

**TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES:
DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

**THE DEMISE OF SLAVERY IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,
APRIL 16, 1862**

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On Thursday, May 22, 1862, Margaret C. Barber of Washington, D.C. stood before the Board of Commissioners for the Emancipation of Slaves in the District of Columbia. She presented a claim to the Commission to be compensated by the Federal Government, which had freed her 34 slaves. She was not alone in making such a request, as more than 1,000 District residents filed similar documents, but hers was the second largest. Documents from her claim provide a vantage point onto both the institution of slavery and the beginning of its demise during the Civil War.

As of April 16, 1862, all slaves within the District of Columbia were freed by the "Act for the Release of Certain Persons Held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia," passed by the U.S. Congress. According to this Act,

All persons held to service or labor within the District of Columbia by reason of African descent are hereby discharged and freed of and from all claim to such service or labor; and from and after the passage of this act neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except for crime, whereof the party shall be duly convicted, shall hereafter exist in said District.¹

The Act passed after considerable congressional and Presidential debate and compromise. Some urged a cautious approach for fear of alienating slaveholding border states such as Kentucky. Abolitionists wanted immediate emancipation without compensation to slave owners, with some suggesting compensation be given to slaves instead. Non-abolitionists tended to favor compensation to former owners.²

The final legislation provided for owner compensation. The Act created a presidentially appointed Board of Commissioners to determine the amount of compensation. The amount was not to exceed \$300 per emancipated slave and was limited to owners who could prove that they had remained loyal to the United States. Compensation would not be provided "for any slave claimed by any person who has borne arms against the Government of the United States in the present rebellion, or in

¹This law is available through the National Archives at <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the Search box, type the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) number 4644520.

²Michael J. Kurtz, "Emancipation in the Federal City," *Civil War History*, XXIV, 1 (March 1978), 250-258.

any way given aid or comfort thereto . . .” Commissioners hired Bernard M. Campbell, a Baltimore slave trader, to assist them in assessing the value of the slaves.

In 1860, Margaret C. Barber had owned 29 slaves ranging in age from 2 to 75.³ By 1862, she had “acquired her claim” to five additional slaves through inheritance both from her father and from her late husband. While the 1860 census listed only the age and sex of Barber’s slaves, her compensation claim provided names, descriptions, and monetary value.⁴ Following are some examples from this document. Peter Jenkins, listed as a “slave for life,” was 65-years old, 5-foot 8½ inches tall, and a “number one farm hand.” Barber was able to hire him out for \$70 a year. She listed his worth at \$250. Ellen Jenkins, 60-years old and 5-foot 7 inches, was also a slave for life, a “good cook” who could earn \$82 a year in wages for Barber. Jenkins’s worth was listed at \$250. Richard Williams was 25-years old and 5-foot 10 inches tall. He was valued by Barber at \$1,500. She noted that Williams was a “slave for life,” a shoemaker, a carpenter, and a first-rate farmhand. Susan Carroll was 36-years old and 4-foot 11 7/8 inches tall, a seamstress and house servant but not a “slave for life.” She was to “serve till 44 years of age.” Barber listed her worth at \$400. In a number of wills cited in claims to the Commission, slaves were bequeathed for a limited number of years, after which the slave was to be freed.

The District of Columbia slave emancipation act and two pages of Barber’s claim provide dramatic insight into slavery—or at least as to how it was practiced in one District of Columbia household in 1862. The language of the law itself is deeply revealing. According to the act, Peter and Ellen Jenkins, Susan Carroll, Richard Williams, and Barber’s thirty other slaves were deprived of freedom and “held to service or labor” simply “by reason of African descent.” The act in quite simple terms makes clear that race was the primary factor used by slavery supporters to justify the institution.

Commission documents also highlight another aspect of slavery: treating people as property. Barber had acquired 34 slaves through inheritance. Jenkins, Carroll, Williams, and the others were transferred from parent to child and from husband to wife in exactly the same manner as a house, furniture, or cash would have been: through a will. In other cases, slaves were sold to pay off the debts of a deceased

³This data comes from the slave schedules of that year’s Census for the District of Columbia. This record is reproduced in National Archives microfilm publication M653A, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, Roll 105.

⁴A facsimile of Barber’s compensation claim (number 366) is available through the National Archives at <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the Search box, type the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) number 4664520.

person. Such a case is described in the compensation claim of Nicholas Acker.⁵ His claim included a copy of the 1858 bill of sale for a thirteen-year-old slave named Ann Maria Adams. Acker had purchased Adams for \$650 from the estate of William Burford who had died with unpaid debts.

The claims of other slave owners provide additional examples. Anthony Addison's claim included the will of Anthony Addison Callis of Prince George's County, Maryland. As with Barber's slaves, some were slaves "for life," others were to be emancipated after a certain date. Callis's will stated that:

I give ... unto my beloved friend Sarah D. Hanson the following servants, namely ... Phill ... Martha and her child Elizabeth ... Polly ... Kitty, and Sam. The said slaves to serve Sarah D. Hanson during her natural life and after her death Phill, Martha, Polly, and Kitt to serve Anthony Addison of the District of Columbia six months, and then to be free from slavery.⁶

While providing eventual freedom for all of his slaves after they had served both Sarah Hanson and Anthony Addison, Callis's will included an ominous warning to these slaves. "Should any of the above named servants conduct themselves in a disorderly manner their said mistress ... shall have the power to sell them for life."

