



Washington History in the Classroom

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“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

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Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

“I Held George Washington’s Horse”: Compensated Emancipation in the District of Columbia

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One day late in January 1863 Noah Brooks, correspondent of the *Sacramento Union*, was walking through the United States Treasury building in Washington and noticed a large crowd gathered outside Room 18. Curious about it he discovered the people were former slaveholders waiting to receive checks of compensation for their slaves from the disbursing agent.

Without knowing it, Brooks had stumbled onto the concluding event of a sequence unique in American history. Nine months before on April 16, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed an “Act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia by reason of African descent”. It provided for the United States Treasury to pay a sum of not more than \$1,000,000 to compensate loyal owners for their property. The average price per slave was not to exceed \$300.

Few people realize that the emancipation of slaves in the federal district antedated Lincoln’s national proclamation of emancipation by almost nine months, and that it was the only instance of compensated emancipation in our history.

Taking the oath of allegiance to the Union was a prerequisite for payment and some one hundred owners never filed their claims. The remaining nine hundred and sixty-six owners possessed from one to sixty-nine slaves apiece. The commissioners used the year 1860 as a price-yardstick, and roughly, the total holdings added up to \$2,074,000 of personal property the government was thus arbitrarily liquidating. Yet despite the amount of money involved, despite the social upheaval that ensued, except for listing the owners’ names, their slaves

The primary source for this article is Miscellaneous Treasury Account No. 158-299, Records of the General Accounting Office, Emancipation Commission for the District of Columbia, Act of April 16, 1862, National Archives, Record Group 217.

by name, and the values claimed for each, the local press ignored the event.

Several circumstances account for this. In the first place McClellan was besieging Richmond and Stonewall Jackson routing the Federals from the Shenandoah Valley. War news overshadowed everything else. Moreover slavery was so common and had lost so much of the element of bondage and hardship that the Act merely anticipated a situation which had existed for some time and which nobody thought remarkable.

The fact was that in some areas, especially the borderline cities with large populations of free Negroes, slavery as a system was doomed. Only two percent of the white District residents owned slaves. Many owned three generations of the same family whom they had to clothe, shelter, protect, baptize, house and nurse according to the southern tradition, and this surplus of human property hung like stones around their necks. Allowing their bondsmen marginal earnings or the chance to purchase freedom and maintain themselves, some owners hadn't seen their property for years. The freewheeling slaves were white-washers, engravers, flour-millers, mill-workers in a lumber yard, hotel waiters, blacksmiths and Navy Yard cooks, in other words, competent individuals able to fend for themselves. "We live like free," boasted one male slave to the 1860 census taker who had listed him in the "free citizen" column by mistake.

However the fundamental reason for the absence of reportage was undoubtedly rooted in caution. The majority of large holders were southern in origin and bitterly resented the interference of distant or northern states in their private affairs. Many had lived in the District, and especially in Georgetown, a long time and were sincerely loyal to the Union. Yet reared in southern Maryland or Tidewater Virginia, their ties and culture still bound them to the South. Some even believed that once "the existing trouble was put down," slavery would again prevail. As late as November 27, 1861, a Georgetown dry goods merchant purchased a servant girl of thirteen years for \$225 from a friend in Montgomery county, Maryland. Seven months later the emancipation commissioners priced her at \$900, the amount she would have brought two years before. Slave-property had become precarious, and obviously it was foolish now to air one's grievances and look a gift horse in the mouth.

The only documentation to the public reaction, that found in the Congressional Globe, is meagre. But by examining what the system meant to the holders, one can guess at it with some accuracy. To the southerners of entrenched wealth and position, slaves meant well-

being and comfort. Fearing they'd come down one morning for breakfast and find an empty kitchen, panicking at the prospect of sabotage or riot, they declared the District would become an asylum for refugee slaves. Along with real estate, silver plate, livestock or pleasure vehicles, these human chattels were taxable at the rate of seventy-five cents on every hundred dollars worth. Emancipation would reduce the tax burden and line the pocket, but not abate the anxiety about a city teeming with unruly free Negroes on jubilee.

Facing an even more desperate prospect were the widows and single women who preferred a steady income from hiring out their people to that received from real estate, stocks or bonds. Some even would sell inherited real estate and then sink the proceeds into the more lucrative human property. By judicious selection and placement of their slaves, they could derive an annual income of anywhere from five to ten percent on their investment.

