

Maryland, 1758

The sprawling land around the stately brick mansion dissolved into a small marsh before becoming the Chester River, fresh water that led to the brackish water of the Chesapeake Bay. The house was quiet as James Hollyday settled into his study, a compact room full of books and natural light. He opened a letter and began to read. Hollyday had recently returned from London, where his half-sister Rebecca Lloyd Anderson and her family lived, and, as he had no wife or children, it pleased him to hear from them. Some of his favorite letters came from his niece Sarah, whom everyone called Sally. Her script was that of the studious young woman she was, unlike the weary scrawl of her uncle's replies. Sally loved writing to her uncle, too. His family thought Hollyday serious and solemn, but he enjoyed these frivolous correspondences with his niece. When he was in London studying law, he and Sally would play music together, she on the harpsichord and he on the flute. After Hollyday returned to Maryland, Sally sent along notes on music, plays, and gossip from London. In this December 1758 letter, she thanked him for a gift he'd sent: "We are much pleas'd and thankfull to you for the bangeau for altho' we can't make musick on it yet it is a great curiosity and makes a good figure as it lays on the Harpsicord."¹

The image of the instrument he sent lying on the harpsichord in a townhouse in the upscale Tower Hill neighborhood of London amused him. Sally and friends of the family, Lady Browne and her daughter Mary Folkes, had wanted to see a bangeau, and Hollyday obliged by sending them one. Although Sally's mother, Rebecca, and father, William, were both born in Maryland, Sally's whole life had been in London. Not long after Rebecca and William married, they had moved to London so that William could sell Chesapeake tobacco and buy European goods for export. By the late 1600s, tobacco already dominated the Maryland and Virginia economy, and exports from these two colonies made up 30 percent of the world's supply. Like sugar, tobacco was a product in high demand in Europe, and, also like sugar, it demands intensive, year-round labor. At first, planters were willing to use white indentured laborers, but by the 1690s, Maryland and Virginia landowners were buying people of African descent to work the tobacco fields, as it cost twelve pounds for four years of a white man's service but only twenty-two pounds for the lifetime service of an enslaved Black man. The Hollydays and Lloyds were wealthy landowning families, and Sally's father saw that they needed an agent in London to sell their tobacco. More than fifteen years after moving to England, William Anderson was doing well in his merchant business. He'd also gone into a shipping business with Rebecca's brothers Edward and Richard Lloyd; their ships carried hogsheads of tobacco, iron, grain, pork, and lumber from the Chesapeake Bay to England, and household goods back to Annapolis and Oxford, Maryland. Their ships also sailed to and from the Caribbean, where they bought enslaved people in Curaçao, the French Antilles, and St. Kitts for their own use and for sale to other landowners in Maryland.²

Sally hadn't seen the tobacco and livestock farms that created her family's wealth and she hadn't seen the hundreds of people forced to labor on those farms. Hollyday must have told her about life at his home, Readbourne, on the Chester River, and, with her interest in music, maybe he told her about the enslaved people and their musical instrument, the banjo, or, as Sally writes it with a French transliteration, "bangeau."

Sally wrote to her uncle that Lady Browne and Mrs. Folkes had come

to the house after the bangeau's arrival and "Mrs. Folks [sic] longs sadly to know how to play on it." Sally thought guitar lessons might help. In her next letter, Sally told him that Mrs. Folkes had found a teacher, and with the "scale of Music" from Hollyday, she will try "to make very pretty Musick on the Bangeau." Sally predicts that Hollyday will soon "hear of a new Fashion'd Instrument, much in Vogue invented by the Affricans." The name of the instrument, the idea that learning the guitar might help Mrs. Folkes learn to play the bangeau, and the knowledge that it was invented by Africans demonstrate that the instrument and its origins were becoming more widely recognized.³

What is remarkable is Sally's vision for the future of the banjo: it will become an instrument that entices white audiences. Still a young woman, she doesn't seem to have the bias that her uncle brought to seeing and hearing the instrument. Although she acknowledged that there was "great curiosity" to the banjo, in the sense that she'd never seen anything like it before, she also wrote, "'tis neatly made." She appreciated it as an object. Hollyday, on the other hand, was dismissive. In 1759, he wrote to Lady Browne's husband, Sir William, admitting, "I did not imagine the bangeau could have given them any entertainment but as a novelty, and should not have thought of sending so rude an instrument of music if it may be called, if Lady Browne had not desired it."⁴

Although the Londoners found it an intriguing novelty, Hollyday found the banjo quotidian. It was common, both in the sense that he saw it often and that it was not worthy of note. While he was in his study reading letters from his family in London, the house might have been quiet, but activity surrounded him. Some sixty enslaved people performed the labor that made his comfort and wealth possible, from dressing him, to cooking his food, to cultivating his tobacco, to playing music when he held parties and entertained guests at Readbourne. But his description of a gourd-bodied banjo—as crude, rude, primitive, or any number of words that suggest it is unsophisticated and something not of value, while giving no real details of the instrument—makes it lucky that any record of the banjo was made at all.

