

# Fleshing Out a Disconcerting History

## The Hidden Years of the Ship *Katherine Jackson*

by Jenifer Dolde, Collections Manager, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

I never expected a routine inquiry to reveal a connection between one of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's artifacts and a tragic episode in African American history. Last year, a researcher called our museum in search of archival materials related to the ship *Katherine Jackson*, which he believed sailed out of Georgetown in Washington, DC, in the early 1800s. I was skeptical that we would be able to help, as our holdings from this era are not as strong as those from the latter part of the century. Nevertheless, I logged in to our collections database to do a quick search and, to my surprise, I found a record for a ship's portrait inscribed: "*Catherine* [sic] *Jackson*. Baltimore, John Myers, Commander, 1843." Intrigued, I fell down the curator's rabbit hole and dug into the records...

As a museum curator, I know well how objects, photographs, and documents are most effective when they help to tell a story, and so documenting their ownership history, how they were made and used, and their connection to the broader past is essential. Provenance—an object's history—is what gives our exhibits authenticity and provides a human connection to an otherwise inanimate object. A finely executed early watercolor of a Chesapeake vessel might be extremely rare and beautiful to behold, but how does it connect to the historical narrative?

The watercolor I found of *Katherine Jackson* is not the work of a famous artist, but that of an obscure painter named M. A. Thomas, whose full name and biographical details remain a mystery. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum purchased the painting in 2001 to help build its collection of objects representing this early time period. Volunteer Norman Plummer scoured records at the National Archives and Maryland Historical Society and learned that Fickett & Thomas of New York built the 456 ton three-masted, square-sterned ship, measuring 124 feet, in 1833. Certificates of registry were filed each year, and by 1836 *Katherine Jackson* had been sold to owners in the District of Columbia.

There was a curious four-year gap in her records, however, and then *Katherine*



**Katherine Jackson Under Sail**, Ship C[Katherine Jackson of Baltimore, 1844. Watercolor, 31 x 26 inches. Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum Collection.

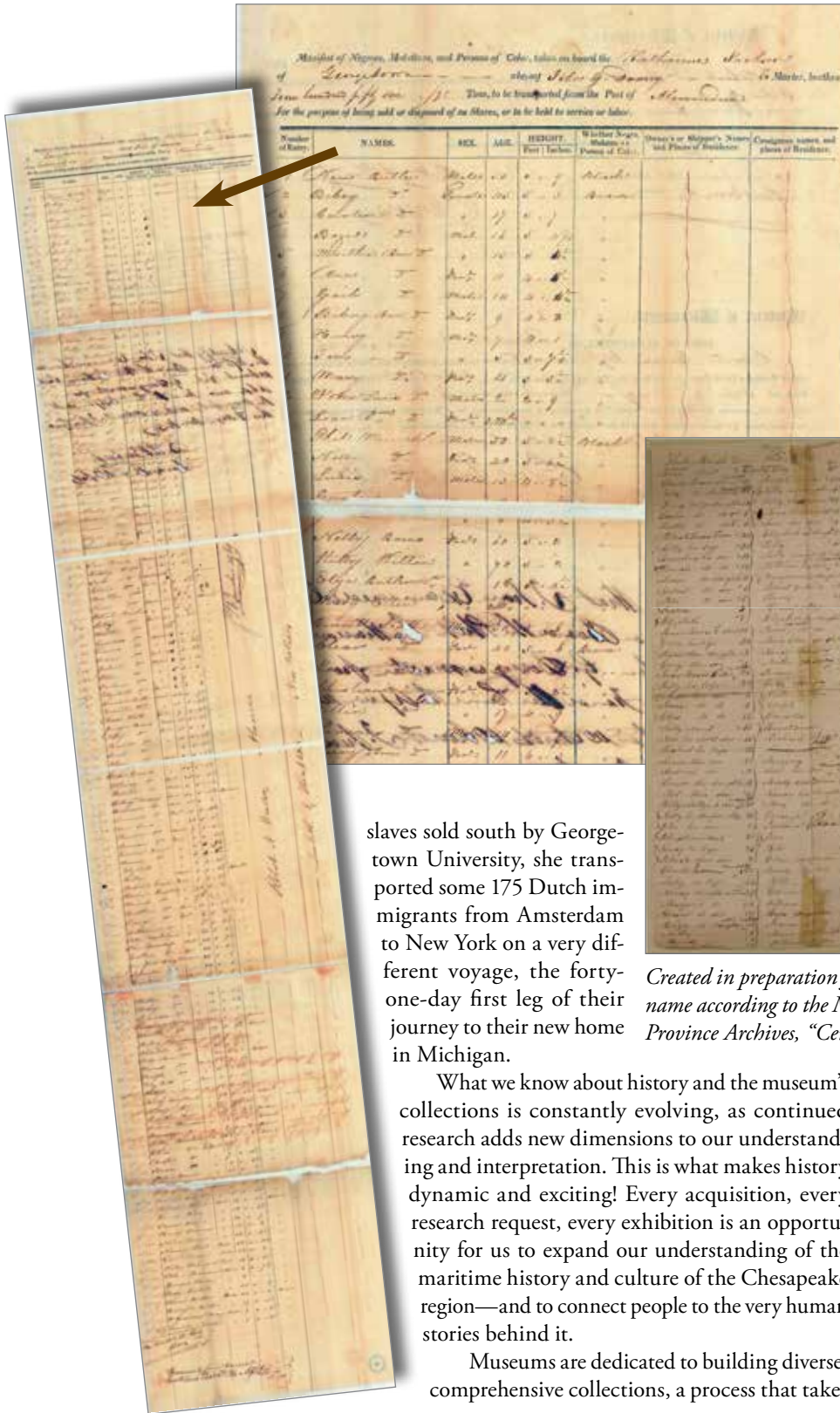
*Jackson* reappears in the Georgetown registry in 1840 with many of the same owners, with a John Duarry as Master. Recently, the ship's activity during that interim period came to light; she was contracted to carry 272 slaves sold south by the leadership of what is now Georgetown University. The manifest listing enslaved persons, aged two months to seventy years, was matter-of-factly "Examined and found corrected" on 6 December 1838, in New Orleans.

