



Washington History in the Classroom

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“Teachable Moment” essays start with a document, map, or image, that invites close analysis to understand its deeper lessons. The features are also windows into how their historian/authors analyze and interpret primary sources to discover layers of context and meaning.

“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*.”**



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

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.

Teachable Moment

The Winding Path to Freedom under the District of Columbia Emancipation Act of April 16, 1862

BY JOSEPH P. REIDY

Washingtonians properly observe April 16 as Emancipation Day, marking the anniversary of the day in 1862 when President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a bill outlawing slavery in the city and compensating slaveowners for the loss of their property. Though nearly 3,000 slaves eventually gained freedom under the law, enslaved people did not suddenly become free on April 16. Much could—and did—go wrong in the months following the passage of the law. This issue’s “Teachable Moment” examines a notable case that illustrates how convoluted and uncertain the journey to freedom could be.

The case involved a white man named Alexander McCormick, who claimed five African Americans as his slaves: Mary Thomas, about 50 years of age; her two daughters, Emeline Wedge, 25, and Alice Thomas, 15; and Emeline’s two children, Martha Ann Elizabeth, five, and George Washington, four. McCormick’s farm lay east of the Eastern Branch (as the Anacostia River was then known), straddling the border between the District of Columbia and Prince George’s County, Maryland, near Bladensburg. Much of the property was located on the District side of the line, including a stable, animal pens, and the farmhouse where McCormick, his wife, his servants, and several hired laborers apparently resided. Several cultivated fields, a pasture, and a spring were on the Maryland side.

When Congress passed the emancipation act, McCormick feared that he would be forced to give up his slaves because they lived in the District. So he devised an elaborate scheme to move them to the Maryland side of the farm beyond the reach of the new law. First he built a “quarter,” as several neighbors termed it, on the Maryland side for the women and children to occupy. He then turned his attention to their labor, trying to be sure that they worked only in the Maryland fields and pasture. Among other things, he ordered them to tend the cows in the Maryland pasture and then hand them off each day to one of the hired laborers at the District line for herding across

the forbidden soil of Washington to the cowpen. McCormick instructed the women not to set foot on the Washington side of the line, not even to visit Emeline’s husband, George Wedge, a free man, who lived with his parents in the District nearby.

The law gave slaveowners 90 days to submit a claim for compensation to the three-man board of commissioners appointed to review all emancipation cases, but McCormick had no intention of submitting a claim. He was not alone; the commissioners soon realized that many masters were evading the law by leaving the city and taking their slaves with them. Without a master’s request for compensation, which in turn triggered the commissioners’ examination into the validity of the claim, no free papers could be issued. On July 12, 1862, Congress closed this legal loophole by passing a supplemental bill that permitted enslaved persons whose masters did not request compensation to petition the commissioners directly for free papers.

That is precisely what Mary Thomas, Emeline Wedge, and Alice Thomas did. Mary Thomas, who appears to have resisted McCormick’s attempt to move her with her daughters and grandchildren into the quarter in April, requested free papers on July 26, and the commissioners heard and approved her case the same day, uncontested by McCormick. When Emeline (on her own behalf and that of her children) and Alice later did the same, McCormick challenged their claims. The commissioners opened an investigation, and the following transcription is an excerpt of those proceedings. The original document was written in longhand by a clerk who sought to record the highlights of each witness’s testimony, which was at times punctuated by questions from the commissioners or other participants. Note that words crossed out in the original are omitted here without notation. Ellipses (. . .) designate where text from the original document has been deleted in the interest of space. Illegible or partly legible words are designated by brackets or bracketed question marks [?].

To JOHN A. SMITH ESQ., Clerk of the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia.

SIR:

Alexander McCormick of the District of Columbia
 the wife and children of G. Wedge a free
 having claim to the service or labor of the undersigned, and having ^{owned} ~~man~~

refused or neglected to file in your office the statement in writing or schedule provided for in the 9th section of the Act of Congress, entitled "An act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in said District," approved April 16, 1862, you will please file this petition or schedule in lieu thereof, in pursuance of the provisions of an act supplementary to said act which said last mentioned act was approved

July 12, 1862. This petitioner further state that the undersigned has resided in said District for many years since the 16th day of April 1862, by and

with the consent of her said Master Agrees to this petition in her own behalf and on behalf of her said children with her husband's husband

Name,	Age,	Sex,	Remarks,
Emeline Wedge	between 21 & 22	female	Brown
her children -			
Maria Ann Elinski to Wedge	between 2 & 4	female	light
George Washington Wedge	between 2 & 3	male	light
Witness to George	George X Wedge		
Witness to Emeline	Emeline X Wedge		

Isaac Blinn

Emeline Wedge's petition for free papers. Courtesy, National Archives and Records Administration



This 1862 map of the forts defending Washington shows McCormick's property at the upper right, just east of the Anacostia River. The mapmaker spelled his name "Macommick." E.G. Arnold map, courtesy, Library of Congress



This 1861 map of Prince George's County, Maryland, shows the Maryland portion of McCormick's farm to the east of the river. Simon J. Martenet map, courtesy, Library of Congress

1. This date is eight full months after passage of the emancipation act, during which time Alice Thomas, Emeline Wedge, and Wedge's children remained enslaved.

