

Words are powerful.

As we share the history of North Carolina, the NC Division of State Historic Sites and Properties strives to use language that is accurate, empathetic, and humanizing. Our word choices focus on the humanity of people who were marginalized or silenced in the past. This page is a resource to provide context for this intentional shift in language. It will be updated as needed, as the NC Division of State Historic Sites and Properties continues to follow the best practices in the field of public history.

While visiting our sites, you may encounter terms related to slavery that are unfamiliar to you. For example, we use “**enslaved person**,” instead of “slave.” This phrase focuses on the individual humanity of enslaved people, rather than defining them only by their legal status as chattel property. The adjective “**enslaved**” also emphasizes that enslaved people were held captive by the actions of another. Words like “**enslaver**,” rather than “master,” emphasize the active role of people in power, who enforced, sustained, and profited from enslaving other human beings.

Glossary of Terms

Enslaved person: a man, woman, or child who was legally held as property of another.

Example: “In 1803, a young **enslaved man** named Peter unearthed the largest gold nugget ever found at Reed Gold Mine.” *Reed Gold Mine State Historic Site*

Enslaver: one who holds another person/people in bondage and exploits the labor of those they enslave for economic gain.

Example: “Evidence of the enslaved persons who dug these earthworks can be found in the accounting of payments made for the campaign. But many of those people are unnamed and payment went directly to their **enslavers**.” *Alamance Battleground State Historic Site*

Freedom seeker: whereas “fugitive” evokes the image of a law breaker requiring capture and punishment, “**freedom seeker**” illustrates the desire of the person acting to make freedom a reality. The terms “fugitive” and “runaway” uphold the enslavers’ perspective.

Example: “Melvin was sold in 1847 after he attempted to escape to freedom. Melvin was just one of many daring **freedom seekers** who tried unsuccessfully to break the chains of bondage, risking everything in the process.” *Somerset Place State Historic Site*

Self-emancipate/self-liberate: the act of an enslaved person freeing him or herself from the bondage of slavery. These words affirm that enslaved men and women seeking freedom exercised self agency in defiance of their legal and social status.

Example: “While enslaved, James’ labor was hired out to numerous Lenoir and Orange County farmers between 1860 and 1865, including Washington Duke. In October 1863,

James sought to **self-emancipate** after Duke entered the Confederate Navy.” *Duke Homestead State Historic Site*

Resources/Further Reading

[The Language of Slavery](#) from the National Park Service, Underground Railroad.

[Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites](#) by Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry.

P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al. [“Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help”](#) community-sourced document.

[The Vocabulary of Freedom](#) from the Underground Railroad Education Center

[Explorations: The Language of Enslavement](#) by Lindsey Norward. Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts.

[Historical Foundations of Race](#), from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.

Kinsley, R.P.; Middleton, M.; Moore, P. (2016). [\(Re\)Frame: The Case for New Language in the 21st Century Museum](#). *Exhibition* (36)1, 56-63.