

# Bazil Newman and Edwards Ferry

By Rod Mackler


Bazil Newman was a free Black born in Loudoun County, Virginia, in November 1779. He became a boatman at Edwards Ferry during the first half of the nineteenth century, and owned land, a warehouse, and a gristmill, as well as his ferry boat. He operated the ferry from the mouth of Goose Creek in Loudoun County, conveying goods and people across the Potomac to the Montgomery County, Maryland, community of Edwards Ferry on the C&O Canal. The chief cargo was probably grain, especially wheat, and the flour that was ground at the several mills along the Goose Creek/Little River watershed.

Black entrepreneurs like Newman fell under increased suspicion, especially after the Nat Turner Rebellion in 1831. Ferryman, in particular, were mistrusted because of the opportunity their work presented to aid in the escape of slaves toward the north. According to Virginia law, Black ferryman had to get certification from “respectable white persons” to verify that their shipping manifests were accurate. Maryland was a slave state, but the C&O Canal was nonetheless used as an Underground Railroad route toward Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was the first state to officially abolish slavery, in 1780, but the abolition was gradual. Even though the last slave in the state was not freed until 1847, by the 1820s, and until the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, once a slave reached Pennsylvania he or she was relatively safe.

The whites of Loudoun County before the Civil War were a diverse lot. There were a number of abolitionists, especially the Quakers, but most white slave-holders would have considered a free Black such as Bazil Newman a threat, as a

bad example for their own enslaved work force. The Goose Creek area had a couple of large land-holders — and by definition, large slave-holders. Thomas Lee (1690-1750) of Stratford Hall (in Westmoreland County on Virginia’s Northern Neck, between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers) established a large plantation near the mouth of Goose Creek, which he called Coton Farm, after his ancestral home in England. Two of his sons — Francis Lightfoot Lee and Richard Henry Lee — signed the Declaration of Independence and his brother named the county seat Leesburg after their

**NEW WARE-HOUSE.**

 THE subscriber informs the public that he has purchased the commodious WARE-HOUSE on the Potomac, about 3 miles from Leesburg, for the business of receiving and forwarding produce or goods of every description. He has a superior BOAT, and may always be found at his post and the most careful attention will be given to all Merchandize and Flour or Grain entrusted to his care. Charges will be moderate. He solicits a share of the public favor.

**BAZIL NEWMAN.**

N. B. On hand and for sale at all times a full supply of Plaister and Salt and other articles wanted by Farmers.

March 14—3m

*Very few free men of color were advertising in the Genius of Liberty in the 1830s when Bazil Newman posted this notice.*

*Bazil Newman Ware-House Ad – From Bronwen Souders: Bazil Newman, 1779-1852,” in Essence of a People II: African American Who Made Their World Anew in Loudoun County and Beyond. Leesburg, Virginia: Black History Committee of the Friends of the Thomas Balch Library, Inc., 2002, page 5.*



*View of the mouth of Goose Creek and Confluence Park, from Edwards Ferry, Maryland river lock (in C&O Canal NHP). Photo by Rod Mackler.*



father. George Kephart was not only a slave-holder, he was an infamous slave dealer, who ran the biggest slave auction house in the country, Armfield & Franklin, on Duke Street in Alexandria. Kephart bought Belmont manor house and 433 acres in 1851 from the heirs of abolitionist Margaret Mercer. The house still stands, the centerpiece of the Belmont Country Club. Loudoun County commissioners are seeking a new name for the county park at Kephart's landing on Goose Creek, less than a mile upstream from Edwards Ferry.

According to Jon Wolz, by the late 1750s, Benjamin Edwards owned land on the west bank of Goose Creek, i.e., where Confluence Park now stands. He operated the ferry from then until his death in 1803, originating from the

Virginia side of the Potomac River and taking goods and people to the Maryland side. Benjamin's widow, Elizabeth Edwards, managed the ferry after his death, followed by his son, Philip Edwards. Could the Edwards family and Bazil Newman both own Edwards Ferry? Yes. First of all, the operator often owned his own ferryboat. Secondly, the ferry landings were considered public property, unlike the current fracas over Whites Ferry. So there is really no contradiction here. The ferry ceased operation during the Civil War — this was a very active crossing point for both Union and Confederate troops using pontoon bridges — but it resumed operations after the war.

The decennial federal census for the first half of the nineteenth century does not give names for slaves, listing them under the owner's slave schedule only by age and gender. There is more information, however, for free Blacks. The census records, available on Ancestry.com, give detail on Bazil Newman's family. Spelling of names in census records is imprecise, especially in this time and with illiterate or semi-literate respondents. The spelling reflects what the enumerator thought he heard. In 1820, for instance, he was listed as "Basil Newman" and had a household consisting of:

- One free colored male, age 25-44. That would have been Bazil, who was 40 when the census was conducted in August 1820.
- One free white female, age 16-25, probably Bazil's wife at the time.
- Two free colored males, under 14.
- One free colored female, under 14.
- One male slave, age 45 and over. Bronwen Souders speculates that this may have been a relative, purchased to keep the family together.