2. "Col^d" was a contraction for "colored," commonly used in official documents, newspapers, city directories, and the like to identify people of African ancestry. Both the emancipation act and the supplemental act departed radically from convention by authorizing the commissioners to accept the testimony of black witnesses.

3. Emeline Wedge is establishing, contrary to McCormick's assertions and those of several other subsequent witnesses, that she and her sister continued to live and work on the District side of the property after April 16, 1862.

4. The Sunday was April 13, 1862, and the Thursday, April 17. The testimony of Lewis Cook, below, identifies McCormick's mother as Mrs. Matilda Young of Prince George's County, Maryland.

5. The clerk clearly intended to refer to Emeline and Alice here. Alice's full name was Alice Virginia.

6. Women of the farm, white and black, worked together to prepare harvested crops for market.

7. On December 22, McCormick reconsidered, and, after claiming that he had earlier misunderstood how the hearings were to be conducted, the commissioners allowed him to participate.

Dec. 16, 1862

Alexander McCormick, owner
(Negroes asking for freedom.)

Emeline Wedge, sworn (col^d)

Knows Alice Virginia Thomas, was slave of Mr. Alexr. McCormick. Alice was in the District on the 16th of April last. farm on the line but most of it is in District. Alice was sent in District by her master very frequently getting the cows, water. Cows have to be brought through part of the District to get home from pasture. Alice usually brings the cows. Mr. McCormick's dwelling house is in District and Alice has been employed there a good deal of the time. since 16th April last, up there every morning, eats there often. Identifies the girl present as Alice.

Alice Virginia Thomas (sworn) col^d

Knows Emeline Wedge now present. Was Alex McCormick's servant on 16th Apl last & he still claims her. Lives on Mr McC's farm, and works most of the time on the farm and at the house in the District

George Wedge (Colored) I know Alice Virginia Thomas. She belonged to Mr Alexr McCormick. 16 April last she was living in District at Mr McCormick's house. on Sunday he took servants to his mothers and kept them there until Thursday. during which time he built a small house on Maryland side— . . .

Alice has been every day in District. She gets up cows every day and cowpen was in District and my wife two or three times a week.

My mother was very ill (two months ago) children came every day to house to see my mother. Weather became bad and children staid . . .

I have seen Alice & Virginia shelling beans at Mr McCormicks kitchen since 16th Apl. Mrs McCormick by them.

I sent to Mr McCormick by wife to let her come to see my mother and he permitted her to come

Mr McCormick being notified came and said he came because he was summoned. that he wanted nothing to do with it here. He believed the law to be un Constitutional and he was willing to bide his time — did not wish to & did not hear the testimony & withdrew.

Dec 17, 1862

Witness

Emeline Wedge. My childs name is Martha Ann Elizabeth — 5 years old, is in District at her fathers — is claimed as Mr. McCormick's slave. Have another child named George Washington — now about 4 years old — is with his father — also claimed as Mr. McCormick's slave. Were moved, a few days before the Emancipation act passed, over the Maryland line — have been in the District frequently with their master's consent since the 16th April last.

Dec 22

Lewis Cook Have been living for 9 months in Maryland with Mrs Matilda Young. I was there when Mr McCormick brought these servants there, on Sunday and until Thursday—4 days when Mr McCormick removed them. I assisted Mr McCormick in mean time to build house in Maryland for servants. Mr McCormick took servants there to live. & It was before act passed knew when

House is some 100 yards on Maryland line farm on both sides of District & Maryland line

James Fowler. I do not know how long during summer I marketted for Mr McCormick. I marketted all produce of farm. In August they were at work in District but not by Mr McCormick's order—cleaning hogs—Mr McCormick was not at home. I never knew Mr McCormick to require work of them in District. Mr & Mrs McCormick assisted me in gathering & marketting— . . .

Barrell from which hogs were watered was in Maryland— water was carried from that barrel to hog pen by Ned Nevitt & Mr McCormick. . . .

Often seen house which Mr McCormick built were there every day . . .

I plastered the house, with Mr McCormick— I never heard Mr McCormick talk about it— They could, I could, live in the house. Stove in there. bed in there. bed downstairs. sometimes fire there. one of girls made fire—frame house. I did not see children there.

I am well acquainted with George Wedges character for truth & veracity. would not believe much in what he says.

Dec. 30. Tuesday.