Georgetown University, a Jesuit-run institution, was financed in part by the donations of wealthy supporters, whose fortunes came from the successful operations of Maryland plantations dependent on the labor of slaves. Weighed down by debt during this time, two Georgetown University presidents, both Jesuit priests, made the decision to sell slaves to two Louisiana sugar planters for the equivalent of \$3 million in today's dollars, and in doing so tore apart families. The sale was hardly unique, and reinforces that slaveholding was a universally brutal and ugly business.

Georgetown's response to this piece of its history was at first perfunctory, but in

2015 the university expanded its approach to interpreting the history of Jesuit slaveholding and formed a "Working Group on Slavery, Memory and Reconciliation." This initiative created the Georgetown Slavery Archive, an ever-expanding digital collection of primary source materials related to the 1838 sale, as well as the history, experience, and legacy of the enslaved, that strives to recognize and remember the humans affected by the institution of slavery. The 1838 sale—and *Katherine Jackson's* role in it—is just one window to a multifaceted and significant story.

By 1842, *Katherine Jackson* had made at least three trips from Rotterdam to Baltimore under John Myers, sole owner and master, carrying a cargo of coffee, tea, nuts, seeds, clothes, soap, and medicines—a mundane departure from the human cargo she had carried four years earlier. The Baltimore records for the vessel end with the settling of John Myers's estate in 1847. Research at the time of acquisition indicated she may have been sold to the Netherlands, which is borne out by the transcription of an 1848 manifest made available online in recent years. Ironically, ten years after *Katherine Jackson* carried the 272



years and is perpetual—our collection can never be complete. CBMM’s curatorial staff developed and regularly revises its Collection Plan, a dynamic document that reflects the museum’s mission and is responsive to the interpretive goals established to meet the needs of the museum’s members, guests, and community. In the coming year, CBMM will realize a long-term goal in making this collection available online, joining other museums and institutions working to build a community of shared knowledge. †

slaves sold south by Georgetown University, she transported some 175 Dutch immigrants from Amsterdam to New York on a very different voyage, the forty-one-day first leg of their journey to their new home in Michigan.

What we know about history and the museum’s collections is constantly evolving, as continued research adds new dimensions to our understanding and interpretation. This is what makes history dynamic and exciting! Every acquisition, every research request, every exhibition is an opportunity for us to expand our understanding of the maritime history and culture of the Chesapeake region—and to connect people to the very human stories behind it.

Museums are dedicated to building diverse, comprehensive collections, a process that takes



*Created in preparation for the 1838 sale, this document lists the slaves by name according to the Maryland plantation where they lived. (Maryland Province Archives, “Census of slaves to be sold in 1838”)*

The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum collects and preserves the most comprehensive assembly of material culture relating to the Chesapeake’s tidewater region. In addition to its impressive watercraft collection, much of which is accessible on its waterfront campus along the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the museum holds more than 70,000 objects in its collections that document the interaction of people and the tidewater Chesapeake Bay region over a 200-year period. The collections are available to researchers (by appointment only). Please e-mail Jenifer Dolde at [jdolde@cbmm.org](mailto:jdolde@cbmm.org) with any questions regarding CBMM’s collections. (213 North Talbot Street, St. Michaels, MD 21663; [www.cbmm.org](http://www.cbmm.org))

*Katherine Jackson Slave Manifest: A list of the slaves transported from Alexandria to New Orleans in the Katherine Jackson in 1838. Many of the men, women, and children listed on this manifest were sold by Thomas Mulledy to Jesse Beatty and Henry Johnson. They were shipped by Robert A. Windsor of Alexandria and consigned to Lambeth & Thompson of New Orleans. (National Archives, Fort Worth, TX, “Manifest of the Katherine Jackson, 1838”)*