Bloodlines to Freedom

Eleanor “Irish Nell” Butler & “Negro Charles”

Eleanor Butler came to Maryland as an indentured servant, married Charles, a slave, in St. Mary’s County in August 1681, and was effectively enslaved by his master. Their children were also enslaved. Because of oral storytelling traditions, later generations remembered the couple’s tale, used for their freedom, and won—if they could prove they were Eleanor Butler’s descendants through a direct female line. This diagram shows the female Butler bloodline and highlights the family members who won their freedom in court, vividly demonstrating the power of the family’s oral history.