

Slave and Soldier

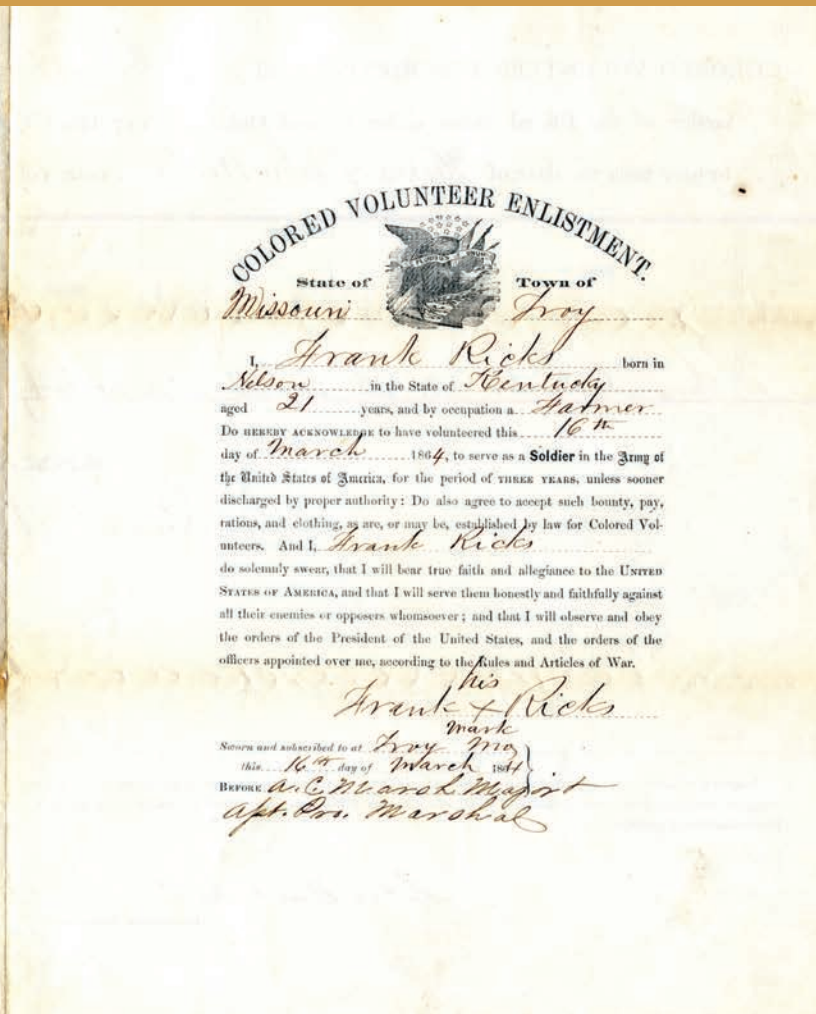
A Glimpse at the Life of Frank Ricks

BY WILLIAM GLANKLER

The lack of sources documenting black lives—slave and free—is a persistent source of frustration for African American genealogists and historians, especially for the period prior to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The simple fact is that slaves themselves did not leave written records of their experiences and, although there were some free blacks in Missouri prior to the Civil War, most notably in St. Louis, the overwhelming majority of African Americans in Antebellum Missouri were slaves. After the Civil War, when African Americans began to take advantage of their citizenship, documentary evidence of vital statistics and other manuscript evidence accumulated. Most Antebellum documentary evidence relates only to the small communities of free blacks, ignoring slaves. Moreover, most of the sources that do exist on slavery are from white authors and, therefore, tell us very little about the slave experience.¹ On the other hand, public records,

especially probate and other court records, although recorded by white officials, do provide a relatively unbiased entry point for studying the slave experience in Missouri. Frank Ricks' experience is but one example.²

Probate estate files contain information about the administration of personal and real property belonging to recently deceased persons as well as the financial administration of the deceased's estate. The inventory and appraisal of property, settlement reports, documents regarding partition of property, accounts and receipts for slave hire contracts, and other court documents contain a great deal of information about slave property. They often record the ages of slaves and document transfer of ownership, but they seldom provide the level of information that three probate files in Lincoln County provided for Frank Ricks. The discovery began with the unearthing of the enlistment paper pictured here, a remarkable find since there



is no obvious reason why this document would have been filed with the estate of his former owner. This document prompted a search through the probate files of Ricks' former owners that resulted in a compelling outline of Ricks' life, from his birth in Nelson County, Kentucky, to his death as a private in the U.S. Colored Troops.³

Frank Ricks was born December 30, 1841, in Nelson County, Kentucky, and was the slave of John Ricks. Sometime in the late 1840s, John Ricks moved his family to Lincoln County, Missouri, bringing with him at least five slaves: Albert or Alberto, Eliza, Harrison, Franklin or Francis, and Celia or Sealy.⁴ John Ricks died in 1853 leaving these slaves to his sons, John M. and Thomas Ricks, who were also tasked as guardians for his daughter Jane, of unsound mind. John M. Ricks died very soon after his father, leaving Thomas the sole guardian of his enfeebled sister, thus controlling her slaves (and the income they generated). Almost immediately after John M. Ricks died, executors of his estate disputed Jane's actual ownership of three of the slaves, which prompted the collection of several documents. One of them is a deed dated a deed from Kentucky dated 1828, by which the elder John Ricks vested in Jane a life estate in Frank and the other slaves, to be managed by her guardian (now Thomas), thus ensuring that the slaves would remain with Thomas Ricks for Jane's benefit.

