears to be Mary Fox, the aunt of Charles Lewis Cocke. A member of the Richmond College Board of Trustees headed the inquest in the absence of the coroner, and another Board member was also on the panel.⁴⁸

In the recollections of Ryland’s nephew, Josiah Ryland (1830-1902), he detailed some of the Black people on campus: a woman he referred to as “Aunt Aggy,” who was likely Aggy Cooper, a man named Tom, who worked in the dining room and “serve[d] fifty hungry men at once,” and Cleber, who “kindled our morning fires.”⁴⁹ Robert Ryland enslaved a man named Tom who appeared in his records and ledger between 1848 and 1864.

PERSONAL LIFE

During this period, Ryland suffered the deaths of five of his children and, in 1846, that of his wife, Josephine Ryland. His grief for her was acute, and he was initially overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for his young children. He married Betty Thornton Ryland in 1848 and the two remained together for the rest of his life. Ryland’s four surviving children from his marriage to Josephine Ryland and the three children he had with Betty Thornton Ryland all lived to old age.

⁴⁷ Charles L. Cocke to James Cocke, July 1, 1846, Charles L. Cocke Papers, Wyndam Robertson Library Special Collections, Hollins University. This excerpt is also quoted in Oast’s *Institutional Slavery* (2016).

⁴⁸ “Unidentified: Coroner’s Inquisition,” May 3, 1844, Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Note, in some browsers the document and transcription is only visible when “Page turner” is selected from the pull-down menu. Mary Fox’s connections to Richmond College and Robert Ryland: Robert Ryland, “Acknowledgements,” March 14, 1844, *Religious Herald*, VBHS. Federal Census, 1860, King William County, Virginia, 34-35, Ancestry.com – note this is not Mary E. Fox whose property with Richard Fox adjoined William Ryland’s property; *Virginia Marriages*, 1700-1850, via ancestry.com, 645: Mary Burton of Henrico married James Fox of King William County in 1824. James Fox was the brother of Charles L. Cocke’s mother, Elizabeth Fox.

⁴⁹ Josiah Ryland (1830-1902), “Recollections of an Old Boy,” *The Messenger* 18, no. 4, 1894, 121, [link](#).

1850-1859

INSTRUCTION & ADMINISTRATION

In 1856, Robert Ryland was accused of using his position as professor of Moral Philosophy to promote abolitionist ideas to his Richmond College students. An anonymous writer to the *Richmond Enquirer* wrote that Ryland was using a textbook written by a “violent fanatical abolitionist,” a reference to Francis Wayland, the author of *The Elements of Moral Science*. The letter-writer continued that Wayland’s book included “strong abolitionist doctrines.”⁵⁰ The following year, a similar accusation was published in *The South* and was more focused on Ryland himself. It stated that Ryland occupied “an influential and responsible office” and “devote[d] all his time and talents to the accomplishment of his fiendish purposes.” The writer also accused Ryland of indoctrinating students incrementally, “carefully feel[ing] the pulse of his patient ere he repeats his dose... until finally, when his class is so thoroughly imbued... taking the Bible in his hands, proceeds to gather from its pages a recognition of his detestable doctrines.”⁵¹ The Richmond College Board of Trustees defended Ryland and declared the body’s confidence in his support for slavery. To satisfy the public, however, it launched an investigation into the charges that he was an abolitionist, eventually finding them to be without merit.⁵² Ryland’s students published their own defense, writing that he had encouraged them to skip the offending passage of the textbook and to read proslavery writers in its place. They concluded by writing, “Dr. Ryland is an owner of slaves, and, so far as we have means of ascertaining, has always been.”⁵³

The next year, Ryland thought he had been accused of abolitionist leanings again, and while the rumor appeared to grow out of his work at First African Baptist Church, he believed it to have resulted in three prospective students

II. BOARD OF TRUSTEES.
Whereas, an article was published in 'The South' on the 12th inst., over the signature of "Amicus Domestic," charging that the President of Richmond College, has "dared, and still dares to use his most strenuous exertions for the overthrow of slavery—for sowing the seed of abolitionism and implanting a spirit of Northern fanaticism in the minds of those entrusted to his care;" that, "with a zeal that would be truly laudable in a more glorious enterprise, he devotes all his time and talents to the accomplishment of his fiendish purposes;" that "there are young men of undoubted talents and of wisdom, fit to adorn much older heads, who have by his villainous labors alone become so thoroughly imbued with his abolition principles that they do not hesitate to openly avow and advocate his sentiments;" And whereas, we, as the legal guardians of the college, are responsible to the public for the character of the instruction imparted by its faculty; and whereas, Mr. Roger A. Pryor, editor of *The South*, having been called upon, has refused to give the name of the author, and assumed the responsibility of the charges himself.* Therefore,
1. Resolved, That from our long and intimate acquaintance with President Ryland, the fact that he is a Virginian and a slaveholder, our knowledge of his views on the subject of slavery as publicly and privately expressed, and such investigation as the brief period which has transpired since the said publication has permitted us to make, we unhesitatingly declare our belief that the said charges are wholly false.
2. That for the entire satisfaction of the public mind, we will continue our investigation, until we have arrived at as full a knowledge of the grounds of these charges as we can attain, and that when said investigation is ended we will without reserve publish the result.
3. That A. M. Poindexter, James Thomas, Jr., and L. R. Spilman be and are hereby appointed a committee to conduct this investigation, and to report as soon as a thorough investigation can be made.
4. That the said committee are hereby instructed to call upon the editor of *The South*, and request him to aid them in their labor by furnishing them a statement in full of the facts and evidence upon which he bases the allegations of the article aforesaid.
J. B. JETER, President pro tem.
JOHN M. MERRAY, Sec'y B. T. R. C.
December 18th, 1857.

"Vindication of President Ryland, II. Board of Trustees," *Religious Herald*, December 24, 1857, RRP, 10.006, 10.004, VBHS

⁵⁰ "Northern Books – Wayland's Moral Science," *Richmond Enquirer*, September 23, 1856, [link](#).

⁵¹ "Beware of 'Traitors!,'" *The South*, clipping hand-dated "12/12/1857," RRP, file 10.003, VBHS.

⁵² Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, December 22, 1857.

⁵³ "Vindication of President Ryland: I. Graduating Class," *Religious Herald*, December 24, 1857, 203, col. 1., VBHS. Also clipped in RRP, 10.006, VBHS. The *Religious Herald* was a bi-weekly Baptist publication that regularly published the writing of area Baptist leaders, including Robert Ryland. Its articles were often reprinted by newspapers outside the region, as was the case when the information contained in Ryland's "Card" which was referenced in the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator* (Boston, MA). Other newspapers that republished items or excerpts from the *Religious Herald* during the antebellum period included *The Boston Recorder*, *The Christian Watchman* (Boston), and Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*.

being discouraged from enrolling at Richmond College. His response to what he called “slander” was an unequivocal statement of his support for enslavement:

I feel it is my duty to say that I was born and raised in Virginia, have always lived, and expect to continue to live, in my native State, and to feel heartily identified with her interests; that I own about a dozen slaves; that I have never manumitted one, and do not design doing so; that I do not think emancipation safe or humane to either master or servant; that I have no sympathy or correspondence with the abolitionists; and that I do not think it morally wrong under existing circumstances to hold slaves. The Providence of God has made it my duty to preach the gospel to the people of color, but I do not see why this relation to them should annoy me with vague suspicions, or affect my standing among right-minded men.⁵⁴

Ryland later discovered that he had been misinformed about the rumor, and he retracted the accusation of slander.⁵⁵

In his administration of the campus, Ryland oversaw the conversion to a gas system that was designed to centralize the distribution of heat. An enslaved man named Martin was referred to as the “gas maker” and was responsible for its operation. Ryland found that the gasworks did not provide enough work to fill Martin’s time, so he hired him out to someone outside the campus. The payment for his hire was collected by Ryland and turned over to Richmond College, “less commissions.” This indicates that someone, possibly Ryland himself, was paid a portion of the hire amount for facilitating the arrangement. In the same list that included money paid by Ryland on behalf of Richmond College and collected for the institution, he also noted paying “College svts [servants]” a total of ten dollars for ringing the bell.⁵⁶

Ryland was actively raising funds for Richmond College during much of his tenure, despite the designation of other “General Agents” for that purpose.⁵⁷ During this period Ryland also led the faculty, taught, and promoted the interests of the college. He managed conflicts with professors, oversaw student progress, and published items on the college’s development. The financial stability of the institution grew along with its reputation during the 1850s.

ENSLAVEMENT

According to the Federal Census Slave Schedule of 1850, Robert Ryland enslaved thirteen people on the day of enumeration: a man, age 48; a boy, age 14, a boy, age 10; a boy, age 8; a woman, age

⁵⁴ Robert Ryland, “A Card,” *Religious Herald*, September 14, 1858, 147, col. 3, VBHS.

⁵⁵ Robert Ryland, “Another Card,” *Religious Herald*, Nov. 18, 1858, 3, col. 4, VBHS.

⁵⁶ Funds Paid For Richmond College... Funds Received for Richmond College, President's Account, July 7, 1859, Trustees Records 1851-1860, University Archives, VBHS. In Jennifer Oast’s *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680-1860*, she describes similar payments for “extra work” to enslaved people hired out to other Virginia colleges such as the College of William and Mary and Hampden Sydney College (167, Kindle).

⁵⁷ “Virginia Baptist Anniversaries,” *Daily Dispatch*, June 8, 1853, Virginia Chronicle.

