

## *“Upon God Knows What Ground”: African American Slavery in Western Pennsylvania<sup>1</sup>*

Between 1790 and 1820 western Pennsylvania changed from a struggling backcountry to a burgeoning industrial power at the epicenter of trade and commerce—one in which the “invisible hands” of African American laborers were the principal driving force.<sup>2</sup> The process by which they negotiated the complex, always ambiguous, legal terrain between slavery and freedom is readily visible in recently unearthed slave manuscripts from the Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds Office.<sup>3</sup> Aged, brittle, yet as vivid as the day they were initially penned, these documents are now in the hands of Samuel Black, curator of African American collections at the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh.<sup>4</sup> Only a cursory glance at the fifty-seven documents in the archives is necessary to verify their authenticity. Changes in penmanship reflect the turnover of political officials in office. Information on presiding judges was also recorded and tells us more about early political history in the region.<sup>5</sup> Signatures and “marks” on these documents make visible gradations in literacy among slaves and slaveowners. Much can be learned from the manuscripts; an attempt is made here to suggest some potential entry points.

The history of US slavery and its decline encompasses a diverse range of experiences. Accurately tracing the historical trajectory of slavery and

<sup>1</sup> The final words of Judge William Gazzam’s ruling on behalf of James Cooper, who was accused of being a runaway slave and “confined in the Common Jail of Allegheny County” in 1803. The phrase reads, “I certify that John Johnston and Arch’d Sinclair, offered to bring forward four or five Others to prove that the said Cooper committed (upon God knows what ground) by Justice Wilkins is a free man.” Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Recorder of Deeds, Manumission and Indenture Records, 1782–1857, MSS #0949, Library and Archives Division, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher M. Osborne, “Invisible Hands: Slaves, Bound Laborers, and the Development of Western Pennsylvania, 1780–1820,” *Pennsylvania History* 72 (2005): 75–99.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Kalson, “History Center Gets Documents Tracing Slaves’ Legal Status,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Nov. 14, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike most primary texts that can only be deciphered by expert historians, the slavery records were recorded by perhaps the most able scribes in the region. Parchment and ink used by the office were of the highest quality. The script is clear and easily readable, making them more accessible to the everyday historians seeking to know more about Pennsylvania history.

<sup>5</sup> The succession of slaveowning judges—William Gazzam and John Wilkins—reflect the evolution of a social order in which one’s race, economic role, and status in society were absolutely congruent.

African American life in western Pennsylvania, however, has proved difficult for scholars. Early historians, influenced by prevailing social attitudes on slavery and race, stressed the institution's "mildness" and low economic importance in this region. Furthermore, scholarship on African American history in western Pennsylvania was impeded by a "decided paucity of . . . statistics" and nationalistic interpretations of society as entirely free and white. Recent studies tend to focus on Philadelphia from the colonial era until 1780 and ignore temporal and geographic context.<sup>6</sup>

In 1780, the revolutionary government of Pennsylvania, spurred by reminders that slavery was "disgraceful to any people, and more especially to those who have been contending in the great cause of liberty themselves," legislated gradual emancipation.<sup>7</sup> The experiences of African Americans in Pennsylvania from this moment forward hinged on the interplay of social and economic forces over which they had very little control. Some slaveowners yielded to the logic of the Revolution and freed their slaves or allowed them to purchase their liberty. Jacob More and Caleb Mills were emancipated in 1804, and in 1806 Jack Walls was "manumitted—and set free at Twenty-six years of age" by Presley Nevill of Pittsburgh. Peter Cosco, on the other hand, purchased his freedom from John McKee in 1795 "for the consideration of the sum of one hundred pounds."<sup>8</sup> Other slaveowners, following gradualist laws, required slaves to agree to long-term indentureships, thereby reviving the older system of subordination and providing masters a profitable exit from slaveownership.<sup>9</sup> Mary Smith, "a black Girl aged thirteen years," for example, was set free by "Horatio Berry of Baltimore . . . for the sum of

<sup>6</sup> Edward R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery, Servitude, Freedom, 1639–1861* (Washington, DC, 1911); Edwin N. Schenkel, "The Negro in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 1789–1813" (unpublished manuscript, 1931), Library and Archives Division, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania; Edward M. Burns, "Slavery in Western Pennsylvania," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 8 (1925): 202–14; Gary B. Nash, "Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 30 (1973): 223–56; Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> The Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 declared that persons enslaved as of March 1, 1780, would remain so for life, so long as their masters registered them in their county of residence. The children of enslaved women born thereafter were subject to *partus sequitur ventrum*, making them the property of their mother's master until the age of twenty-eight. See James T. Flanders and Henry Mitchell, eds., *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801* (Harrisburg, PA, 1896–1911), 10:63–67.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted all citations are from Allegheny County, Pennsylvania Recorder of Deeds, Manumission and Indenture Records, 1792–1857, MSS 0949.

<sup>9</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

Five hundred dollars being paid by George Poe Jr. of the Borough of Pittsburgh,” after which the young woman “b[ou]nd and put herself servant to the said George.”

John McKee and Presley Nevill were engaged in a variety of commercial and industrial enterprises driving the maturation of western Pennsylvania. Slaves worked at a wide range of jobs, and at least some had special skills. Beyond its inherent value, their labor was important to economic development; enslaved persons engaged in substance production, granting their owners time and security to branch out financially.<sup>10</sup> As the institution dwindled, freedmen and freemen joined ranks and laid the foundations for Pittsburgh’s first African American communities.<sup>11</sup> Between 1790 and 1820, the slave population dropped to only a handful, while the free black community increased 300 percent and encompassed men such as Henry Holt.<sup>12</sup> In 1807, Holt was described as “full faced . . . his complexion Black, considering his Mother was in part White.” Furthermore, he was “well educated, reads & writes well, did understand figures and plays well on the Violin, either by note or otherwise,” and he worked as a waiter—one of the few occupations available for free blacks. Perhaps as a middle-aged man he witnessed the emergence of Martin Delaney, Lewis Woodson, and John Vashon. Their generation marked the arrival of a new class of seminal ideological leaders of the black struggle.<sup>13</sup>

The slave manuscripts at the Heinz History Center provide a unique opportunity to trace African Americans’ trajectory from slavery into American politics. They also document proceedings in Missouri, Louisiana, and Virginia. Collectively, these manuscripts complicate our understanding of law and slavery in America, prompting a reevaluation of the place of slavery and capitalism not only in western Pennsylvania, but more broadly in a democratic society.<sup>14</sup>

*Edinboro University of Pennsylvania*

Y’HOSHUA R. MURRAY

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, “Invisible Hands.”

<sup>11</sup> Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, NY, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Clarence R. Turner, “Black Pittsburgh: A Social History, 1790–1840” (unpublished manuscript, 1974), Library and Archives Division, Senator John Heinz History Center.

<sup>13</sup> Tunde Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robinson Delany* (Jackson, MS, 2003); Laurence A. Glasco, ed., *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Seth Rockman, “The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,” in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives and New Directions*, ed. Cathy D. Matson (University Park, PA, 2006), 335–61.