

"Records of manumissions began after formation of Carroll County"

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By Duane K. Doxzen

After the formation of Carroll County in 1837 from parts of Baltimore and Frederick counties, the register of wills in Westminster began recording manumissions of slaves from wills of county residents. Some of Carroll's slave, though not most, were freed through the wills of their masters before the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in Maryland.

After the death of a slave owner who had provided for manumission in a will, the slave had to travel to the office of the register of wills with someone who could testify on oath that the slave identified in the will was the same person now claiming his or her freedom. This journey was no doubt often difficult, especially for those slaves who had to travel from the farthest reaches of the county, many times by foot.

The following is an excerpt from the will of Joseph Arnold, who died in 1839, an example of what would have been read in a will that provided for manumission:

The Testament and last Will of Joseph Arnold of Carroll County Maryland as Follows to wit, I Manumit liberate and set free from slavery and servitude from and after my death my negro man named Samuel, and my negro woman CassAnna the wife of my said negro man Samuel, and their children [goes on to name children and future generations of the family]...in a manner as full ample and effectual as though they had been born free.

The register of wills would then enter a description of the slave into the record and issue the slave a manumission, or "freedom," certificate. The following is an excerpt of what was recorded regarding the manumission of Samuel, the slave named in Arnold's will:

I hereby certify to all whom it doth or may concern, That it hath been proved to my satisfaction that the bearer hereof a negro man named Samuel aged about fifty three years of rather bright complexion, five feet + seven inches high, has one scar across the brow over his right eye also one other scar on his fore finger on his left hand...as also one other scar on top of his right foot occasioned by a cut with a sickle, the middle finger on his right hand stiff in the first joint, the foreteeth in the upper jaw and two foreteeth in the lower jaw of his mouth much decayed, is somewhat bald on the forepart of his head, and his hair is considerably gray, is the identical person manumitted by Joseph Arnold, late of Carroll County,...and that the said negro man Samuel was raised in the Town of Westminster in that part of Carroll County, formerly part of Frederick County in the State of Maryland...Test. John Baumgartner Register of Wills for Carroll County Maryland.

We know that at least forty one black Carroll countians submitted to such measures to claim their freedom. It is ironic indeed that the institution of slavery created the rationale for a record that supplies us with vivid images of black men and women, much more so than many we possess of the men and women who supposed to own them, in a time before photographs were common. This record allows us a glimpse of those county slaves lucky enough to have gained their freedom in an age where freedom for many blacks was dependent on the benevolence of those who held them in bondage.

The Manumissions From Wills record for this county, covering the years 1837-1865, is located at the office of the Register of Wills/Clerk of the Orphan's Court in Westminster.

Photo Caption: Manumission Certificate (blank) issued by the Circuit Court for Carroll County, c.1837. Upon receiving their freedom, former slaves were required to secure a manumission certificate. The document was to be carried by the person as proof that they were free. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.

Side Bar:

Each year the Society hosts an African-American History Forum during Black History Month. This year's program will be held at 7:30 p. m. on Thursday, February 29th, in the Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 E. Main St., Westminster. Our guest speaker will be Duane Doxzen, who will present a program on local history sources for researching African-American history in Carroll County. Mr. Doxzen is a 1994 graduate of Western Maryland College and a Society volunteer who has been researching and preparing a manuscript on this topic for nearly a year. His presentation will focus on the use of a variety of public records including, wills, estate inventories, chattel records, marriage licenses, census and military records, in the process research. He will also summarize the use of other sources including newspapers, church and cemetery records. The program is free to the membership and general public.