

'Slave Books' offer glimpse when freedom for some required proof

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These legal documents housed by the Madison County Circuit Clerk's office are anything but typical.

Preserved volumes nicknamed "The Slave Books" shed light on a chapter in Illinois and American history that is often lost in the Land of Lincoln and the events of the Civil War.

Two volumes of Madison County history that were sent to the State Archives in Springfield in 2000 for preservation, record the emancipation of African Americans from slavery as well as the free born status of others from as far away as New York.

Chief Deputy Circuit Clerk Judy Nelson said that while it took about six years to get the volumes preserved, it was more than worth the wait as the documents are among the most unique that the clerk's office houses.

Although Illinois was a free state, prior to the end of the Civil War slavery was legal in slave states that remained in the Union, such as neighboring Missouri. The Emancipation Proclamation did not free slaves in those states.

The Dred Scott case of 1847 effectively negated the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that regulated slavery in the free states and allowed slave owners to bring slaves into free states without those slaves gaining freedom.

According to Nelson, the preserved books contain records from 1830 to 1860. Although there was originally a third volume, it has been lost, or could have been stolen, she said.

At a glance, wills recorded in the books in fading script show one avenue by which African Americans gained their freedom in the years leading up to the Civil War.

One such will is that of William Harmond of Claiborne County, Miss. Harmond died in 1838. In his will, he asks his executor to bring a slave named only as "Maria," along with others to "Ohio of some other free state, and have them made free so that they might enjoy all the rights and privileges of their colour [sic]."

Harmond's executor, named William Datson, followed Harmond's orders, registering the will in Madison County. The book does not record what became of "Maria."

While the wills emancipating African Americans are examples of content in the two volumes, enslaved African Americans are not the only people who make an appearance in the books.

The books contain records of apparently free-born African Americans as well, recording simply that they were indeed free. One example is of a sailor from New York City who had a "yellow complexion," and registered his free status with Madison County under the American Seaman's act.

The records are so detailed that one woman's five freckles are recorded.

When the books were sent off for preservation at the behest of Karl Moore, of the state archives, they were still in bound form, Nelson said. The preservation process meant that pages are no longer bound but the paper has been deacidified and each sheet preserved in a clear cover.

To prevent any future theft or loss, the "Negro Book," and "Free Book," as they are officially titled, are housed in Circuit Clerk Matt Melucci's office.

Although there are no plans at present to make the pages available online for research, anyone interested in viewing the books can inquire about them at the Records Center in the basement of the Madison County Courthouse in Edwardsville.