The banjo was easy for Hollyday to obtain: he sent it to Sally just

months after returning to Maryland, although he gave no indication of where he obtained the instrument. By the mid-1700s, the banjo was known and even somewhat common in Maryland. A striking, yet disturbing example of this is in the advertisements placed when a person liberated themselves. These ads often begin “Run away, from the subscriber” or the slaveowner’s name, and give descriptions of the person, including name, visual appearance, demeanor, languages spoken, and any distinguishing talents, including whether they were a musician. These ads provide more information on certain individuals than exists about most other people living in the mid-eighteenth century, and show how slaveowners like Hollyday paid close attention to the people they owned.⁵

In the years 1748 and 1749, advertisements were put out for the return of three different banjo players who escaped slavery in Maryland. Two of the men had been living near Hollyday’s home on the eastern side of the bay. Sometime before June 1748, Toby escaped from William Harris, who lived across the Chester River in Fairlee, Maryland. The advertisement urging Toby’s recapture notes that Toby was dressed finely, or at least had fine-quality clothes with him: a broadcloth coat and waistcoat, both lined with red fabric, a pair of wool breeches, a new pair of stockings, a hat, and “a pair of old Pumps”—attire that suggests Toby didn’t do manual or field labor. It’s also possible that these were not his regular clothes, but items he took because they would make him look like a free man. Toby probably planned his escape well, since he left in a canoe and took with him “a new Fiddle, [and] a Bonja, on both which he at times plays.” Playing music was likely part of Toby’s expected labor, and the fine clothes came from his owner’s desire that he look good at parties.⁶

Like many musicians who escaped, Toby was a carpenter and sawyer. Skilled craftsmen, and especially carpenters, were among the most valuable enslaved people, as were musicians. As a carpenter, Toby would have had the skills to make his own banjo. He could also have made his own fiddle, although constructing a fiddle or violin requires more time and precise work than a banjo. If Toby was expected to play music, Harris could have also bought the new fiddle Toby took with him. He also took a howel, a woodworking tool used in barrel-making, with which he

made bowls. Woodworking could have been a way to earn money once he escaped. Harris suspected that Toby might have gone to his former owner, Reverend James Williamson, who was Harris's relative.⁷

The next year in mid-August, a man named Prince sought his liberty, leaving the home of John Woolford in Cambridge, a town on the Choptank River forty miles south of Hollyday's plantation. Like Toby, Prince took with him nice clothing, including a new blue coat, a wool jacket, two linen shirts, a pair of leather and a pair of black cloth breeches, and a felt hat. The description of Prince as "yellow" suggests that he was light-skinned, perhaps of mixed African and European ancestry. He took "an old fiddle" with him when he left, and Woolford comments that he "plays very well on the Banger"—using the same word for the instrument as newspaper editor James Alexander. The advertisements use different but similar words for the instrument—banjo, bonja, bangeo, banjoe, banger—which suggests that there was starting to be some standardization of the name, and the lack of description suggests that readers knew what the instrument was, what it looked like, and that the ability to play it was distinguishing enough to be included in a description. And while some musicians listed in these advertisements, like Prince and Toby, played both the fiddle and the banjo, many more played just the fiddle.⁸

Perhaps at the very moment that Hollyday was reading Sally's letter, outside his window William, a man he had bought, was practicing the fiddle. William worked in the house and may have played the fiddle at Hollyday's parties. He may also have been one of the musicians who Hollyday said played fiddle and banjo under the trees. Hollyday wrote that sometimes William led others in song, which may indicate his prominence among the Black people at Readbourne and even the surrounding area.⁹

Like so much of this history, what happened to William and the banjo Hollyday sent Sally isn't known. If William outlived Hollyday, he could have been listed as property in Hollyday's will, but Hollyday didn't itemize the enslaved people he called property and left his entire estate to his

brother Henry. It is not clear in the letters between Hollyday and Sally whether the banjo stayed at the Andersons or was kept at the home of Lady Browne or Mrs. Folkes. Perhaps it found its way into one of the cabinets of curiosities that were popping up across London, or perhaps someone threw it out when the novelty wore off.¹⁰