Take Mrs. Ann Bisco, for example, the fourth largest owner in the District, a sixty-three year old widow, frail and retiring, who almost never left her two-story brick near Rock Creek, Georgetown. She ran what amounted to an employment office for the thirty-two slaves worth \$14,950 she had inherited from her father, a tobacco planter in St. Mary's county, Maryland. "All had been brought up in her family under her own eye and care," wrote Mrs. Bisco's attorney for his client in her petition for compensation. "When her husband died, her friends advised her to sell them. But she was averse to it. The wages have been her sole support."

Keeping the most infirm or the mothers of young children at home as domestics, Mrs. Bisco hired out fourteen adults and two boys to sixteen employers sprinkled all over Georgetown and the first ward of Washington. Three cooks earned \$6 a month each, two maids and two nurses the same, a seamstress and a laundress \$5 a month, and two boys \$4. Even old Ezekiel, blind in one eye and rheumatic, ruptured and apt to "frolic and drink," was proud to contribute his \$1.25 a day as a whitewasher. Utilizing about half her cadre, Mrs. Bisco derived around \$900 annually or 5.8 per cent on her total investment.

Women living near the open country or the hotel area could expect twice as much. Waiters earned \$144 a year, fieldhands \$300, coachmen \$144, and greenhouse men \$120. One widow named Mrs. Margaret Barber owned thirty-four slaves, most of whom had been devised to her for life and had only rural skills. Feeling a real sense of responsibility for their welfare and happiness, she remained in the country during this difficult period to find congenial occupations for her slaves as well as capitalize on their earning power. (She lived where the

United States Naval Observatory is now, on the hill between Wisconsin Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue. It was her estate of seventy acres the Navy bought for the Observatory.) In this way Mrs. Barber added \$1,440 to her annual income.

Beset then by grave doubts, facing radically altered conditions where they could not readily grasp what lay ahead, 966 owners of 3100 slaves set about writing their petitions. The deadline for filing them with the clerk of the Commission was July 15. Sometime after June 10 owners could expect a summons to appear before the Commissioners to have their property assessed and their loyalty investigated, a touchy prospect on all counts.

Writing the petition involved numerous chores set by the Act. Not only did the four-page document require an itemized description of each slave, but a statement of title and a value set on each one. Deeds were pulled out of vaults and affixed to the backsheet or laboriously copied onto it. Two friends were buttonholed to attest title and loyalty. Since an underlying purpose of the Act was to smoke out rebel potential, this was perhaps the most important requirement.

The completion of the petition was a breeze compared to the safari necessary to round up slaves living all over the District map. Some of the most valuable, the healthy young bucks, had vamoosed with northern regiments during the previous winter when the latter had been encamped around Washington. To receive compensation each one had to appear in person before the Commission at the City Hall. With McClellan's army on the Virginia peninsula, finding the mavericks was like looking for needles in the haystack, and many a son or brother was dispatched on this tedious errand.

Once the summons came, the owner then in the humid Washington summer with the thermometer hitting ninety, hired several hacks to transport the troop to the City Hall. Here under gaslight chandeliers, in one or another of the courtrooms as it happened to be vacant, sat the tribunal and a slavedealer from Baltimore. The commissioners had subpoenaed this man to assist them in doing a fair and intelligent job of evaluation.

Middle-aged and non-slaveholders, longtime Washington residents and staunch Union men, the three commissioners were each earning two thousand dollars for the nine months' stint. The chairman was Daniel R. Goodloe, a native of North Carolina and an ardent abolitionist who had drifted to Washington in 1844. Also a prominent journalist, in August of 1861 he had written a pamphlet advocating compensated emancipation and stating he considered slaves even at this late date still worth around \$300 apiece on the average. The

District Committee of the Senate who wrote and introduced the bill numbered 108, perhaps used this figure when determining the average price.