55; a woman, age 36; a woman, age 37; two girls, age 10; a girl, age 6; a woman, age 60 (described as “mulatto”); a girl, age 12; and a woman, age 58.⁵⁸

On December 21, 1850, after the death of his father, Ryland wrote a letter to his mother providing information on his father’s grave marker and asking her to send him the “servants” that came to him after the settlement of Josiah Ryland’s estate: “They can walk part of the way. They will have to be hired out, and it is better for them to come before New Year’s Day.”⁵⁹ The census enumeration of those Robert Ryland enslaved took place before he wrote this letter to his mother and it is not known how many enslaved people were transferred to him in the settlement of his father’s estate. Ryland’s ledgers of the time show his extensive use of the “hiring out” system. During the years 1850-1859, he hired out Sally/Sallie, Ellen, Matilda, Thom/Tom, Louisa, Judy, and Walker Lee. Their labor provided a significant portion of his income.⁶⁰ Combined invoices and receipts in Ryland’s personal papers show his payments to doctors for visits to some of those he enslaved in 1854 and 1855 and his purchases of their shoes. Those named in the medical care receipt are Matilda, Sally, and Violet. Ryland purchased shoes for Lucy, Ellen, Violet, and Judy and heavy work shoes for Tom. He paid taxes on specific properties and the enslaved people, carriages, and other items associated with them.⁶¹

CAMPUS “HIRE” OF ENSLAVED PEOPLE

Ryland described the college “servants” as “frequently changed” which was typical of the system of “slave hiring” used in many businesses, institutions, and homes in antebellum Richmond.⁶² An 1854 Richmond College advertisement in the *Religious Herald* included the provision of “servants’ attendance” to students.⁶³ Two advertisements placed in the *Daily Dispatch* by a campus steward indicate the plan to “hire” a number of people. Both stipulate that a “liberal price will be paid for”

⁵⁸ Federal Census Slave Schedule, 1850, enumerated December 12, 1850, “Robert Ryland,” Henrico, Virginia, National Archives and Records Administration, ancestry.com. Robert Ryland’s brother-in-law H.F. [Henry] Thornton was acting as the college’s steward at this time (Federal Census, 1850, “H.F. Thornton,” Henrico, Virginia, National Archives and Records Administration, ancestry.com).

⁵⁹ Robert Ryland to Catherine Peachey Ryland, December 21, 1850, typescript, RRP, 22.004, VBHS. New Year’s Day, and at times the days around it, were “hiring days” when enslaved people hired for one year terms would either seek new work (if they were “self-hired”) or were placed in new homes or at new businesses where they would be under the control of an overseer or, in the case of colleges, the campus steward.

⁶⁰ Robert Ryland, Ledger II, [Receipts 1850-1859], pp. 120-139, RRP, 55.2, VBHS.

⁶¹ “State Taxes 1855,” “Robt Ryland,” RRP, 34.024; “County Taxes, 1857,” “Robert Ryland,” RRP 34.072, VBHS.

⁶² Robert Ryland, President’s Report, January 9, 1860, Trustees’ Records, University Archives, VBHS; Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 101-102.

⁶³ Advertisement, “Richmond College,” *Religious Herald*, August 17, 1854, 127, col. 5, VBHS.

those who were hired, rather than wages being paid **to** them.⁶⁴ The timing of the advertisements was likely aligned with the coming “Hiring Days” at the first of the new year.

Institutional records of the time contain a number of references to enslaved labor and the work of “servants”:

- Ryland complained to the Board of Trustees that the professors were relying too heavily on the labor of those “servants” attached to the Boarding Department, writing that the number of fires that they were already attending were significant and professors should pay the cost of “hire” for a “servant” to maintain the five fires in their classrooms. It appears that he proposed the Boarding Department continuing to cover his/their food and clothes, but this separate “hire” would cover his/their “extra work.”⁶⁵
- The Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees from July 17, 1852 include Ryland’s summary of budget concerns related to the cost of “servants’ hire.” In the same report, Ryland included a line item, “Servants hire, extra work [etc].”⁶⁶
- In the Board’s minutes of July 16, 1856, the “hire” of a man named William is shown in a conflict over which budget should cover the cost of his labor: “Resolved that the hire of the servant William, for the session 1854 & 5, ought to have been paid out of the proceeds of the boarding department, as the Trustees assumed the payment of his hire, only on the condition that the Boarding department not involve them in loss.”⁶⁷ This also indicates that cost of labor associated with the Boarding Department was expected to be covered by the amount students paid for room and board (“the proceeds of the boarding department”).⁶⁸
- Following the departure of the steward, C.A. Mayo, Ryland wrote to the Board of Trustees that among the items Mayo left in chaos was the accounting of the “hire of servants” during the previous session.⁶⁹
- After Mayo left his position as steward, a person he enslaved appears to have remained on the campus, still hired to the institution’s use. He or she was then hired out by the college for a short time or limited duties to James B. Taylor, a member of the Board of Trustees who was doing significant work on two projects: the shift to a “hotel” boarding system in which individuals leased buildings and assumed the cost of hiring laborers, and a large construction project consisting of a new main campus building and upgrades to the grounds

⁶⁴ “Wanted. – To hire by the month or year,” *Daily Dispatch*, November 15, 1855, Virginia Chronicle, [link](#); “Wanted – Servants,” *Daily Dispatch*, December 31, 1855, Virginia Chronicle, [link](#).

⁶⁵ Robert Ryland, President’s Report, December 2, 1851, Richmond College Board of Trustees Records 1851-1860, VBHS.

⁶⁶ Minutes, Richmond College Board of Trustees, July 17, 1852, University of Richmond, University Archives, VBHS.

⁶⁷ Minutes, Richmond College Board of Trustees, July 16, 1856.

⁶⁸ Minutes, Richmond College Board of Trustees, July 16, 1856.

⁶⁹ Robert Ryland, President’s Report to the Richmond College Board of Trustees, November 1, 1856, Trustees Records 1851-1860, University of Richmond, University Archives, VBHS.

and other structures. Nine dollars was noted among “Funds collected for Richmond College by R. Ryland 1857”: “April 30 Jas. B. Taylor servant hired of C.A. Mayo.” In this context, “hired of” meant “hired from,” and indicates that the college was re-hiring out the labor of someone whom it had hired from Mayo.

In the Fall of 1856, Richmond College attempted to address the ongoing financial losses associated with students’ housing and food by switching from the steward-based system to a “hotel” system like that at the University of Virginia.⁷⁰ College owned buildings were rented to men known as “hotelkeepers” who were responsible for providing students with housing and meals. These operations remained under the oversight of the Board of Trustees. The Board dictated the duties of the “servants” in the buildings, and Ryland and other professors would at time inspect the “dormitories”:

Attendance of Servants on Dormitories

Daily {Bring water and clean towels, clean up the rooms, make up the beds}

Wash the windows once in four weeks.

Black students shoes, afternoon, daily.

Carry water to each Dormitory twice during the day

The duties which have no fixed hours must be performed after breakfast hour: as well as the cleaning up the grounds which must be performed daily by 10 o’clock. All the grounds being equally divided⁷¹

Direct Board of Trustees intervention in the operations of the buildings centered on the financial collapse of two of the hotelkeepers. When the debt of one man mounted to the point that his personal possessions in the building were on the verge of seizure, the Board authorized Ryland to extend him eight dollars a day from college funds to keep the hotel operational. Ryland also paid “svts’ hire” [servants’ hire] for enslaved laborers working in the hotel.⁷² The next year, another hotelkeeper was in the same position, with an advertisement and legal notice of the auction of his possessions “at the Richmond College” appearing in the newspaper. Three enslaved people who worked in the hotel/dormitory were named in the notice: Sarah, Willis, and Little John.⁷³

At the start of the following decade, the Federal Census Slave Schedule enumerated twelve enslaved people in the college-owned hotels of William Lindsay and Anselem Brock, eleven of whom were

⁷⁰ Information about the use of hotels at the University of Virginia can be found in Oast, *Institutional Slavery*, 173-174, Kindle.

⁷¹ Regulations for Renting and Keeping Boarding Houses at Richd College,” Presented at the Meeting of Trustees Nov. 1. 1856, Trustees Records, VBHS.

⁷² Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, April 26, 1858, University Archives, VBHS; Robert Ryland, President’s Account, July 7, 1859, Board of Trustees Records, University Archives, VBHS.

⁷³ “Trustees’ Sale of Household Furniture,” *Daily Dispatch*, September 28, 1859, *Virginia Chronicle*; “Trustees’ Sale of Genteel Household and Kitchen Furniture,” *Daily Dispatch*, September 28, 1859, *Virginia Chronicle*.

hired from other enslavers.⁷⁴ Brock had previously been a hotelkeeper on the campus of the University of Virginia, and in an announcement of the Richmond College hotels placed by college trustee James B. Taylor, Lindsay was described as having run a hotel at William & Mary.⁷⁵ In the building managed by Brock, there were five “hired” enslaved people. In Lindsay’s building, there was one woman that he personally enslaved and six other enslaved people that were “hired out” to work there. They included a thirty-year-old woman who was enslaved by Richmond College mathematics and astronomy professor Lewis Turner, who had also filled the steward’s role in 1854.⁷⁶

PERSONAL LIFE

Ryland’s personal financial records show his increased affluence over the decade, and by 1859, he had reached a point of personal and professional comfort. This brief period of stability and satisfaction reached its zenith in the late summer of 1859, when his son, William Semple Ryland (1836-1906) was ordained as a Baptist minister and Robert Ryland provided him his ministerial charge.⁷⁷ Charges are given by senior Baptist ministers to those who are recently ordained and they communicate the gravity and importance of a lifelong commitment to ministry.

1860-1861

GROWTH OF THE COLLEGE

By 1860, the college was thriving and Ryland was approaching the end of his third decade as leader of the institution. When he wrote his son in October of that year, his feelings about the administration of Richmond College were among the most positive he ever expressed about his work there: “I am in decidedly good spirits concerning the college.”⁷⁸ There were one hundred fourteen students attending in 1859-60. A Modern Languages department had been established in 1859, and in 1860 Jeremiah Bell Jeter, a key Richmond College trustee, established a committee “to study the propriety of establishing a law department.”⁷⁹ The Building Committee made up of three college trustees was accepting bids for the construction of the “Central Edifice,” which was to be a

⁷⁴ “A. Brock” and “William Lindsay,” United States Federal Census of 1860, Slave Schedule, Henrico, Virginia, 44-45.

⁷⁵ *Catalog of the University of Virginia*, 1857-1858, Hathi Digital Library, 7, [link](#); “Richmond College,” *Richmond Enquirer*, August 22, 1856, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#).

⁷⁶ “William Lindsay,” *United States Federal Census of 1860*, Slave Schedule, 45.

⁷⁷ *Richmond Whig*, August 23, 1859, 2; *Daily Dispatch*, August 15, 1859.