*Goose Creek river lock, near Edwards Ferry, Maryland (in C&O Canal NHP). Photo by Jon Wolz.*



*View of Edwards Ferry landing in Maryland, from Confluence Park. Photo by Rod Mackler.*



According to the 1830 census, “Basil Newman’s” household consisted of eight people:

- One free colored male, age 36-54 (Basil).
- One free colored female, age 24-35, (possibly a spouse).
- One free colored female, 55-99.
- One free colored male, 24-35.
- Two free colored males, 10-25.
- Two free colored males, under 10.

In 1840, the “Bazel Newman” household consisted of six individuals:

- One free colored male, age 55-59 (likely Basil).
- One free white female, 20-29.
- One free white female, 15-19.
- One free colored male, 24-35.
- Two free colored males, 10-23.

In the census of 1850, all the members of the household are named. The “Barnie Newmon” household consisted of:

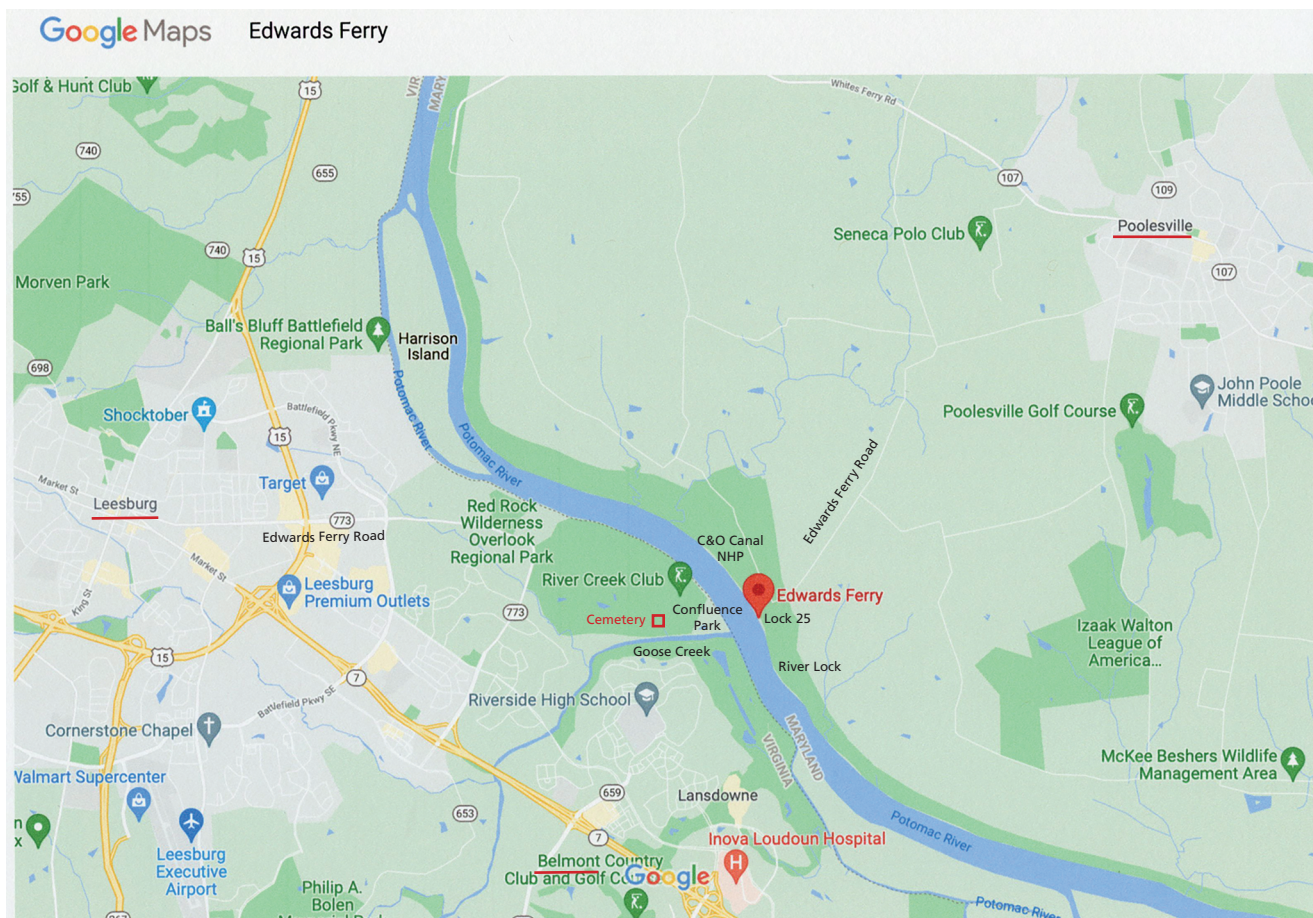
- Barnie Newmon, Black, male, age 71, occupation: Boatman, owning real estate valued at \$1000.