The other two members were downeast Yankees, Horatio King from Maine who had entered the Post Office Department in 1840 and was acting Postmaster General when Lincoln appointed him, and John M. Brodhead, a native of New Hampshire. Although he had been in the Second Comptroller's office since 1822 and risen through the ranks to become Chief Clerk at \$3000 a year, in 1855 Brodhead unaccountably abandoned his post and hung out a shingle as a physician. Seven years later, as Emancipation Commissioner, he was again involved with figures, computing claims and doing clerical work. (His fling as a medico was apparently unsatisfactory, for after the Commission's work was over, Brodhead again entered the Second Comptroller's office in his former post.) Little could be found in the records about this man, yet somehow the very fact that he did try a profession so intimately involved with the human spirit, suggests more than anything else in the background of the others, his very humanity and compassion.

The slave dealer who was to evaluate the slaves was Bernard M. Campbell, an inter-state trader who had a breeding farm in New Orleans and a jail in Baltimore on Pratt Street. After twelve years in business at this stand, from February 2 to May 18, when communications with the South broke off, he had sold only thirty-seven slaves. He had however not been idle. After the Act was signed, a stream of refugee slaves had fled from Maryland plantations and entered the capital expecting liberation. Their frantic owners had tried then to secure those who remained in Campbell's jail. On June second, sixty male Negroes rioted in the open brick pen, assailing the dealer and the police with buckets, bricks and barrelstaves. Campbell sustained some nasty wounds on his face, and now as the slaves advanced toward him for evaluation they confronted a formidable figure with red welts slashing across his forehead and a left eye swollen black and blue.

As each came up the dealer swept him or her with that rapid overall glance peculiar to the buyer of slaves, and then asked age, health and occupation. Careful not to offend or wound their feelings, in doubtful cases Campbell requested that teeth be bared and mouth opened wide. Teeth he considered important indices of health, and in a cook especially, a guaranty of cleanliness. Old slaves often claimed to be older than they were, for venerable age secured greater respect. For this reason the Commissioners would test their statements by querying about public events of which the most illiterate could not be ignorant. Some replied they were women when the Battle of Bladensburgh was fought,

when cholera raged, or the Capitol was burnt. One aged man said he had held George Washington's horse. In this way from fifty to one hundred were examined and assessed every day. Almost every master claimed perfect health for his slaves. But aware of the eager crowd of spectators gathered in the courtroom every day, it was the rare slave who didn't show a sense of drama and complain of fits and palsy, hernia and rupture, and in the most intimate terms. The highest priced slave was a blacksmith worth \$1800, and the lowest, a two months old mulatto baby, worth \$25.

As owners watched, wondering how their original estimates had stacked up, they were alternately pleased or chagrined. In almost every case they had underrated youth, good looks and health and over-rated skill and devotion.

Over the weekend of August 31, 1862, on the plains of Chantilly, Virginia, the second Battle of Manassas was fought and from that strategic area so near the capital the Federals were ousted at heavy cost. With its transportation disrupted, schools, warehouses, and churches converted into hospitals, thousands of stragglers seeking shelter and food, and an influx of strangers who wandered about searching for wounded relations or friends, Washington was chaotic. The hearings were temporarily suspended. When they resumed, Chairman Goodloe was appraiser and the name of B. M. Campbell vanished from the record.

Despite the lure in Baltimore of a young wife and his baby daughter, the forty-six year old dealer had remained on the job all summer. "Without the aid of such a man," wrote Goodloe to Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, on September 25, "we must utterly have failed to make a fair award of compensation while our labors would seem to have been interminable." A check for \$500 was sent to Campbell and the compliment paid him of having it delivered in person. (The dealer operated his jail until 1864 when Maryland abolished slavery. He then turned to the profession of locksmith and prospered in it.)

Once the task of evaluation tapered off, the Commission tackled the more perplexing one of deciding the borderline claims. Nine hundred and nine cases had been clearcut and favorably reported. Titles had been valid and loyalty clear. But numerous ambiguities rendered 57 of the claims suspect. Some petitioners confessed to having sons or husbands in the Confederate army, but asserted their own support of the Union. Others had signed the Virginia ordinance of secession in May of 1861, but possessed slaves who had been in the District when

the Act was signed. Two Negroes who had purchased their own freedom prior to 1861, and had been laboring to purchase that of their families, claimed compensation for their wives and children. All these cases were disqualified. Bending over backwards to be fair, the commissioners at length decided that an overt act of disloyalty or the bearing of arms against the Union, would be the definitive test.