⁷⁸ Robert Ryland to William Ryland, October 13, 1860, RRP 01.041, VBHS.

⁷⁹ Alley, 45; W. Harrison Daniel, “The Genesis of Richmond College, 1843-1860.” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 2 (1975): 134.

significant addition to the campus.⁸⁰ The endowment had reached \$100,000 and the institution “boasted an expanding curriculum.”⁸¹ After students initiated plans to organize a military company, the “Richmond College Minute Men,” and in anticipation of a session that never opened due to escalation of the Civil War, Professor of Greek, C.H. Toy was selected to provide military instruction in the Fall of 1861.⁸²

Prior to the closure of Richmond College before the 1861-62 session, the campus hotels/dormitories continued to provide room and board for students and enslaved men and women continued to labor in the college’s buildings.

ENSLAVEMENT

The 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule indicates that Robert Ryland enslaved fifteen people at the time of enumeration. They appear in three entries.

Ryland’s primary entry shows nine individuals:

- Woman, age 75
- Woman, age 35
- Man, age 21
- Young woman, age 19
- Young man, age 18
- Girl, age 16
- Girl, age 6
- Girl, age 3
- Boy, age 1

The second entry shows four individuals that he hired out to Agnass Cooper, the free Black woman who resided on the campus:

Agness Cooper, Employer; “R. Ryland” (Henrico County) “owner”:

- Woman, age 24
- Girl, age 6
- Girl, age 4
- Girl, age 2

The third entry shows a fifty-year-old woman and a one-year-old child enslaved by “Dr. Ryland” and hired to the use of a man named William Hendrick.

⁸⁰ [Advertisement], *Richmond Whig*, July 10, 1860.

⁸¹ Daniel, “Genesis of Richmond College,” 149.

⁸² Alley, 44; Daniel, “Genesis of Richmond College,” 134; “Richmond College Minute Men,” *Richmond Whig*, November 30, 1859, Virginia Chronicle, [link](#).

Of those enslaved by Robert Ryland in 1860, nine people did not appear in his 1850 Slave Schedule entry.⁸³

In an 1860 letter to his son, Ryland noted the illness of a man he enslaved named Walker, who was unable to work in “the Factory for 1½ months.”⁸⁴ In June and October of 1862, Ryland was paid \$36.60 and \$16.50 for “Walker’s hire.” At the time, he was also hiring out two women: Ellen and Matilda, for whom he was paid \$90.00 and \$70.00 respectively. In Ryland’s record of receipts in 1863, Ellen and Matilda are still shown as having been hired out, but Walker no longer appears there.⁸⁵ He does appear, along with Sally, Lucy, Judy, Louisa, Ellen, and Tom, in the record of visits by two doctors to those Ryland enslaved.⁸⁶ Walker’s last name was Lee. He was baptized by Robert Ryland at First African Baptist Church in 1859. Ryland kept careful records of those he baptized and who enslaved them. In the location of the enslaver’s name next to Walker Lee’s, Ryland wrote “Ro. Ryland.”⁸⁷

Ryland enslaved a man named Sam, age twenty-two, who was listed among those who died in Henrico County in 1862.⁸⁸ In 1863, Ryland continued to hire out Ellen and Matilda. He earned \$150 for Ellen’s labor and \$120 for Matilda’s. That year, he also hired out Tom and earned \$31.45 for the man’s work.⁸⁹ He hired out Matilda, Ellen, Tom, and Sally in 1864, earning \$504.00. In 1864,

⁸³ United States Federal Census of 1860, Slave Schedule, Henrico County, Western Subdivision, “Robert Ryland,” 44-45; “Agness Cooper,” employer, “R. Ryland,” Henrico County, owner; “Wm Hendrick,” employer, “Dr. Ryland,” owner, 28. In 1860, Robert Hill Ryland, M.D., the son of Robert Ryland’s brother Samuel Ryland, was living in Louisiana and seven people he enslaved were enumerated there. Given Robert Ryland’s prominence in Richmond, the enumerator’s use of “Henrico,” as his place of residence, and the frequent use of “Dr. Ryland” to distinguish him in many other contexts even before his honorary doctorate from Columbian College in 1860, it is most probable that “Dr. Ryland” refers to Robert Ryland, not his Louisiana nephew. United States Federal Census, 1860, Census Place: West Feliciana, Louisiana; Page: 157; Family History Library Film: 803411; United States Federal Census, 1860, Slave Schedule, “R.H. Ryland,” Louisiana, West Feliciana, Ward 8, The National Archives in Washington DC; Washington DC, USA; Eighth Census of the United States 1860; Series Number: M653; Record Group: Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Example of Ryland referred to as Dr. Ryland in 1853, “Richmond College,” *Daily Dispatch*, July 4, 1853, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#).

⁸⁴ Robert Ryland to William Ryland, November 20, 1860, RRP 01.039, VBHS.

⁸⁵ Family income, Ledger II, Robert Ryland Papers, RRP, 55.2.33, 55.2.34, VBHS.

⁸⁶ “Expenses of Family for 1863 (War prices),” Ledger II, RRP, file 55.2.34, VBHS.

⁸⁷ First African Baptist Church (Richmond, Va.), Minute Books, 1841-1930, Accession 28255. Church records collection. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia Minutes of the Deacons of First African Baptist Church, July 30, 1859, Library of Virginia.

⁸⁸ Henrico County Register of Deaths, September 1862, “Sam,” age 22, “Robert Ryland, Master,” microfilm, Library of Virginia.

⁸⁹ “Receipts for the year 1863,” Ledger II, RRP, 55.2.34, VBHS.

Ryland sold two people, Maria and Parthena, for \$2,400 in a partial exchange for Confederate stock coupons.⁹⁰

Ryland liquidated many of his assets and invested in the Confederacy. Ryland encouraged the Richmond College Board of Trustees to do the same. The board invested much of the college's endowment in Confederate funds.⁹¹

INSTITUTIONAL "HIRE"

The record of institutional hire prior to the close of campus at the outset of the Civil War is distilled in the 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule in which the entries for the campus "hotelkeepers," Anselem Brock and William Lindsay, flank that of Robert Ryland, indicating the enumerator's movements on September 5, 1860: Brock's building, then Ryland's residence, then Lindsay's building.

Enslaved People "Hired" in Brock's "Hotel":

Woman, age 40, enslaved by L. McRae (Henrico County)

Woman, age 25, enslaved by Mrs. Cobbit (South Carolina)

Man, age 20, enslaved by Mrs. Meade (Richmond)

Young man, age 17, enslaved by Mr. Farish (Henrico County)

Woman, age 30, enslaved by Mrs. Byrd (D – [illegible; possibly D.C. or Dla.])⁹²

Robert Ryland's entry

Enslaved People "Hired" in Lindsay's "Hotel":

Man, age 50, enslaved by L. Taylor (James City County)

Man, age 35, enslaved by Roy Temple (New Kent County)

Young man, age 18, enslaved by Mr. Rawlings (Orange County)

Boy, age 16, enslaved by Roy Temple (New Kent County)

Boy, age 14, enslaved by Ann Mutter (Richmond)

Woman, age 30, enslaved by Lewis Turner (Henrico)

Lindsay also personally enslaved one woman, age 70.⁹³

CAMPUS CLOSURE AND CIVIL WAR HOSPITAL

The campus housed Confederate soldiers for a time following the closing of Richmond College in 1861. It was then turned over to "a committee of Louisiana gentlemen" in August of that year and

⁹⁰ "Receipts for the year 1864 (Bellum horrendum)," Ledger II, RRP, 55.2.035, VBHS.

⁹¹ Robert Ryland, "Receipts for the year 1864," Ledger II, RRP, 55.2.035, VBHS; Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, November 21, 1863, University Archive, VBHS.

⁹² United States Federal Census of 1860, Slave Schedule, Henrico County, Virginia, Western Subdivision, "A. Brock, Employer," 44.

⁹³ United States Federal Census of 1860, Slave Schedule, Henrico County, Virginia, Western Subdivision, "William Lindsay, Employer, 45.

became known as the Louisiana Hospital.⁹⁴ Ryland and his family continued to live on the campus rent-free during the Civil War, and often visited the wounded in the hospital that occupied the Columbia mansion and other former college buildings.⁹⁵ These visits were one part of his colportage outreach work, funded by the Baptist Colportage Board, through which Ryland would distribute “thousands of tracts, hymn books, spelling books, and religious newspapers” to wounded soldiers in the city’s many hospitals.⁹⁶

FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

In 1841, Robert Ryland was asked to lead First African Baptist Church by Jeremiah Bell Jeter, his longtime friend, Richmond College trustee, and pastor of Richmond’s First Baptist Church.⁹⁷ Because of the constraints on the assembly of enslaved and free Black people following Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, Virginia law demanded that religious gatherings of Black people be supervised by a white pastor. Originally, First Baptist Church had held a racially mixed congregation where the white attendees were vastly outnumbered by Black people. Those enslaved and free Black congregants had previously attempted to establish their own church but had been “thwarted” by the Virginia General Assembly in 1821.⁹⁸ By 1841, the white congregants were

⁹⁴ “Richmond College,” *Central Presbyterian*, August 31, 1861, Virginia Chronicle; President’s Report, undated, Trustees Records, University Archives, VBHS. This document was later dated “1862?” although the description of Brock and Lindsay as current hotelkeepers and the plan to consider the use of the campus as a hospital indicates it was written before August 1861.

⁹⁵ Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, June 15, 1863; *Religious Herald*, June 6, 1861, 90, col. 7, VBHS.

⁹⁶ “The Richmond Hospitals, An Interesting Report,” *Richmond Enquirer*, October 17, 1862, Virginia Chronicle, [link](#); Robert Ryland, Ledger 2, “Receipts for the Year 1862,” RRP, file 55.2.033, VBHS.

