



December 2021

Wessyngton Plantation License Plate on the Road to Freedom



*This battlefield supporter visited **Wessyngton Plantation** located near Cedar Hill in Robertson County. Wessyngton Plantation specialized in dark-fired tobacco from the early 19th to the late 20th century. Joseph Washington, a native of Virginia, established Wessyngton in 1796. In 1819 Joseph and Mary Washington built the manor house, a distinguished two-story, five-bay red brick example of the Federal style. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photo credit: Library of Congress.*

Among the first settlers in Robertson County, Joseph Washington was a second-cousin to President George Washington. Wessyngton, the Old English spelling of the Washington surname, was the name taken by many of the plantation slaves. Joseph died in 1848 and the plantation passed to his son, George Washington. George set about building Wessyngton into one of the most productive plantations in Tennessee. In 1860 Washington owned over 13,000 acres and his 274 slaves raised 250,000 pounds of tobacco a year. Tobacco was often referred to as "the weed." His real and personal estate was valued at \$519,000, a property value that was seventy-eight times the average of all property holders in Robertson County. A year before the Civil War began, Wessyngton became America's largest tobacco plantation and the world's largest single producer.



Wessyngton Plantation former slaves: Left to right: Allen Washington (b.1825; head dairyman), Emanuel Washington (b.1824; the cook), Granville Washington (b. 1831; body servant to George A. Washington), and Hettie Washington (b.1839; head laundress and Emanuel's wife). The picture to the right is one of the many tobacco fields at Wessyngton. Photo credits: Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The outbreak of the Civil War in mid-1861 brought operations at Wessyngton to a halt. The Union Army and pro-Union citizens gained control of Middle Tennessee in early 1862. Many of Wessyngton's black men enlisted with the Union army after the office for the recruitment of United States Colored Troops (USCT) opened at Nashville in September of 1863. Robertson County saw very little major military action within its borders, however the citizens contended with one of the most lawless eras in their history as roving bands of guerrillas and bush-whackers wreaked havoc on the county. On Sept. 20, 1864 the *Nashville Daily Times and True Union* reported "*Old Robertson*" is famous for good whisky and bad guerrillas. On last Tuesday [20th] a party of five bushwhackers caught a young man near Springfield, and robbed him of all his valuables. Colonel Downey, of the USCT, stationed at Springfield, heard of the robbery and immediately sent out a squad of his men, who came upon the guerrillas about ten miles from Springfield, towards the Kentucky line. The colored chivalry immediately opened fire on the rebels, and stiffened three of them as cold as a lump of ice."

After the Civil War and Emancipation, many of the USCT returned to their families and to Wessyngton to farm. Because the Washingtons never sold any of the slaves from the plantation, the African American families remained intact through recent times. As many as five generations of black families lived at Wessyngton at the same time, and many of them continued to use the Washington surname and found their way back home to their families in Robertson County.

Until 1983, Wessyngton Plantation remained in the hands of direct descendants of Joseph Washington. Wessyngton Plantation and surrounding grounds are now privately owned and not open to the public.

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