Not hiding from history

A local family's journey tracing an inescapable lineage of slavery, and their efforts to confront it

By Julia Shanahan
Rappahannock News staff

While Tim and Phoebe Kilby were growing up, they had little knowledge of their family's slaveholding past around Rappahannock County — a sharp contrast from the childhood of Betty Kilby, who fought to integrate the Warren County school district as a Black 13-year-old.

For Betty, a descendant of slaves, her family's history was almost inescapable. "My grandfather lived in a shack," she said. "[The history] was in our face."

The Kilby's family history dates back to the early 1700s when John Kilby settled in the British Colony of Virginia in Culpeper County. John Kilby's descendants enslaved men, women, and children of African descent from the early 1770s to 1865. Research by the present-day Kilbys revealed church and court records with basic descriptions of three generations of enslaved persons, some of whom were forced to work in Rappahannock and surrounding counties.

See **KILBY,** *Page* **12**

COURTESY OF TIM KILBY

Simon Kilby, circa 1915. He was among three generations of enslaved Kilbys in Rappahannock and neighboring counties.

KILBY

From Page 1

Both white and Black Kilby descendants have migrated and settled along the Northern Neck region in Virginia, as well as areas in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New York, and other southern states. Genealogical testing has confirmed the biological relationship between European American and African American Kilbys.

"Being so close to that history and growing up [in Rappahannock], it was something that I really wanted to learn as much as I could," said Tim Kilby. "I never probed a lot to my aunts and uncles and my father about the family history."

Tim grew up in Rappahannock County on the Kilby Farm located near Sperryville. His parents owned that property until 1987 when he and his sister decided to sell it following their parents' death. The property where Betty's family was enslaved is near F.T. Valley Road.

In 1980, a woman knocked on the door of Tim's mother, saying she was doing research on her family in the area and suspected her Black line of Kilby descendants were related to the white line of Kilbys. Tim said that because there was no internet at the time, it was difficult to do in-depth research on his family tree.

That was until 2014 when he retired and did a simple Google search, finding his first cousin Phoebe Kilby whom he hadn't talked to in more than 40 years. He saw a news article about Phoebe making connections with Betty — a Black woman whose ancestors were enslaved by Tim and Phoebe's family.

'Hello cousin'

Phoebe Kilby went to the Rappahannock County Historical Society in 2006 to learn more about her family tree, not knowing the extent to which her family had enslaved people.

That's when she found Betty Kilby, who grew up in Warren County, and Phoebe said she had strong suspicions that Betty was descended from people Phoebe's family enslaved. Phoebe was working at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, and a program called "Coming to the Table" was meeting on campus.

The group began in 2006 with the mission of connecting individuals to their own history in slavery and providing resources to help heal. Phoebe said this group illustrated a model for how she could approach Betty, so Phoebe decided to send Betty an email on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2007, hoping to have a conversation and piece together more of their family story.

Phoebe promptly received a response, with the opening line: "Hello cousin."

Betty was already traveling around the country selling her first book, Wit, Will & Walls, which details her role in a lawsuit as a 13-year-old plaintiff — Betty Ann Kilby v. Warren County Board of Education — following the landmar k U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka and ultimately resulted in an integrated school system for Warren County.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIM KILBY

Above: **Betty Kilby Baldwin (second from left), Tim Kilby, Phoebe Kilby, and Rev. James M. Kilby. The family was joined by Betty's other family members and grandchildren.**

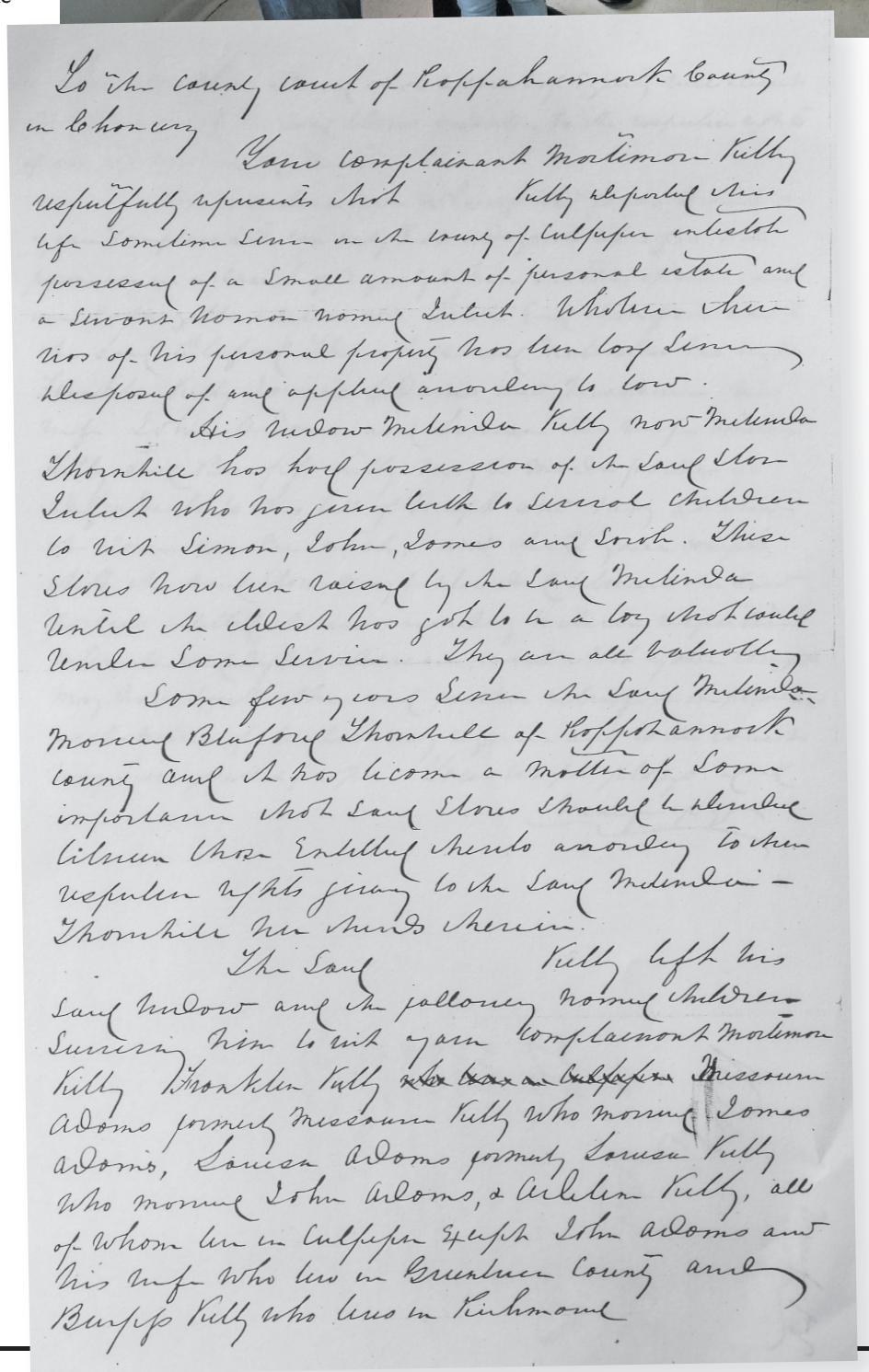
"I was selling and signing my book 'Wit, Will, & Walls' and telling kids about love and forgiveness, and so I would have been a hypocrite had I not reached back with a warm hand," said Betty Kilby.