⁹⁷ Jeremiah Bell Jeter’s own history as someone initially resistant to enslavement and a “reluctant” enslaver warrants additional consideration. Jeter wrote that he “grew up with a determination never to own a slave,” although “[w]hether slavery was right or wrong” was not his issue with human bondage. It was the “management ... responsibility, care and trouble” and the “firm authority” which he saw as necessary that were “uncongenial” to his “taste and habits.” He came to enslave people through one or more of his marriages. In 1840, Jeter enslaved three people (United States Federal Census, 1840, Richmond, Ward 3, Henrico County, Virginia, “Jeremiah B. Jeter,” 216). In 1860, Jeter enslaved one person, an eleven-year-old boy he hired out to W.M. McFarlane (United States Federal Census, Slave Schedule, 1860, “J.B. Jeter,” Henrico County, Virginia, 47). Following Jeter’s wedding to Mary Dabbs in 1863, he controlled all of those associated with her late husband’s estate. In 1860, Josiah Dabbs had enslaved twenty-five people (United States Federal Census, Slave Schedule, 1860, “Josiah Dabbs,” Henrico County, Virginia, 42-43). Jeter noted that the “state forbade” the emancipation of those he controlled through his wives’ estates unless they left Virginia, but he said it was what he viewed as their inability to support themselves that decided the question: “It was simply cruelty to free a mother with dependent children.” He considered sending them to Liberia but “none of them desired [it].” He was also concerned that if he sent away “the men who could support themselves and aid in the support of others, and retain the women and children to be supported by my own labors” he would be “stretching my humanity quite beyond the power of its endurance.” Those he held “earnestly protested” being sold or given away and Jeter determined that “it was not only allowable for me, but my solemn obligation, to hold and rule them, for their interest and for my own.” (Jeter, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 68-69).

⁹⁸ Midori Takagi, “Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction”: *Slavery in Richmond, 1782-1865*,

planning to build a new church and according to Robert Ryland, “some very fastidious people don’t like to resort to a church... where so many colored people congregated.” Enslaved and free Black members raised \$3,500 for the purchase of the original building from First Baptist Church. James Thomas, Jr., a member of the Richmond College Board of Trustees was a significant financial supporter of the effort.⁹⁹

Ryland’s decision to accept the position was driven in part by his deeply held belief that Black and white people deserved equal access to the teachings of the gospel. He viewed acting on this belief as his duty, although he wrote, “It is more congenial to my feelings to preach to whites, than to the blacks.”¹⁰⁰ In a letter to the American Colonization Society in 1847, his description was positive and emotional. He wrote, “[M]y position as pastor of the Af. Ch. is one that accords well with my tastes. I feel honored with the privilege of preaching to them & of doing what little I can to aid them to heaven.”¹⁰¹ In 1898, Ryland wrote that “[o]ur bodies are diverse in color, but our souls, if they have any color, are by nature equally dark, and by the blood of the Lamb, may be made equally white.”¹⁰² He was described by some members of First African Baptist Church with tremendous affection and by others with hostility.

Ryland’s convictions regarding the equality of souls did not affect his approach to earthly equality. In a sermon he gave in response to an attack on an enslaving family by a member of First African Baptist Church which resulted in the death of a white woman and her child, Ryland emphasized that

Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia (1999), 2125, electronic version.

⁹⁹ James Thomas, Jr.’s fortune was centered on his tobacco business which relied on the labor of enslaved people. Historian Joseph C. Robert refers to Thomas as “the most famous of the mid-nineteenth century tobacco manufacturers” (Joseph C. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*, New York: A.A. Knopf (1949), 82). Thomas personally enslaved fifty-five people in 1860 (Federal Census Slave Schedule of 1860, Henrico County, Richmond, Ward 3). In 1852, man named Frank was enslaved by Thomas and “received ten lashes at the public whipping post” for being in the city with an “improper pass” (“Improper Pass,” *Daily Dispatch*, June 12, 1852, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#)). A woman he enslaved named Sarah Ann Jackson was also whipped ten times for trespassing and disorderly conduct in 1853 (“Disorderly,” *Daily Dispatch*, March 4, 1853, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#)). Nelson, another man enslaved to Thomas, received “ten lashes” for disturbing the peace by playing music on Broad Street (“Serenaders,” *Daily Dispatch*, July 30, 1852, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#)). Peter Haskins was sentenced to thirty-nine lashes for theft in 1853 (“Stealing Money,” *Daily Dispatch*, February 15, 1853, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#)). Isaiah Smith escaped from Thomas and hid on a vessel bound for Pennsylvania. He was discovered during a search of the ship. A news item detailed the plan to return Isaiah Smith to Thomas (“Fugitive Slave Captured,” *Daily Dispatch*, April 26, 1854, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#)). Other news items indicate Thomas’ use of enslaved people hired from other enslavers. Two of those people were [Richard](#) and [Cary](#). The students of University of Richmond Assistant Professor of History Samantha Seely have conducted project-based research on Thomas, his relationship with the institution, and his use of enslaved labor.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Ryland to Mrs. James Robert Fleet, December 5, 1866, RRP, 15.008, VBHS.

¹⁰¹ Robert Ryland to the American Colonization Society, September 28, 1846, Papers of the American Colonization Society, Library of Congress and Fold3.com.

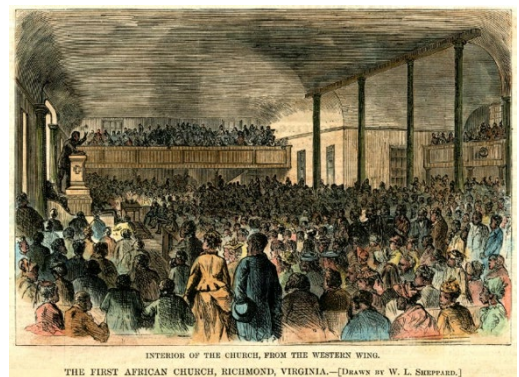
¹⁰² Robert Ryland, D.D., *The Colored People*, Baptist Mission Rooms: Baltimore, Maryland, 1898, RRP, 3.060, 7, VBHS.

the existence of the church demanded congregants' adherence to a racial hierarchy: "God has given this country to the white people. They are the law-makers – the masters – the superiors. The people of color are the subjects – the servants – and even when not in bondage, the inferiors."¹⁰³ In the day-to-day workings of First African Baptist Church, his belief in sharing the gospel meant that he facilitated aspects of spiritual expression and self-governance that made the church a key location of Black power in the South. At the same time, his efforts were aligned with the priorities of proslavery Christianity, showing critics of enslavement the "success of quasi-independent black churches" and emphasizing the effects that religion could have on maintaining enslavement while modulating what Ryland viewed as its most objectionable aspects: the separation of families and the limits on sharing religion with enslaved people.¹⁰⁴ When a visiting journalist asked a Black Richmonder why proslavery people were encouraging him to visit First African Baptist Church, the man responded, "I thought they would tell you to go there. They [always] do. That's an old game of theirs – *Go to the African Church* they [always] say to strangers, *and see how happy our slaves are, and how well they dress.*" When the same man was asked if Ryland always preached in a way "to suit the slaveholders," he explained that "[h]e wouldn't be allowed to preach at all if he didn't."¹⁰⁵

SERVICES

Prior to Nat Turner's Rebellion, Black ministry had thrived in Virginia and some of the most talented and significant ministerial voices in the region were among the members of First African Baptist Church. In what Ryland called "recompense for [the] slight" of not being able to preach, he established a pattern of church services in which men would be called to pray or to exhort the congregation in public religious addresses that were long, powerful, and evocative of sermons.¹⁰⁶

Numerous white visitors would note the enormity of the congregation – often 1,500 to 2,000 people – and detail the extraordinarily moving words of the enslaved and free speakers that Ryland would gesture to from the pulpit. These accounts provided the names of individuals in the congregation and detailed elements of Ryland's sermons. They also described the choir and the congregational singing that began thirty



William Ludwell Sheppard, "First African Church, Richmond, Virginia -- Interior of the Church from the Western Wing," VCU Libraries Digital Collection

¹⁰³ Robert Ryland, "Substance of Sermon, Delivered at the African Church, July 25, 1852, by the Pastor," *Daily Dispatch*, August 6, 1852, *Virginia Chronicle*, [link](#). An excerpt of the sermon was quoted in Alfred L. Brophy, "The Nat Turner Trials," *North Carolina Law Review* 91 (2013), 1822, [link](#).

¹⁰⁴ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2008), 170.

¹⁰⁵ James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, New York: A.A. Burdick (1859), 17-18.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Ryland, "Origin and History of the First African Church," in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880*, Richmond: Carlton McCarthy (1880), 258.

minutes before each service, when those assembled would sing “solemn old tunes,” “one after another join[ing] in until all seemed to be singing” in “strong, mellow tones, full of pathos.”¹⁰⁷

Ryland’s ministerial attention to Black congregants was, like Jeter’s before him, focused on “preach[ing] out of their minds their dreams and fancies, their visions and revelations, and all their long cherished superstitions.”¹⁰⁸ Prior to the racial separation of the congregation into two churches and Ryland’s assumption of the role of pastor at First African Baptist Church, these beliefs had caused conflict for Jeter. Historian Midori Takagi describes the “horror” that white members of First Baptist Church had felt when they saw that “black members maintained a strong belief in spirits and witchcraft in addition to their unshakable faith in God and saw no conflict or contradiction between the two.”¹⁰⁹ Ryland worked to address this, seeing it as one of the “peculiarities” of the congregation.¹¹⁰ In his sermons he drew on biblical passages to enforce white supremacy and the enslavement system. Former First African Baptist Church member Henry Brown, who orchestrated his escape from enslavement by having himself shipped in a box to Pennsylvania following the loss of his family after they were sold, remembered Ryland using his position as pastor to support the system of enslavement: “[H]e was not ashamed to invoke the authority of heaven in support of the slave degrading laws under which masters could with impunity abuse their fellow creatures.”¹¹¹

At times, Ryland would invite ministerial students from Richmond College to give the sermons at the church.¹¹²

BAPTISMS, MARRIAGES, DEATHS & FUNERALS

Ryland maintained careful baptism lists in the minutes of the deacons’ meetings that he recorded as their “moderator,” recording those who had been baptized and the men and women who enslaved them. For free members, he wrote the word “free.” He also shared the number of baptisms he performed at the church in newspaper items and in private letters. In 1859, two entries above his record of the baptism of Walker Lee, Ryland drew a line and wrote, “3153 to this,” meaning that Walker Lee was the 3,156th person he baptized there.¹¹³ Ryland took pains to explain to those outside of the church that these numbers did not indicate any willingness on his part to hurry congregants

¹⁰⁷ G.F. Root, “Congregational Singing Among the Negroes,” reprinted in *Southern Musical Advocate and Singer’s Friend*, April 1, 1860, [link](#).

