

Carroll Yesteryears

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In 1757, “Gift of Freedom” Bestowed Upon Slave Nero

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

*At the Request of Negro Nero the following Gift of Freedom was recorded April the first day for the Year of our Lord One thousand seven hundred & fifty seven - To wit: To all whom these presents shall come Know ye that I James Brooke junior of Frederick County in the Province of Maryland Tanner & currier have discharged from my service a certain Negro Man named Nero I being induced to give him the aforesaid Negro his freedom from sundry good & lawful Motives and I do declare that the said Negro Nero is discharged from service and from the service of any other persons whatsoever & I do further desire that the said Negro may pass & repass Deal & Trade as other freemen do without molestation or hindrance for the same manner as if he the said Negro Nero never had been a Slave - To the due performance of which I bind my self my heirs Executors & administrators in the full and just sum of One hundred pounds Sterling Money to be paid to the aforesaid Negro Nero his heirs Executors Administrators or assigns at any time when the said Negro Nero shall be hindered the lawful exercise of his freedom by me or any Person claiming by from or under me according to the true Intent and meaning of these presents in witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & seal this twenty ninth day of the third Month one thousand seven hundred and fifty seven.*

*James Brooke Jun'r      Signed, sealed & delivered in presence of Joseph Janney*

The above legal document, a manumission, guaranteed Nero the “Gift of Freedom.” James Brooke, Junior, listed himself as a Frederick County tanner and currier in 1757. Tanning was an important industry at a time when leather was used for everything from boots to bookbinding. James and his father, also James, owned thousands of acres in Frederick County. Just one of their tracts, “Addition to Brooks Discovery on Rich Land,” contained almost 9,100 acres along what is today the western boundary of Carroll County. He and his wife, Hanna Janney, were both Quakers, a religious group strongly opposed to slavery. They married in 1759 and were members of the Fairfax (Virginia) Monthly Meeting when this manumission was entered in the Fairfax records.

What did freedom mean to Nero? We don’t know his age or how long he had been a slave. Had he come to Maryland from Africa or the Caribbean, or had he been born in the colony? Was he a field hand, a house servant, or did he work in Brooke’s tanyard? Did he have a family? Manumission offered him a new beginning. Emancipation for many slaves was still over 100 years away even though in 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote...“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Nero was exceptionally lucky, not only free, but with the powerful influence of James Brooke, Junior, behind him should he ever need it.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County*

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*Image credit: Fairfax Monthly Meeting minutes, 1759*

*Image caption: These life-changing words appear near the beginning of the legal document (manumission) that freed Nero, a Frederick County slave belonging to James Brooke, Jr., in 1757.*