Betty invited Phoebe to a Christmas dinner with her family in Front Royal for an introduction.

"I called up my family members one by one who were supposed to come to the dinner, and I explained to them this crazy thing that I'd done with inviting the slaveholding family to our family dinner," Betty said.

Betty and Phoebe hit it off. The dinner sparked a lasting relationship, and the two went on to coauthor a book called "Cousins," with the proceeds going toward a scholarship fund for Black students who are descendants of enslaved Kilbys.

Tim Kilby published his own book, "Gourdvine Black and White," which details "the history,"



Left: **1865 court document identifying enslaved woman Juliet, Betty Kilby Baldwin's great, great grandmother, and her four enslaved children by name: ". . . Juliet who has given birth to several children to wit Simon, John, James, and Sarah."**

RAPPAHANNOCK COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE VIA TIM KILBY

biography, and genealogy of one family divided into two by race and the time in which they lived." His book also tells the story of the three generations of enslaved Kilbys — Sarah, Juliet Ann, Simon, John, James, young Sarah, and Bettie. The proceeds from Tim's book are also donated to the scholarship fund.

The legacy of slavery

Betty's great, great grandmother Juliet was enslaved on a farm in Culpeper County, where a 200-year-old sycamore tree and leftover farmhouse rubble remain. Some of the present-day Kilby's visited this site with a Netflix film crew for a documentary, "Stories of a Generation with Pope Francis."

"I had some small stones that I had engraved the slave's names on, and we had a little ceremony where we laid the stones among the big roots at the bottom of the tree to honor the enslaved people," said Phoebe Kilby. The piece of land is just over the Rappahannock County line, and it was discovered in Tim's research.

The legacy of slavery in Betty's family did not end with emancipation. Betty's father worked in sharecropping, which Betty called only "a step above slavery." She said he was given 24 acres and "a rundown shack."

"Sarah's Brick" with a handprint found at the plantation site. There is no definitive evidence proving this is slave Sarah Kilby's handprint, but circumstantial evidence (time, place where it was found, known person at the location and handprint size) suggests it could be Sarah's.

Sharecropping occurred during the Jim Crow era, where predominantly Black, poor farmers were given access to small plots of land. But rather than paying rent in cash, they were required to give a portion of the crop yield back to the landowner. Sharecroppers often could not make enough income to purchase the land or start a savings account, leaving many Black families with little to no generational wealth.

Because of this, Betty said education was important to her father. "He felt as though if we didn't get a good education, people would always be taking advantage of us," she said.

When Betty was 13, her father enrolled her in an all-white high school in Warren County shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Brown v. Board of Education. Betty's name was entered as the plaintiff, and after a lawsuit, she was attending school alongside white classmates.

"I say that death would have been more humane than going to that school day after day, year after year," said Betty, detailing the torment her and other Black students received at the hands of their white peers. But despite the odds, Betty graduated high school on time.

Betty said her family's history was hard to ignore while she was growing up. She said she would hide under furniture while the adults in her family discussed their past, saying she had her "nosy ways" of attaining knowledge.

Tim Kilby grew up in Rappahannock County and attended high school around the same time as Betty, but just a county over. He said he had an aunt who kept some old family photos and knew a little about their history, but he said it was hardly ever talked about.

"Sweeping it under the rug and hiding that history — that was something that brought up both anger in me, but also shame about what these ancestors did," Tim said.

Tim and Phoebe said their form of "personal reparations" include maintaining their scholarship fund for Kilby descendants across the country, and also acknowledging and sharing their family's history, albeit ugly.

"African American history has always been pushed to the side," Betty said. "That's why we have Black History Month — we've never really celebrated Black history."