¹⁰⁸ Robert Ryland, “The Origin and History of the First African Church,” 255.

¹⁰⁹ Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*, 1183-1229; Ryland, “The African Church,” 255.

¹¹⁰ Ryland, “The Origin and History of the First African Church,” 255.

¹¹¹ Henry Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written By Himself* [British edition], Manchester: Lee and Glynn (1851), 32, Documenting the American South, [link](#).

¹¹² Robert Ryland, “The Origin and History of the First African Church,” 259-260.

¹¹³ Minutes of the Deacons of First African Baptist Church, July 30, 1859, Library of Virginia.

through the decision to be baptized. Instead, he wrote, he saw it as his “duty to throw obstacles in the way,” and to “[hold] up the dangers of a premature confession.”¹¹⁴

Ryland also performed marriages for enslaved congregants although there are limited accounts of this facet of his ministry.¹¹⁵ He was frequently at the deathbed of church members, and his recollections of these moments provide names and details of the dying in their final hours.¹¹⁶

DEACONS

As pastor of First African Baptist Church, Robert Ryland recorded the minutes of the church’s deacons, a decision-making body made up of mostly free members of the congregation. This disproportionate representation of free men caused tension in the church and resulted in one of the few instances when Ryland recorded his own efforts to sway the deacons’ decision making. After the exclusion of three men who objected to enslaved people not having a more proportional representation among the deacons, Ryland attempted to intervene on their behalf.¹¹⁷ He recorded other conflicts within the church and deacons’ decisions on those issues. The minutes also contain records of people who entered as members of the church, and those who left it. Ryland’s accounts of members who were sold to places in the Deep South and those who moved to the North provide a sense of what Gregg Kimball calls, “the church’s relative position in a world of faith that overlapped with Richmond’s place in the African diaspora.”¹¹⁸

The deacons oversaw the church treasury, which was filled by the donations of members, proceeds from choir concerts, and the highly profitable renting of the church building, which was among the largest venues in the city. During the week and on Saturdays, the building was the site of political meetings, musical performances, art displays, and an array of other events often attended by largely white audiences. This included what was said to be the first display of the Confederate flag in Richmond and one of Jefferson Davis’ final speeches as President of the Confederacy.¹¹⁹

Ryland admired many of the deacons and wrote vivid accounts of them in a series of essays on the church which he published in the mid-1850s. He recalled that Joseph Abrams, who was a significant minister before Nat Turner’s Rebellion, had once been whipped for preaching. After Abrams’ death

¹¹⁴ [Robert Ryland], “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15, September 1855, 262, Hathi Trust Digital Library, [link](#).

¹¹⁵ “Let Off,” *Daily Dispatch*, March 27, 1858, Virginia Chronicle, [link](#).

¹¹⁶ [Robert Ryland], “Reminiscences of First African Baptist Church, No. 4,” *American Baptist Memorial*, December 1855, 355, Hathi Trust Digital Library, [link](#).

¹¹⁷ Takagi, “*Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*,” loc. 2253, electronic version; First African Baptist Church, Minutes, May 5, 1850, Library of Virginia.

¹¹⁸ Gregg Kimball, “Richmond’s Place in the African American Diaspora,” in *Afro-Virginian History and Culture*, ed. John Saillant, 145, 163.

¹¹⁹ “African Church Speech,” Papers of Jefferson Davis, Rice University, [link](#); “The Stars and Bars in the Church,” *Daily Dispatch*, August 17, 1876, [link](#).

in 1854, Ryland offered to write the text for his grave marker, but was refused because, in Ryland's words the following year, "his friends thought their own literary taste fully equal to the occasion...The result satisfies me that I ought to have waited, at least until I was invited."¹²⁰

THE COLONIZATION MOVEMENT

Robert Ryland used his position as pastor at First African Baptist Church to advance the interests of the [American Colonization Society](#). In 1846, he wrote to the society that he was "gradually bringing the whole subject of colonization before the minds of the people. At this time their minds are seriously agitating the matter. Some half dozen are about concluding to offer themselves."¹²¹ He wrote to the society and described those he believed to be ideal prospective candidates for transport to Liberia, individuals who were either already free or whose enslavers were willing to give them up to support the movement. He also noted those that he did not believe were well suited to be missionaries or colonists, either because of advanced age or, in the case of the enslaved man Burwell Mann, because he demonstrated "no special prominence either as to intellectual or moral worth."¹²² Mann eventually secured his freedom, but it does not appear that Ryland or the American Colonization Society helped him. Ryland did assist a First African Baptist Church deacon named Thomas U. Allen. He purchased Allen on December 22, 1843 for the purpose of eventually freeing him and continued to legally own him until, it appears, Allen could repay the cost of his purchase.¹²³ Ryland recorded elsewhere that he charged interest when he acted as a purchasing agent for other people, and this may have been the case with Allen. Ryland held him for the following fifteen months as Allen sought contributions at First African Baptist Church and in other congregations.¹²⁴ Ryland also raised funds for the effort at a meeting of Baptists in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1844. He did not tell his audience that he was Allen's legal enslaver, but instead described him as enslaved by his previous owner.¹²⁵ Once Allen secured his freedom, he became the pastor of Second Baptist Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts and later pursued higher education in New Hampshire.

¹²⁰ [Robert Ryland], "Reminiscences of First African Baptist Church, No. 4," *American Baptist Memorial*, 354.

¹²¹ Robert Ryland to American Colonization Society, October 12, 1846, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress and Fold3.com.

¹²² Robert Ryland to the American Colonization Society [likely William McLain, ACS Secretary], January 11, 1848, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress and Fold3.com.

¹²³ City of Richmond, "Ryland to Allen, Emancipation," City of Richmond Court of Hustings, DB 47:632, Library of Virginia.

¹²⁴ Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press (2000), 145.

¹²⁵ S.C.C., "For the Religious Herald," November 14, 1844, *Religious Herald*, VBHS. Ryland does not refer to Allen by name, but the specifics align with information in the First African Baptist Church minutes and the emancipation document Ryland filed in Richmond's Hustings Court on April 14 1845, several weeks after he signed the emancipation document. Ryland referred to Allen as being "owned by an orphan child." The letter writer wrote that "Brother R. was desirous of getting some assistance" and said he was willing to receive any donations toward Allen's effort and that of First African Baptist Church, which had offered to assist him. At this point, Ryland was Allen's legal owner. He had been purchased from Edmonia

PRESSURES & CONTROVERSIES

After the discovery of a clandestine operation to use Ryland's regular distribution of mail to congregants as a means of communicating plans of escape from enslavement, Ryland was "mortified," both by being used for the purpose by members of the church and by the request of "some white persons" that he use his position to help in efforts to capture others attempting to escape. Ryland viewed both accusations – that he was facilitating freedom and that he was acting as an impediment to it – as equally at odds with his role: "Be it mine to preach the gospel, to watch for souls, to make full proof of my ministry."¹²⁶

Ryland's position at the church placed him at a point of "tension" between his congregation and increasingly vocal proslavery interests in Virginia and in the region.¹²⁷ In 1849, he discovered that there was a rumor that he was receiving an exorbitant salary as pastor. He was driven to locate the source of the story, and his frustration prompted him to share his feelings about his position at First African Baptist Church with his father: "I feel that I am disinterestedly and laboriously working for the welfare of the blacks & through their benefits, for that of the whites — and to be calumniated thus & charged with oppressing the blacks on the one hand and trying to [illegible: possibly "defraud"] their masters of their slaves on the other - is rather discouraging — However I am determined to try to do right and leave my character for God to de — ["decide" or "determine" — letter is torn]."¹²⁸

The 1852 murder of two members of the Winston family by Jane Williams, a woman they enslaved and a member of First African Baptist Church, was a threat to Ryland's leadership and to the church's survival.¹²⁹ Williams' motive for the brutal attacks on Virginia Winston, Joseph Winston (who lived but was gravely injured) and their infant may have centered on the possibility that she was to be sold away or separated from her own young child.¹³⁰ Ryland visited Williams in her jail cell when she was still insisting that she was innocent and he "exhorted her to make her peace with God." She confessed to Ryland and said that she alone had attacked the Winstons.¹³¹ Her husband,

Stagg, the "orphan child," on December 22, 1843 (City of Richmond, Hustings Court, DB: 47:632, Library of Virginia). Ryland's decision not to disclose that he was Allen's owner may have been linked to abolitionists in the audience who had already expressed hesitation for assisting in purchasing someone even for the purposes of freeing them.

¹²⁶ [Robert Ryland], "Reminiscences of First African Baptist Church, No. 3," *American Baptist Memorial*, November 1855, 324, Hathi Trust Digital Library, [link](#).

¹²⁷ Ayers, 21.

¹²⁸ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, May 20, 1849, RRP, 11.075, VBHS.

¹²⁹ The material on Jane Williams and the Winston murders is drawn from Shelby M. Driskill, "Jane Williams: Enslavement, Murder, and 'A Creed So Prevalent,'" (unpublished manuscript, October 21, 2020), Ulysses file.

¹³⁰ "The Testimony in the Murder Case," *Daily Dispatch*, July 22, 1852, Virginia Chronicle; "Confession of the Murder," *Richmond Enquirer*, July 30, 1852, Virginia Chronicle.

¹³¹ "Jane, The Murderess," *Daily Dispatch*, July 26, 1852, Virginia Chronicle.

