



# The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation: Stories of My Family's Journey to Freedom

*John F. Baker Jr.*

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When John F. Baker Jr. was in the seventh grade, he saw a photograph of four former slaves in his social studies textbook. When he learned that two of them were his grandmother's grandparents, he began the lifelong research project that would become *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation*, the fruit of more than thirty years of archival and field research and DNA testing spanning 250 years.

A descendant of Wessyngton slaves, Baker has written the most accessible and exciting work of African American history since *Roots*. He has not only written his own family's story but included the history of hundreds of slaves and their descendants now numbering in the thousands throughout the United States. More than one hundred rare photographs and portraits of African Americans who were slaves on the plantation bring this compelling American history to life.

Founded in 1796 by Joseph Washington, a distant cousin of America's first president, Wessyngton Plantation covered 15,000 acres and held 274 slaves, whose labor made it the largest tobacco plantation in America. Atypically, the Washingtons sold only two slaves, so the slave families remained intact for generations. Many of their descendants still reside in the area surrounding the plantation. The Washington family owned the plantation until 1983; their family papers, housed at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, include birth registers from 1795 to 1860, letters, diaries, and more. Baker also conducted dozens of interviews -- three of his subjects were more than one hundred years old -- and discovered caches of historic photographs and paintings.

A groundbreaking work of history and a deeply personal journey of discovery, *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation* is an uplifting story of survival and family that gives fresh insight into the institution of slavery and its ongoing legacy today.

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