

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Manumission records are genealogical tool
by Jay Graybeal

A large number of Marylanders of African-American descent have ancestors who were free blacks. Although free blacks had lived in Maryland since Colonial times, it was not until after the Revolution that they became a significant part of the population.

The roots of Maryland's large free black population can be found in the religious history of the state. As early as the 1760s the Society of Friends, known as Quakers, began to free their slaves on moral grounds, and shortly thereafter, they encouraged others to do so. The Methodists also condemned slavery and joined the Quakers in the 1790s in petitioning the General Assembly to rid the state of black bondage. In the early 19th century, many local Pennsylvania Germans also freed their slaves, which added to the growing number of free blacks. The 1850 census for Carroll County showed nearly equal numbers of slaves (975) and free blacks (974).

Freeing blacks was usually accomplished in one of two ways. A slave owner could execute a manumission certificate stating the date that the slave would be freed. This document was signed, witnessed and recorded by the county clerk as proof that the slave was indeed free. These documents often provide a wealth of information about the former slave including age, physical description, occupation and place of birth. Because it was crucial to distinguish a free black from a slave, the physical description was usually done in great detail. Freed blacks were given a certificate to carry showing that they were free. Carroll County manumissions from 1842 to 1865 can be found in the Chattel Records of the Land Records office, located in the Carroll County Court House Annex. Abstracts for the more than 75 manumissions are available at the Historical Society.

Freeing a slave by means of one's last will and testament was the second most common type of manumission in Carroll County. This method provided the slave owner with the maximum amount of servitude and also allowed the specification of various terms of continuing service including a number of years, the attainment of a certain age or the death of a spouse or other heir. The county Register of Wills was responsible for recording manumissions for those free by a will. In Carroll County these records can be found in the office of the Register of Wills located in the Court House Annex.

Free blacks occupied a curious niche in Maryland society somewhere between slaves and poor whites with whom they often competed for jobs. The rights of free blacks declined as quickly as their numbers increased. State laws by 1810 forbade their testimony in court cases determining whether a black was free or a slave, circumscribed their rights of free assembly, required a permit to own a firearm or a dog, and forbade them to vote. Free blacks visiting the state could not stay longer than two weeks.

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Despite these constraints, Carroll County free blacks appear to have enjoyed some prosperity prior to the Civil War. They often owned modest homes and worked in the small towns throughout the county. The outbreak of the Civil War brought new opportunities including enlistment in the Union Army and more jobs in urban areas. Marylanders adopted a new state constitution in 1864 which forbid slavery and rendered the term free black obsolete.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: Manumission certificates were issued to freed blacks by the Circuit Court for Carroll County, c. 1837.