John Williams, was also under suspicion. Ryland gave a sermon to the First African Baptist Church congregation centered on the biblical commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” and told them of the threats the murders had concentrated on the church and on its members. He urged the congregants to “*keep your own place – the place of submission.*”¹³² The enslavers of Richmond would now suspect all of the church members, he said, “the most innocent and deserving.” It was, he continued, their “duty to bear these reproaches with meekness, and to see to it that the suspicions resting on you shall prove, so far as you are concerned, to be unjust and groundless.”¹³³ Following Jane Williams’ conviction for the murders, Ryland visited her again. She confessed that she had poisoned another Winston child weeks before the other murders and asked him to keep this a secret until after she was executed, “fearing that a mob would seize and destroy her.”¹³⁴ Ryland did not alert the police, and only shared the confession with the press after she was killed. At the gallows, he stood beside Jane Williams and said a prayer for her.¹³⁵ He continued to believe that John Williams was innocent, later lamenting that he had been executed unjustly and blaming the “infuriated state of the public mind” at the time of the murders.¹³⁶

In 1862, an editorial in the *Confederate Baptist* targeted “the African churches of Richmond” insisting that they were “the resort of insolent negroes, who desire to be exempted from control of their masters.” While the editorial writer did not name Ryland when he wrote that a white pastor leading a Black congregation “is always degraded...ruled by negroes, and as a direct consequence, loses all his manliness as a master, and his integrity as a Christian,” Ryland responded to what was clearly an attack on him. He defended the church, writing that it was made up of “staid, orderly, and obedient” people. He also defended himself. He acknowledged that he was the target of “sneers of the proud, ungodly and blaspheming men,” and wrote that he was “happy to be ‘degraded’ in their view” seeing it as “the price of the privilege of preaching Christ’s gospel to the poor.”¹³⁷

CATECHISM & LITERACY

While Ryland believed that enslaved people should have access to “suitable” reading material and the legal limitations on reading instruction were one of his two objections to the enslavement system, providing direct reading lessons would have put him at odds with authorities and many in the white community. It appears, however, that he may have found a way to support the development of literacy among the congregants who were learning to read or improving their reading skills. In 1848, he published a catechism – questions of faith followed by answers from

¹³² In Ryland’s published writing, italics were substituted for his underlining of text.

¹³³ Robert Ryland, “Substance of a Sermon, Delivered at the African Church, July 25th, 1852, by the Pastor,” *Daily Dispatch*, August 6, 1852.

¹³⁴ “Further Confession of Jane Williams,” *Daily Dispatch*, September 17, 1852.

¹³⁵ “The Execution of Jane Williams,” *Daily Dispatch*, September 11, 1852.

¹³⁶ [Robert Ryland], “Reminiscences of First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” *American Baptist Memorial*, November 1855, 324, Hathi Trust Digital Library, [link](#).

¹³⁷ Robert Ryland, “African Baptist Churches,” *Religious Herald*, May 14, 1863, Robert Ryland Biographical File, VBHS.

biblical texts – under two titles, *Scripture Catechism, for Coloured People* and, a short time later, *Scripture Catechism for the Instruction of Children and Servants*. These may have operated, in the words of Charles F. Irons, as a “thinly veiled literacy program” that Ryland intended to be “a primer for his black congregants.” They were also constructed to support the tenants of proslavery Christianity. In addition to the “brief section on the mutual responsibilities of ‘Masters and Servants,’” – responsibilities that included submission to “masters,” even cruel ones – Irons writes that “through the very act of creating and disseminating a catechism, Ryland was making the case that a well-regulated system of paternalist instruction—not abolition—was the best way that owners could care for their slaves.”¹³⁸ Ryland shared his beliefs about reading and his own strategy for the distribution of “suitable” reading material among members of the congregation in one of his 1855 essays.¹³⁹

A single source also indicates that Ryland supplied the congregants who could read with a collection of hymns. He was said to have distributed fifteen hundred copies “but found he had not enough to supply a copy to each one who could read.”¹⁴⁰

SECTIONALISM, SECESSION & WAR

Ryland’s feelings of allegiance to the South deepened in the years leading up to secession, however he hoped separation from the Union could be avoided while enslavement was preserved, a sentiment articulated by a number of his peers. Sectionalism had threaded through Ryland’s personal and public writing in the decades before the Civil War. In one of a series of essays he wrote for the *Religious Herald* in support of Richmond College, he detailed the risks posed by a reliance on “foreign” teachers, specifically teachers from the North, and he challenged potential students to show their loyalty to the region by becoming teachers themselves: “Do you deliberately consent to withdraw from all competition and allow the youth of other States to come in and supplant you?”¹⁴¹ He was amused though, by a controversy that arose when a northern instructor was being considered for a position at Richmond College. Several members of the Board of Trustees left a meeting in protest, and the absence of their negative votes meant the candidate got the position.¹⁴²

In an 1857 speech before the Columbian College Alumni Association, Ryland spoke out on his fear of disunion in response to enslavement and the increasing calls for abolition from those in the

¹³⁸ Charles F. Irons, “‘And all these things shall be added unto you’: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* (Winter 1998), 29; Charles F. Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2008), 187, 180.

¹³⁹ [Robert Ryland], “Reminiscences of First African Baptist Church, No. 2,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (October 1855), 292.

¹⁴⁰ “Letter from the South,” excerpt in “Religious Privileges of Slaves,” *Semi-Weekly Standard*, September 2, 1857, Chronicling America, Library of Congress, [link](#).

¹⁴¹ Robert Ryland, “Richmond College – No. 11,” *Religious Herald*, VBHS.

¹⁴² Robert Ryland to William Ryland, September 27, 1858, RRP, 01.071, VBHS.

North, and he shared his hope that his listeners would “[r]ebuke those politicians... who are continually exasperating the public mind and urging measures to weaken the bonds of union.” After posing the question of why God would have allowed enslavement in the United States, Ryland offered the prospect of a possible end to the use of forced labor in “a few centuries.” After those hundreds of years, he argued, “free labor may supplant slave labor throughout our borders. As the country becomes filled up with people, the competition between laborers for employment will so reduce their wages that economy may induce capitalists to prefer voluntary operatives.”¹⁴³

As described in the summary section focused on the campus in the 1850s and detailed in section 3.2.2.5 of the complete report, in 1858, Ryland responded to what he believed to be a rumor that he was an abolitionist by placing an item (“A Card”) in the *Religious Herald* in which he stated that 1.) he identified with the interests of Virginia, 2.) he owned “about a dozen” slaves, 3.) he had never manumitted one, nor did he see it as “safe or humane for master or servant” to do so, 4.) he did not sympathize with the abolition movement nor did he communicate with those aligned with it, 5.) he did “not think it morally wrong under existing circumstances to hold slaves.”¹⁴⁴

After expressing his dread of potential war to his son, Ryland’s support for the Confederacy deepened following Virginia’s secession, and he, like many, began weighing in on the strategies of generals: “It seems to me that we are giving up too much ground without fighting, but I yield to the powers that be... I am still not doubtful of the final result. We are contracting our circumference to thicken the line & when we make a stand, it will be a firm one! ... Our reverses of late have given the Yankees great audacity but I trust as Genl. Whiskey shall cease to command our forces, the [illegible: possibly “scale”] will soon turn in our favor.”¹⁴⁵ In a letter written to one of his two sons who served in the Confederate army, Ryland wrote, “[O]ur beloved South having been threatened with invasion and subjugation, it seemed to me that nothing was left us but stern resistance or abject submission to unconstitutional power. A brave and generous people could not for a moment hesitate between such alternatives. A war in defence [sic] of our homes and firesides—of our wives and children—of all that makes life worth possessing is the result. While I most deeply deplore the necessity for the sacrifice, I could not but rejoice that I had a son to offer to the service of the country, and if I had a dozen *I would most freely give them all.*”¹⁴⁶

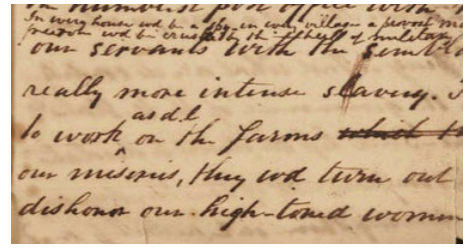
¹⁴³ Robert Ryland, The American Union, RRP, 51.020, VBHS. Also published as Robert Ryland, “The American Union,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), September 3, 1857, 2. Early American Newspapers. Newsbank. This contrasts with his speech, “The Colonization Society” (1824), in which he anticipated enslavement ending within one hundred years (RRP, 26.026-29).

¹⁴⁴ Robert Ryland, “A Card,” *Religious Herald*, September 14, 1858, VBHS.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Ryland to William Ryland, November 23, 1860, RRP, 1.030, VBHS; Robert Ryland to William Ryland, March 4, 1862, RRP, 1.009, VBHS.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Ryland, “A Letter to a Son in Camp,” *Religious Herald*, August 15, 1863, VBHS. Also included in John William Jones *Christ in the Camp; or, Religion in Lee’s Army*, Richmond: B.F. Johnson & Co. (1888), 28.

Ryland's strong support of the Confederacy was also demonstrated in an 1864 sermon given at Mount Olivet Church in which he spoke of the need to examine the sins that may have affected the South's fortunes in the war – among them were alcohol, gambling, and prostitution – and called upon the congregation to rally behind the Confederate cause. Of enslavement, he said that, should the North win the war, “they [would] curse our servants with a really more intense slavery.” The South's loss would upend the social order when the North “[would] turn out a brutal soldiery to insult & dishonor our high-toned women whom they would afterwards employ as cooks, & milk-maids, as washers & seamstresses.”¹⁴⁷



Robert Ryland, [Mount Olivet Sermon,] April 8, 1864, RRP, 0157-.0158, VBHS

POST-WAR RICHMOND & KENTUCKY YEARS

Following the surrender of the Confederacy and the end of the Civil War, Ryland attempted to resign as pastor of First African Baptist Church in May of 1865, but “the majority refused to accept his withdrawal” in light of his years of service to the church.¹⁴⁸ In June, however, Ryland resigned the position, writing later that he did so “from a belief that they would *naturally* and *justly* prefer a minister of their own color.”¹⁴⁹

Ryland's personal wealth was wiped out due to his investment in Confederate funds. The endowment of Richmond College was practically destroyed due to the institution's own Confederate investments which Ryland had encouraged. For months following the end of the war, Ryland followed the request of the Board of Trustees and prepared the campus for the arrival of students. He threw himself into the process, attempting to locate the contents of the college's library which had disappeared after being removed by the military.¹⁵⁰ Word reached Ryland before March of 1866 that some key members of the Board of Trustees wanted him to resign his position. Feeling that he lacked the confidence of the full board, Ryland wrote a letter of resignation from his positions as president of Richmond College and its Board of Trustees on March 23, 1866. He was persuaded to remain on the board and was provided a house on the campus rent-free until September 1867.¹⁵¹

Ryland found work at two city institutions: the Richmond Female Institute, where he and his family lived for a time, and at the Richmond location of the National Theological Institute, which provided

¹⁴⁷ Robert Ryland, [Mount Olivet Sermon,] April 8, 1864, RRP, 54a.0157-.0158, VBHS.