- Cornelia Newmon, female, age 41. In the box for race, the original entry is overwritten with a “B” for Black.
- Sophy, female, age 10, Mulatto.
- Patty Cox, age 60, no gender or race given.
- Hezekiah Newmon, male, Black, age 63, occupation: laborer (Surely Basil’s brother).

There is also an entry in the 1850 census for a Barsell Newman, age 28, perhaps a son of Basil. The 1850 census gives names for the members of this household:

- Barsell Newman, age 28.
- Maria Newman, 29.
- Ricd [Richard?] Newman, 7.
- Perciller [Priscilla?] Newman, 4.

Basil Newman died in 1852 and was buried in a family cemetery near the confluence of Goose Creek and the Potomac. He made out his will a few months before his death and left a 67-acre farm to Cornelia F. Harris, who “has lived with me the past 16 years ... and who been to me a faithful bosom companion and obedient housekeeper.” He also left funds for his coffin, tombstone, and for enclosing the cemetery.



Map © 2021 Google Maps. Annotated by Rod Mackler.



As the River Creek housing development and golf course were being built, members of the Leesburg community discovered that there was a family cemetery there. Basil Newman's gravestone was still intact and legible and there were depressions that indicated other burials in the immediate vicinity. The original tombstone has been lost, but fortunately a photo was preserved in the Thomas Balch Library and a reproduction has been installed in the cemetery. The plaque indicates the other graves likely "contain his brother Hezekiah, 'faithful companion' Cornelia, and sons Robert, Bazil, and Benjamin and maybe Benjamin's children." River Creek does an excellent job of preserving and maintaining the cemetery.

*Thanks to Britannie Davis Monge, Community Manager of the River Creek Owners Association, for directions and access to the Newman Family Cemetery and Confluence Park.*

## Sources:

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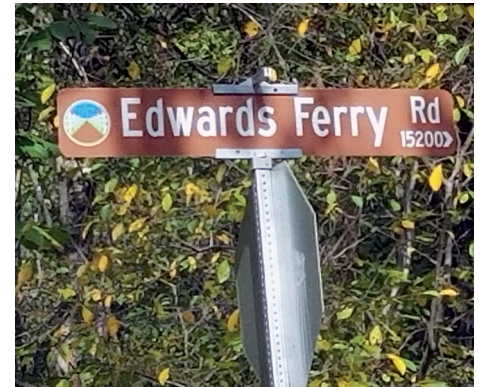
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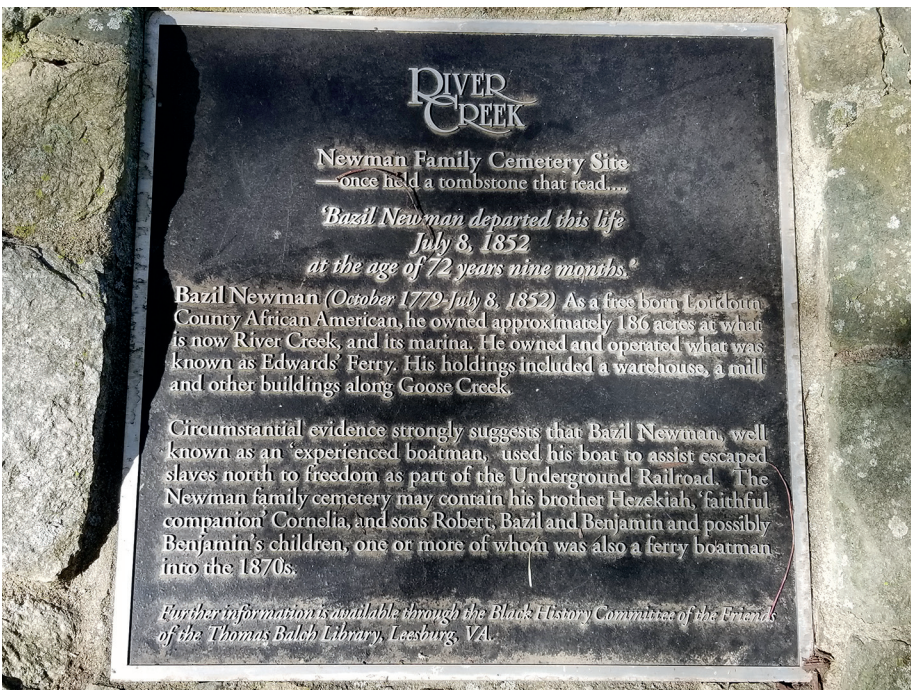
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Edwards Ferry (Confluence Park) is five miles from the center of Leesburg, the county seat of Loudoun County, Va., via Edwards Ferry Road. All photos this page by Rod Mackler.



Edwards Ferry is five miles from Poolesville, in upper Montgomery County, Md., via Edwards Ferry Road.



River Creek plaque, detailing the life, burial and kin of Basil Newman.



Basil Newman reproduction tombstone.