In the end compensation was due for 2,989 slaves. Computing these payments presented a special problem in accounting. Usually claims were made on the Treasury, and after review in the Second Comptroller's office, they were sent to the Hill and Congress would appropriate enough funds to cover them at a lower rate. In this case the order was reversed. The money had already been voted and the claims had to be scaled down to allow everyone a fair proportion and to meet the statutory average. How the Board calculated their rule-of-thumb is unrecorded. But it is certain that with his long experience in the Second Comptroller's office, Brodhead contributed substantially to the calculations.

The formula which spelled out the relationship between the total assessment of \$2,074,000 and the funds available after expenses and salaries were paid, roughly \$905,000, determined a rate of 43.8 per cent. This was applied to each evaluation. A slave appraised at \$1,600 would bring \$700.80, one at \$1,000, \$438, and so on down to the mulatto baby worth \$25 who brought \$10.95. The highest total payment went to George Washington Young, a gentleman-farmer with sixty-nine slaves who received \$17,771.85.

By January 21, 1863, all accounts were figured, the books closed, claimants notified and the report sent to the Secretary of the Treasury. Each claimant then walked up to the cage in Room 18, "gave his name," as Noah Brooks recalled in his *Diary* thirty years later, "the commission clerk looked up the number of his claim, and the Sub-Treasury cashier produced a check which bore the same number. Thereupon the claimant signed a receipt, received this check, and went to General Francis Spinner, U. S. Treasurer, where he signed another receipt, and the check being duly counter-signed, was payable at the Sub-Treasury." The Board had done its job so well it could return \$79,831.92 to the Treasury of the original million.

Claimants had the statutory right to appeal their payments. But court records do not reveal any litigation for appeal, although there was considerable cause for grumbling. In the first place many petitioners had expended great effort and anguish to validate their claims. Margaret Barber for instance, not only had to make the routine visits

with her thirty-three slaves but he examined herself about each one. Every time one of the five who had deserted her before Christmas was found, he had to be brought into City Hall and she had to accompany him. She had two attorneys and eight witnesses, and all had to make at least one trip over from Observatory Hill (as we know it today), and some two and three. To be a witness was obviously a test of friendship. Two from Georgetown made respectively ten and thirteen trips over to testify to the loyalty of their friends.

The experience took a severe emotional toll as well. The case of Mrs. Lucinda Matthews of Georgetown was particularly dramatic. On April 15, 1862, her husband Henry had disinherited their two younger sons because they had defected to the southern army. A few days later he wrote out his petition for slave compensation—he owned eleven slaves—and on April 30th after a short painful illness, died. An older son Charles, an able young lawyer, handled all legal aspects of his mother's claim, saving her the strain of tedious crosstown journeys by bringing affidavits home for her to sign. They thought all was going well. But then suddenly, a neighbor who was a clerk in the Navy Department informed the Commission he had overheard Mrs. Matthews express strong sympathy for the Confederates. She was summoned to appear November 17. Standing up in her widow's weeds, she reviewed all the circumstances of her sons' defection, and recounted how she had come back from church on that Sunday to find both gone to Virginia. "My husband rose out of his sickbed to go down to Alexandria and implore them to return. Tears were in his eyes." The next day at her own request, she returned to the City Hall to swear her loyalty to the Union, and opposition to her sons' actions. Evidently her words held authority for she was given full value for her slaves, \$3,143.33.

All grumbling aside, when the check earmarked with the scrolls and hentracks of Father Spinner's remarkable signature crackled in hand, it is doubtful if people found it anything but manna from heaven. Many slaves had indeed abandoned their masters to join army officers or go north. But owners discovered it was easy to replace them. While both Washington and Georgetown soon bulged with contrabands, riot and sabotage did not occur. People had ready money to spend and with which to pay debts. New houses were purchased, a few built, new businesses initiated, pew rents collected at long last. Mrs. Bisco left Ezekiel in charge of her little brick, pocketed her check for \$6,548.10 and moved to a more convenient boardinghouse on P street for the duration. Mrs. Barber converted hers for \$9,500 into government Sixes (gold bonds) and found her efforts had won rewards. Many

of her former slaves remained on her estate to tend the winepress and orchards, raise the geese, and guard the livestock pens from pilfering soldiers.

The resulting security and yeasty stimulus had leavened the lowest and most trying winter for citizens in the history of the District of Columbia.