¹⁴⁸ John T. O'Brian, “Reconstruction in Richmond,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89, no. 3, July 1981, 263.

¹⁴⁹ Ryland, “The First Century of the First African Church,” 264.

¹⁵⁰ “Ro. Ryland,” Union Provost Marshals' File of Paper Relating to Individual Civilians, M345, National Archives Records Administration, accessed through Fold3.com.

¹⁵¹ Robert Ryland to the Richmond College Board of Trustees, March 23, 1866, Records of the Board of Trustees 1861-1870, University of Richmond, University Archives, VBHS; Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, June 12, 1866, University of Richmond, University Archive, VBHS.

ministerial instruction to formerly enslaved men. He wrote that he saw the work there as an absolute necessity, and believed that “the colored people have recently been raised, not only to freedom, but to the dignity of citizenship... *They ought to be educated*. But that is not all. *They will be educated*.” He believed he should be the one to provide their education since he had “labored, on the Sabbath and in other spare hours, with honest zeal, for their spiritual welfare.” He wrote that he “still number[ed] among them a host of warm-hearted friends.”¹⁵² His decision to teach at the institute shocked the editors of the *Religious Herald*, but they appeared to note his extenuating financial circumstances, writing that there was “a more weighty reason which it was not proper for him to mention,” and they conceded that Ryland was “the best qualified for training colored men for the ministry.”¹⁵³ Ryland’s time at the institute, which was located at the former Lumpkin’s Jail site, the notorious slave prison known as the Devil’s Half-Acre, was limited. While he wrote that he had resigned after realizing that two female teachers could be hired for what he was paid, his private letters indicate the work with the students did not satisfy him professionally: “My pupils were so unimpressionable that the work was almost purely mechanical. Did you ever fancy that turning a grindstone all day without sharpening the iron would be harder work than if it [should] sharpen it? (Oh darkeydom! forgive the insinuation).”¹⁵⁴ The institution took the name Colver Institute in 1869, became the Richmond Institute in 1876, and Richmond Theological Seminary in 1886. In 1899, the seminary merged with the Wayland Institute to form Virginia Union University.

Ryland accepted a position leading Kentucky Female College and resigned from the Richmond College Board of Trustees on May 25, 1868. He remained at the women’s college until 1871, then moved on to positions at Lexington College and Henry Male and Female College. Between 1893 and 1897, Ryland served as Chaplain of the Southwest Virginia Institute. Throughout his over thirty years in Kentucky, he continued to work when he could as a guest minister, preaching before white and Black congregants. He was frustrated at not locating a permanent church during much of this period and attributed it to the “spirit of the age.” When he could, however, he relished “opportunities to labor among the destitute and among those who were willing to receive the gospel from the lips of an old man. My aim,” he continued, “has been and still is, to be found at work when the Master comes.” As for his personal spiritual journey, Ryland remained convinced of his own “great unworthiness,” writing at the age of eighty-five that, despite “many humiliating failures,” he had tried to “live a Christian life.”¹⁵⁵

Ryland continued to demonstrate the same contradictions on the subject of race that he had prior to emancipation. In 1885, he was deeply concerned for the Black domestic workers in Kentucky who

¹⁵² Robert Ryland, “To the Baptist Churches of Virginia and the South Generally,” *Religious Herald*, September 12, 1867, VBHS.

¹⁵³ Editors, “Address of Dr. Ryland,” *Religious Herald*, September 12, 1867, VBHS.

¹⁵⁴ Charles H. Corey, *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary, With Reminiscences of Thirty Years Work Among the Colored People of the South*, Richmond: J.W. Randolph Company (1895), 57; Robert Ryland to Charles Hill Ryland, October 1, 1868, RRP, 13.023, VBHS.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Ryland, “My Experience and Call to the Ministry,” “Lexington, Ky., 1889,” *The Colloquium*, p. 44, clipping from RRP, 51.046, VBHS.

were on the verge of being displaced by workers from England. He wrote, “What will the colored women do after a while?”¹⁵⁶ Six years later, however, he was amused by his wife’s surprise when she could not find a cook that suited her, writing that she was seeing the difference between “antebellum & post-bellum times.” He continued, “The new generation of Negroes is far above hard work. The women are worse than the men. If you hire them, they study how little work they can do to avoid dismissal, & as soon as they can get money enough...they are gone!”¹⁵⁷ A year before his death, Ryland wrote *The Colored People*, a small publication that included his thoughts on enslavement, colonization, and the lives of Black people following emancipation. In it he remembered those his father enslaved with fondness, painting an idyllic portrait of his childhood among enslaved children and the meals he shared with their families. Ryland wrote that after enslavement – “a season of discipline” – the colonization of Africa by Christianized formerly enslaved people and their descendants would be a demonstration of the “hand of God.” Despite what he referred to as “a natural and mutual race-prejudice between whites and blacks” based on white “distaste for the black skin, the curly hair and the servitude so long associated with them” and Black people’s memories of “the hardships of slavery, and our reluctance to cut the tie that bound them,” Ryland asked his readers to remember that “[o]ur bodies are diverse in color, but our souls, if they have any color, are by nature equally dark, and by the blood of the Lamb, may be made equally white.”¹⁵⁸

Robert Ryland died at his daughter’s home at the age of ninety-five after suffering a brief illness.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Robert Ryland to Samuel Ryland, March 15, 1885, RRP, 12.034, VBHS.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Ryland to Betty Ryland, December 10, 1891, RRP, 20.018, VBHS.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Ryland, *The Colored People*, 6-8, RRP, 3.060-061, VBHS.

¹⁵⁹ Obituary, “Robert Ryland,” RRP, 03.038, VBHS.

SOURCES

The Virginia Baptist Historical Society provided access to thousands of pages of Robert Ryland's personal papers. In early to mid-2020, University of Richmond Digital Engagement Team in Boatwright Library has digitally preserved this material resulting in nearly six thousand images, and their work facilitated research during the COVID-19 lockdown period when access to campus was limited. A significant portion of the material cited in the report has also been drawn from other sources located during independent research (Fall 2018-Fall 2019) and under the auspices of the Inclusive History Project (Fall 2019-Winter 2020/21):

- Institutional records including the minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees (microfilm), records of the Board of Trustees (manuscripts), and digitized volumes of *The Messenger*
- Hundreds of newspaper articles, including the *Religious Herald* (Virginia Baptist Historical Society), other Baptist publications, and contemporaneous local, regional, and national newspapers located in digital databases and on microfilm (*Virginia Chronicle*, Library of Virginia and the Virginia Newspaper Project; *Chronicling America*, Library of Congress; and *Early American Newspapers*, Boatwright Library at the University of Richmond through a gift of Edwin S. Snead, III, Class of 1951)
- Biographies and autobiographies of Ryland's friends, students, and colleagues
- The minutes of deacons' meetings at First African Baptist Church which Ryland recorded (Library of Virginia, provided by members of First African Baptist Church)
- Henrico County and Campbell County tax records (Library of Virginia)
- Data from the Federal Censuses of 1810 to 1890, particularly the records of enslavement within Population Schedules before 1850 and the designated Slave Schedules of 1850 and 1860
- Manuscript records and images from the Library of Virginia, the library of the Virginia Historical Society at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, the Wyndham Robertson Library at Hollins University, the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, the Lynchburg Museum, Duke University (papers of George Frederick Holmes), and the Library of Congress (records of the American Colonization Society)

BRIEF PROFESSIONAL TIMELINE

1827-1832	Pastor of Second Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia
1832-1840	Instructor, administrator, and steward – in charge of facility and “hired” labor – at Virginia Baptist Seminary
1840-1866	Following Virginia Baptist Seminary’s charter, became President of Richmond College, President of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, and Professor of Moral Philosophy and other subjects; at times served as General Agent (fundraising) and performed steward’s duties
1841-1865	Minister of Richmond’s First African Baptist Church, a position that legally had to be filled by a white man due to the constraints put into place following Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831; guest minister at many local and regional churches
1867-1868	Instructor at the Richmond branch of the National Theological Institute, focused on the instruction of formerly enslaved ministerial students; Instructor at Richmond Female Institute
1868-1871	Administrator of Kentucky Female College; guest ministry at local churches
1871-1881	Administrator of Lexington College and Henry Male and Female College; brief pastoral position and guest ministry continued
1893-1897	Chaplain of Southwest Virginia Institute

SELECTION OF RYLAND’S PUBLIC STATEMENTS & WRITING ON ENSLAVEMENT

1824	Ryland gave a public address while a college student focused on the work of the American Colonization Society in which he referred to enslavement as “evil” and “legalized crime,” envisioning the removal of freed Black people from the United States as a remedy, providing a state of “innocence” for the country and a Christianizing influence on Africa that he hoped would counter Islam (“The Colonization Society,” RRP, 26.026-.029, VBHS)
1835	In an open letter to theologian and academic Francis Wayland, in response to Wayland’s textbook, <i>The Elements of Moral Science</i> , specifically a section focused on the immorality of enslavement, Ryland wrote of three “difficulties” with manumission and abolition: first, enslavers who freed those they enslaved would have to continue to care for those who could not care for themselves; second, in Virginia, those who were freed had to leave the state and “servants of humane masters... prefer their present bondage to expatriation and freedom” (here Ryland introduced the idea of “humane masters” who are “studying the subject of slavery candidly”); third, white people would not work for wages to do the work that enslaved people were doing, particularly the “drudgery of domestic business... slaves have always performed it.” Ryland concluded by writing that he hoped he would not be viewed as an advocate for enslavement, and that he felt “the perplexity of the subject.” (“To Dr. Wayland,” <i>Christian Watchman</i> , August 21, 1835)
1852	In a sermon given in response to the murders of members of an enslaving family by a woman held by them who was a member of First African Baptist Church, Ryland emphasized why enslaved and free Black congregants must remain submissive to white people. In part, it would protect the existence of the church. Ryland also stated, “God has given this country to the white people. They are the law-makers – the masters – the superiors. The people of color are the subjects – the servants – and even when not in bondage, the inferiors.” (“Thou Shalt Not Kill”/ “Substance of a Sermon,” <i>Daily Dispatch</i> , August 6, 1852)
1857	In a speech before the alumni association of his <i>alma mater</i> , Ryland spoke out on his fear of disunion in response to enslavement and calls for abolition, asking listeners to “[r]ebuke those

politicians... who are continually exasperating the public mind and urging measures to weaken the bonds of union.” After asking why God would have allowed enslavement in the United States, Ryland offered a possible end to the use of bondage in “a few centuries.” Then “free labor may supplant slave labor throughout our borders. As the country becomes filled up with people, the competition between laborers for employment will so reduce their wages that economy may induce capitalists to prefer voluntary operatives.” (“The American Union,” RRP, 51.020, VBHS)

