

**Life of Mary Coon**  
**From Her Deposition, 1887**  
edited by Emilie Amt

*In 1887 Mary Coon, formerly a slave who had been owned by a member of St. Mark's Church, was applying for a military pension as the surviving dependent of a deceased Civil War soldier, her son Nelson Coon. The words below were written down, by a clerk, from Mary Coon's oral answers to questions in an interview that was part of her pension application. These are undoubtedly paraphrases and summaries of her answers rather than a verbatim transcript. In addition, I have rearranged the order of Mary's answers to construct a more coherent story. (Most of the questions are not preserved in the record.)*

I am 55 years old as near as I can tell.<sup>1</sup> I was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland but when I was very small I was taken by my mistress Henrietta Hemsley, afterward Mrs. Frisby Tilghman... They took me to their place [i.e., Rockland]...

I was free before the war commenced.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Tilghman gave all his slaves their freedom some time before the war commenced.

I married Daniel Coon when I was a slave on Mrs. Tilghman's plantation. My maiden name was Mary Campbell.<sup>3</sup> My husband was never a slave. He was a travelling blacksmith. We were married by Rev. John Lanehan, now of Laurel, Md. I can't give the date of my marriage, but I was married on Sunday evening, I am sure of that.

My husband died before the war.<sup>4</sup> I had never been married before I married Daniel Coon, and have never been married since. My husband had been married before he married me, he told me he came from the North somewhere.

I had seven children counting one that died as soon as it was born: Nelson Coon, Mary, Caroline, Henrietta, Kate, and Sally Coon. All are living except Nelson and the child, unnamed, which died at about the time of its birth.<sup>5</sup> ...The child that died was next to Nelson. I think Mary is about 32 years old. She was born here in Hagerstown and there was two years between each of the other children...

I haven't the dates of the births of any of my children. I had the dates of the births of all of my children in a Bible, but it was stolen from me and I can't tell about them. The record of my husband's death and my birth was in the Bible that I lost. I lost my Bible when I was moving

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<sup>1</sup> Mary was actually closer to 65.

<sup>2</sup> The record of Mary's manumission by Henrietta Tilghman in 1855 survives. It states Mary's age at that time as 33 years old.

<sup>3</sup> The manumission record records Mary's maiden name as "Cammelville."

<sup>4</sup> Other witnesses in the pension case testified that Daniel died of a stomach injury caused by having been kicked by a horse he was shoeing.

<sup>5</sup> Mary's manumission records shows that two sons, Nelson and Chester, ages 9 and 7, were freed with her in 1855.

sometime during the war after my husband died... My husband died in Hagerstown, Md., I can't tell exactly when but a year or so before the war broke out.

I think Nelson was under age when he went to war. He was my oldest child, Mary is the next, and there is about a year between the rest that is all I can say.

[Before] my son went into the army he worked for the Bumbaugh's, but they are dead. He boarded at home... Nelson went into the army when Thomas Henry, Perry Moxley, and James Hill went. They all went away together. Nelson was sound and healthy then. Nelson sent some money some two or three times when he was in the army....

My son got a disease in the army, a bad cold which ran into consumption. I never heard my son say where he got this cold, but the first night after he got home he coughed all night long.... Nelson staid here about a year and then went to Washington because he could get light work there... Nelson couldn't earn much of anything after the war... He tried to live on Dr. Scott's farm just outside Hagerstown, but he couldn't work, he was sick so much. Nelson was too sick to contribute anything to my support after he came out of the army. I often sent things to him after he went to Washington...

My son Nelson died the second summer after Grant was elected the second time, in June. He died at the hospital in Washington, D.C. He never did any work to amount to anything after he came from the army... I claim a pension because I am hardly able to work and I am afraid I shall lose the sight of my eyes. I have the rheumatism so bad I can hardly get along... I haven't any property of any kind except a bed, bureau, and tin trunk which my daughter is keeping for me...

**Q: How do you know you are 55 years old?**

A: Well that is what I think.

**Q: Give me the name of the 1st President the you remember?**

A: Andrew Jackson.

**Q: Who was next to Jackson?**

A: Van Buren

**Q: How large were you when Jackson was President?**

A: I was quite a girl but I don't know how large or just how old. Thomas Henry and Prince Jones have known me all my life and can tell these things.

**Q: Did you ever have any record of your birth, marriage, and the birth of your children?**

A: Yes sir. Mrs. Tilghman put them all down in the Bible I lost. I have no memory and have to do the best I can from what people tell me. Thomas Henry has told me the most about my family...

Mary E. Coon X Her Mark