Altogether, Margaret Barber estimated that her slaves were worth a total of \$23,400. On June 16, 1862, 28 of Barber's slaves were examined by slave trader Bernard Campbell so that their value might be assessed by the Commission. Ultimately, Barber received \$9,351.30 in compensation for the emancipation of her slaves. Unfortunately, there is no indication in any of the Commission's records as to the value that Barber's former slaves assigned to their newfound freedom. We have no way of knowing, based on existing documents, how they felt about their imminent emancipation.

District of Columbia court records, however, reveal freedom was something that at least five of Barber's 34 slaves were eager to grasp. They would not await the Commission's deliberations. "[S]ince the United States troops came here," said Barber, five of her slaves had "absented themselves and went off and are believed still to be in

⁵A facsimile of Acker's compensation claim (number 370) is available through National Archives microfilm publication M520, *Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Emancipation of Slaves in the District of Columbia, 1862-1863*, Roll 3.

⁶A facsimile of Callis's will is contained within the compensation claim of Anthony Addison (number 457). It is available through the National Archives at <http://archives.gov/research/arc>. In the Search box, type Archival Research Catalog (ARC) number 4644604.

some of the Companies and in their service.” These five were Mortimer Briscoe, Towley Yates, Resin Yates, Andrew Yates, and William Cyrus.⁷

Teaching Suggestions

1. Provide students with basic information about the institution of slavery. If necessary, define important terms such as “emancipation.” Then divide students into small groups. Provide them with copies of Barber’s petition and ask them to read it silently. When they have finished reading the document, give them a piece of paper and ask them to write up to three words that describe how the document makes them feel. Collect the papers, read the words aloud to the class, and ask students if any of them would like to elaborate on their choice of words. Next, ask them to what extent their feelings influence their interest in learning more about the abolition of slavery in DC.
2. Ask students to read Margaret Barber’s petition carefully. Divide them into small groups and ask each group to choose one of Barber’s slaves to discuss. The discussion should focus on describing what a typical day might have been like for that person. What sort of work might he or she have done? How long would they likely have worked each day? Were they forbidden to do certain things (e.g. travel to another state without permission)? Each group should then present its description of the slave’s day. Encourage them to think how the slaves’ days would be different (or the same?) after they were freed.
3. Direct students to compose a list of words that come to mind when they hear the word “freedom.” Alternatively, students could draw pictures (or clip them from magazines) to create a collage of images regarding the term freedom. Then instruct them to do the same for the word “slavery.” Lead a discussion in which students can share their lists.
4. Ask students to compose a list of words or a picture collage that one of Margaret Barber’s slaves might have created just prior to his or her emancipation in 1862. What might have come to his or her mind when they heard the words slavery and freedom? What sorts of opportunities might they have hoped that freedom would bring them?
5. Distribute to students a copy of “An Act for the Release of Certain Persons Held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia.” Ask them to read it carefully. Lead a class discussion. Was there a symbolic importance to emancipation in the nation’s capital in addition to the very real benefit of emancipation to DC slaves?
6. Instruct students to choose one of the five slaves who “absented themselves” from Barber’s household and went to the Union Army. Direct them to write a letter from that person to one of Barber’s slaves who did not leave her household

⁷The page from Barber’s claim which lists these five former slaves is not currently available in digital format through the National Archives website.

prior to the Commission hearing. The letter should describe the writer's motivation for leaving and how life was different (or in some ways the same?) as during slavery.

7. In April 1866, Congress passed and the President signed a Civil Rights act "to protect all persons in their civil rights and furnish the means of their vindication." Direct students to analyze this document with the following questions in mind:

- What rights did this act protect?
- Why would Congress feel the need to pass this type of legislation?
- What kinds of hypotheses might you pose regarding the lives of African Americans based on this document?

Ask students to write down their answers to these questions. Then, direct them to conduct research on the lives of African Americans during Reconstruction. In a second writing assignment, ask them to incorporate their initial analysis of the 1866 Civil Rights Act with insights gained from their research.

Note: A digital copy of this law is available at www.archives.gov/research/arc. Type the identifying ARC number 299820 into the Search box to access the document.

Sources

Digital copies of the documents cited in this article are available from the National Archives website. Go to www.archives.gov/research/arc. Type the identifying ARC numbers into the Search box to access the documents.

You and your students can explore the debate within Congress pertaining to the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia by reading the 1862 edition of the *Congressional Globe*, available at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwgc.html>. The "Browse Appendix Page Headings" link will lead to a number of speeches reflecting a diversity of viewpoints on the emancipation of slaves in DC. You may also select the "Browse *Congressional Globe*" link. This will allow you to search the full text of the *Globe* and the Appendix. The *Globe* is arranged by Congress. You will want to select the 37th Congress, 2nd Session, for this topic.

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