- 1858 Ryland issued a public response to what he believed to be a rumor that he was an abolitionist. This was a year following an anonymous accusation that he was spreading abolitionism through his use of Francis Wayland’s textbook. To quell the suspected rumor, which he thought was influencing parents of prospective Richmond College students, Ryland placed a “card” in the *Religious Herald* in which he states 1.) he identified with the interests of Virginia, 2.) he owned “about a dozen” slaves, 3.) he had never manumitted one, nor did he see it as “safe or humane for master or servant” to do so, 4.) he did not sympathize with the abolition movement nor did he communicate with those aligned with it, 5.) he did “not think it morally wrong under existing circumstances to hold slaves.” (“A Card,” *Religious Herald*, September 14, 1858, VBHS)
- 1861 In a report from the Education Board of the Virginia Baptist General Association, Ryland wrote that the South can no longer accept ministers from the “corrupted region” of the North which had harbored a “long-cherished hatred...toward the institutions of the South.” (Report to the Virginia Baptist General Association, published in the *Daily Dispatch*, June 1, 1861, Virginia Chronicle)
- 1864 In a sermon at Mount Olivet Church in Hanover County, Ryland called on listeners to rally to the Confederate cause and to imagine the social inversion should the Union prevail: the North would “curse our servants with a really more intense slavery. They [would] hire our private citizens to work as d.l. [likely “day labor” or “day laborers”] on the farms... once owned by them, & to crown all our miseries, they wd turn out a brutal soldiery to insult & dishonor our high-toned women whom they would afterwards employ as cooks, & milk-maids, as washers & seamstresses.” (Mount Olivet Sermon, April 1864, RRP, 54a.0157-.0158, VBHS)
- 1880 In a history of First African Baptist Church, Ryland recalled his time there, his baptisms of members, his ministerial priorities, and other memories of the church’s early decades. He also addressed the belief among white people that “all negroes are alike,” praising specific members of his former congregation. Ryland concluded by sharing his feelings on emancipation, “The negroes are now all free, and I am heartily glad of it, though I say nothing of the agencies and methods by which the event was accomplished. They are our fellow-men— our fellow-citizens— and many of them our fellow-Christians.” Ryland then called for recollection of the “leading doctrine” of Christianity: “Love worketh no ill to his neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” (“The Origin and History of the First African Church” in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880*, 272)
- 1898 Just a year before he died at the age of ninety-five, Ryland’s thoughts on enslavement were recorded in his work, *The Colored People*, in which he fondly recalled those enslaved by his father, urged an end to “all prejudice and indifference,” called for a focus among white readers on the “temporal and spiritual interests” of Black people, and again addressed why God would have allowed enslavement. His answer is aligned with the priorities of the colonization movement, to which he remained committed for most of his adult life. After the enslavement era, “a season of discipline,” Ryland wrote, “it does not seem presumptuous to infer that the Benignant Being had in view, first, the salvation of a vast throng of benighted souls, who would not otherwise have been saved, and then to send them and their descendants, properly qualified to illumine the two hundred millions of Africans yet in darkness with the light of the gospel.” (*The Colored People*, RRP, 3.059, VBHS)

TERMINOLOGY

“SERVANTS”

The term “servant” was the “standard euphemism” for enslaved people in the antebellum South, and like most white Virginians at the time, Robert Ryland generally defaulted to this term in his letters and other writing.¹⁶⁰ “Servant” is also a frequent designator used in the records of the Board of Trustees and other institutional documents. Historian Christopher L. Tomlins describes “unfree” labor becoming the assumed synonym for “servant” and writes that “what was differentiated was free labor.”¹⁶¹ Jeffery Kahana summarizes Tomlins in his own examination of the term, writing that “Americans in the early republic, [Tomlins] argues, bristled at the word servant to describe working people who were not black slaves.”¹⁶² Midori Takagi also addresses the use of the word in relation to the work of enslaved people: “Throughout this period household servants were mostly slaves and generally women.”¹⁶³ A significant amount of the labor needs at Virginia Baptist Seminary and Richmond College fell into the category of household work. In 1835, Robert Ryland was clear that he defaulted to viewing domestic labor as being performed by enslaved people. On “[t]he drudgery of domestic business,” Ryland wrote, “slaves have always performed it.”¹⁶⁴ This is also one of the rare instances in which Ryland used the term “slaves.”



Typical classified section in the
Richmond Daily Dispatch (May 2, 1860)

Some examples of Robert Ryland’s own use of the term “servants”:

1. An essay he wrote describing efforts of enslaved members of First African Baptist Church to use mail distribution as a means of organizing escape efforts: “About this time several servants escaped to the North, from their masters, and wrote back to their former comrades, here, detailing the manner of their escape, and proposing to them facilities and information for the same experiment.”¹⁶⁵
2. Ryland treated “servant” and “slave” synonymously in an 1858 statement declaring his commitment to the institution of slavery in Virginia: “I own about a dozen slaves... I have never manumitted one, and do not design doing so... I do not think emancipation safe or

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Pryor, in “Book Discussion on Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee,” C-Span, May 19, 2007, [link](#).

¹⁶¹ Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early Republic*, New York: Cambridge University Press (1993), note 30, 268.

¹⁶² Jeffrey S. Kahana, “Master and Servant in the Early Republic, 1780-1830,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, Spring 2000, 28.

¹⁶³ Takagi, “Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction,” 34.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Ryland, “To Dr. Wayland” [Open Letter to Francis Wayland], *Christian Watchman*, August 21, 1835, Early American Newspapers, Newsbank.

¹⁶⁵ Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of First African Church... No. 3,” 323.

humane to either master or servant.”¹⁶⁶

3. His description of how enslaved people were able to donate money to First African Baptist Church: “My own servants, when we were about to furnish their fall or spring clothing, would often say that, by patching their old garments, they could do without *new* ones, and would ask us for the *money* instead. Of course, we had no objection to this plan, unless we suspected a vicious use of the money. I suppose other families pursued the same course.”¹⁶⁷
4. In an 1864 sermon at Mount Olivet Baptist Church, when speaking of the prospect of Northern victory and the freeing of enslaved people: “they wd [would] curse our servants with a really more intense slavery.”¹⁶⁸
5. In Ryland’s papers, there are more than a dozen references to the purchase of “servants’ clothes,” both as personal expenses and as expenses of the Virginia Baptist Seminary and Richmond College Boarding Departments.¹⁶⁹ The required purchase of enslaved people’s clothing was typically made explicit in hiring agreements.¹⁷⁰
6. In his receipts year to year, Ryland notes the money he received for hiring out those he enslaved including “Servts hired at Semy [Seminary] 1834 80.[00].”¹⁷¹

“HIRING OUT”

Given the institution’s use of hired enslaved labor, and Ryland’s regular hiring out of those he enslaved, a familiarity with the “slave hiring” system and associated terminology is necessary. The system of enslavers leasing those they enslaved to others formed a significant part of Richmond’s antebellum society and economy. The practice was referred to as “slave hiring,” “negro hire,” “servants’ hire,” or simply “hiring” and covered a range of forced labor, from household work for families who may not have enslaved anyone personally to the large-scale hire of enslaved men to work in the area’s coal pits and factories. Takagi writes, “Bondmen who were hired out were

¹⁶⁶ Robert Ryland, “A Card,” *Religious Herald*, September 14, 1858.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Ryland, “Origin and History of the First African Church,” *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880*, Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880, 271.

¹⁶⁸ Sermon, “Mt. Olivet Ap 8 64, Judges 6:24,” RRP, 54.0150, VBHS.

¹⁶⁹ Examples of “Servants’ clothes” purchases in the ledgers maintained by Ryland include Ledger I, RRP, “Expenses of the Boarding Department of VBS 1834,” 55.1.032; “Expenditures of the Boarding Department 1835, 1st Session,” 55.1.037; “Expenditures of the Boarding Department, 1837,” 55.1.051; “Expenses of the Boarding Department” 1838, first and second sessions, 55.1.55-57; Ledger II, “Expenses of the Board.g Department, 1840 Second Sess.n,” 55.2.007; “Expenses of the Boarding Department 1841 1st Session,” 55.2.009, VBHS.

¹⁷⁰ John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press (2012), 12, 14.

¹⁷¹ Robert Ryland, “Receipts on Private Account of 1835,” Ledger I, RRP, 55.1.036, VBHS.

temporarily employed away from their owners as skilled artisans, house servants, fire fighters, road pavers, and factory hands.”¹⁷²

In his records of Boarding Department expenses, Ryland frequently noted the payment of “hire” (Ex: “Fanny’s hire”) and in the case of his hiring out those he himself enslaved, he recorded his own receipt of the associated amount of their “hire.”¹⁷³ Hirers would often enter into agreements of a one-year hiring period which ended each December. “Self-hired” enslaved people would seek new employment during “Hiring Days” on and around New Year’s Day. Historian John Zaborney writes that, “[i]n Virginia, those who hired by the year executed a slave-hiring bond for the transaction.”¹⁷⁴

The full version of this examination of terminology is included in Appendix A of the report.

¹⁷² Takagi, “Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction,” location 115-116, Kindle.

¹⁷³ Robert Ryland, Ledger I, RRP, 55.1.036, .039-040, VBHS.

¹⁷⁴ Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire*, 12.