John H. Owen (produced by Mr McCormick).

I went to live with Mr McCormick 12 May and lived until 23 August. While living with Mr McCormick I never knew Mr McC to allow the servants to come into Maryland. They never came in District line except of their own accord and it was against Mr McCormicks order. When binding rye they were kept on Maryland side. When they came to about line Mr McCormick would stop them and tell them to go no further.

. . . I never knew them to be required or allowed to work at house or drive cows or milk them I never knew them to do so except of their own accord

I have heard Mr McC order children away from the house I never knew them to work the sweet potato crop near quarter worked by Mr McC & myself. Cowpen 100 or 150 yards from line. Sally King attended cows when I was living there then Mr King got cows up generally. I never knew Mr McC to get them up. I have got them up. I have known cows to go up of own accord. Would go up of their own accord when driven in neighborhood of cowpen. Most of crop was on District side was not work enough on Maryland side for the girls. They were a good deal of time unemployed at quarter while we were at work. I never knew of them being ordered or desired to do anything on District side.

William Wedge. I live in District. round the road short 3/4 of a mile further of George Wedge. Little children have been to my house for two months. Wedges wife & sister have been at my house every night since children have been there. go back in morning. I have seen Lou driving cattle. have seen her at the marsh and at cowpen. Cant say marsh is in District have seen her drive cows to cowpen. Cant say how often, but frequently. have never seen her drive them out of cowpen. Cant say whether bars or not. it is not gated. have seen her put up bars when the cows went in.

Servants got to my house sometimes before candlelight sometimes just after sunset. go away when it was light.

8. Fowler makes clear in his testimony below that he also worked for McCormick harvesting crops, cleaning hogs, and improving the quarter. Like other small farmers, McCormick employed white laborers seasonally to supplement the labor of their slaves, especially at harvest time.

9. Although Fowler was making a case that the new quarter McCormick had built on the Maryland side was habitable, in the end the commissioners were not persuaded.

10. The sense of the testimony suggests that the clerk intended to write "the District" instead of "Maryland."

11. Owen attributes the same capacity to act of their "own accord" to the cows that he grants to Emeline and Alice.

12. Although this witness testified at McCormick's request, he could not resist observing that McCormick's attempt to dodge the emancipation act meant that he squandered a good portion of the women's useful labor.

13. Alice's nickname.

14. Because the cowpen was located entirely in the District, testimony suggesting that Emeline and Alice penned the cows undercut McCormick's claims that their labor was confined strictly to the pasture and fields on the Maryland side.

To the Hon^{ble} the Commissioners under the Act of
Congress for emancipation of Slaves in the District of
Columbia -

The undersigned, from whom certain of his
Slaves absconded from the State of Maryland, & who have
applied to your Commission under the supplemental Act to
the Act of 16th April 1862, & by your decision considered
as entitled to its benefits, respectfully Protest against
the effect & correctness of said decision, & begs leave to have
this his Protest filed with the Tapes of the case & Commission

Washington December 30 1862.
G J

Alex^r W. McCormick

McCormick disputed the Wedges' right to freedom in late December. Courtesy, National Archives and Records Administration

On December 30, 1862, the commissioners completed their investigation and dismissed McCormick's claim that the women had lived in Maryland since before passage of the act. They concluded that the house he had built for them "could scarcely be said to be inhabitable." And, although McCormick may have objected to the women and children staying with the Wedges in the District, "he took no steps to have them removed." Finally, at McCormick's direction, the women carried "vegetables from the farm to Wedge's . . . with directions for him to take them to market." The commissioners found that the petitioners were "entitled to their freedom." McCormick received no compensation.

Bested but unbowed, Alexander McCormick wrote to the commissioners, protesting "the effect & correctness" of their decision. He held firm to the conviction that the women were "his Slaves" who had "absconded from the State of Maryland."

For more than eight months after the emancipation law took effect, Emeline Wedge, her sister Alice, and her children remained enslaved despite the clear intentions

of Congress. They spent a full agricultural cycle, from spring planting through autumn harvesting, on the farm as their legal ordeal continued. Their courage, ingenuity, and persistence in challenging their master's efforts to evade the law helped them at last achieve the freedom that the law promised and that they rightfully deserved.

Joseph P. Reidy, a professor of history and an associate provost of Howard University, is writing a book on the winding road to freedom during the Civil War era.

Source

The original petitions of Mary Thomas, Emeline Wedge and her children, and Alice Thomas are among the Records of the U.S. District and Other Courts in the District of Columbia, 1810–1993, Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, 1685–1993, National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

For a full transcript of this petition, as well as copies of the original documents of the petitions, supporting documents, and notes from approximately 1,100 petitions that the commissioners reviewed in connection with the D.C. emancipation act, see the Website of the Civil War Washington project at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln (<http://civilwardc.org/texts/petitions/>).