In order to fulfill his guardianship duties, Thomas hired out the slaves with the exception of Eliza, who cared for Jane. It was common practice for administrators to hire out the estate's slaves in order to raise income for the estate. The period of hire was most often one year, beginning January 1 and ending December 24. Contracts for slave hire found in court case files verify this and often specify that the slaves were to be excused from work between Christmas and New Year's, which was common practice throughout Missouri. Moreover, the death of the master quite often forced the administrator to sell some or all of the estate's slaves.⁵

Administrators recorded this information in their annual settlement reports. If the estate hired out numerous slaves, the administrator often created separate documents that recorded information for the hire of each individual slave, which included the slave's name, the amount received, and to whom the slave was hired.

Documents such as these filed by Jane's guardians—first Thomas Ricks and then William Young—detail to whom Frank was hired out and at what rate for the years 1855-1863. During those years, Frank worked for C.W. Ricks, Thomas O. Ricks, N. Fielder, John O. Ricks, Thomas Rhodus, J.M. Guthrie, James Shannon, and Isaac Whiteside, earning \$1,153 for Jane's upkeep, an average of \$128 per year. After Jane Ricks died in January 1864, William Young administered her estate, and he continued hiring out the slaves for the year 1864. Frank was hired out that year to William C. Price, but only earned \$31.25. In comparison, Harrison fetched \$137.50, which suggests Frank was only hired out for two to three months, a time period that coincides with Frank's enlistment with the Colored Volunteers on March 16, 1864.⁶

The enlistment form provides some details about Frank Ricks. He was recruit number 42 in Troy, Missouri, and enlisted for three years. The form verifies that he was born in Nelson County, Kentucky, and was the former slave of the heirs of John Ricks. The enlisting officer, Major A. C. Marsh, Assistant Provost Marshal, noted that Ricks was 21 years old, with black eyes and black complexion, and was 5 feet 9 inches tall. Marsh also noted that Ricks was a farmer by occupation and that he "presented himself." Ricks signed the enlistment form with his mark. According to military records, Ricks was a private in the 68th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Troops Company F under Captain Goodshul and was mustered out March 22, 1864, at Benton Barracks in St. Louis. He died October 12, 1864, while his regiment performed garrison duties in Memphis, Tennessee.⁷

Frank Ricks' enrollment papers. (Photo: Missouri State Archives)

COLORED VOLUNTEER DESCRIPTIVE LIST of Frank Ricks Colored Volunteers, enlisted in the service of the United States under General Order No. 135, Head Quarters Department of the Mo. St. Louis, November 14th, 1863. Claimed to have been the slave of Heirs of John Ricks a citizen of Lincoln County, State of Missouri.

Name.	Description.						Where Born.		Occupation.	Enlisted.			
	YEARS OF AGE.	EYES.	HAIR.	COMPLEXION.	FEET.	INCHES.	State.	County.		When.	Where.	By whom.	Period.
<u>Frank Ricks</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>Blk</u>	<u>Blk</u>	<u>Blk</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>Kentucky</u>	<u>Nelson</u>	<u>Farmer</u>	<u>March 1864</u>	<u>Troy Mo</u>	<u>A.C. Marsh</u>	<u>3 years</u>

REMARKS.

This Recruit Presented himself

I CERTIFY, on honor, that I have carefully examined the above named Colored Volunteer, agreeably to the General Regulations of the Army, and that, in my opinion, he is free from all bodily defects and mental infirmity that would, in any way, disqualify him from performing the duties of a soldier.

Sgt. A. Ward M. S.
Examining Surgeon.

I CERTIFY, on honor, that the above named Colored Volunteer was duly enlisted by me, and that the above is his correct Descriptive List. That I have minutely inspected him previous to his enlistment, and that he was entirely sober when enlisted; and that, in accepting him as duly qualified to perform the duties of an able-bodied soldier, I have strictly observed the Regulations which govern the recruiting service.

Station Troy Mo
Date March 16 1864

A.C. Marsh
Major
Provost Marshal and Recruiting Officer.
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Benton Barracks, opened just after the Civil War, started on land rented from John O'Fallon around present-day Fairgrounds Park in St. Louis. When Jefferson Barracks (in south St. Louis) became a hospital during the war, Benton Barracks became a troop cantonment and camp for refugee slaves. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collections)

The mystery remains as to why Ricks' enlistment form was filed in his former owner's estate file. The federal government passed legislation in February 1864 regarding the recruitment of slaves into the military, as well as compensation for their owners. The legislation required all able-bodied black men between the ages of twenty and 45 to enroll in the U.S. Army. Upon enrollment, the master was to receive a certificate indicating the slave's freedom, as well as \$100 compensation, if the master was loyal to the Union.⁸ This suggests that the document was proof of enlistment held by Ricks' former owner as a means of receiving his monetary compensation. Because Jane Ricks' estate file was still active, any income for the estate, including compensation for slaves belonging to the estate, would have been filed with the estate papers and recorded in the settlement reports filed by the administrator. Yet, there is no documentation in the files that Young ever requested or received any compensation from the government. The fact that the enlistment form was not filed by the Lincoln County Probate Court until May 14, 1866, suggests the possibility that the administrator hoped to file his claim at a later date. It is also possible that Young failed to prove his loyalty to the Union, thus making him ineligible for the federal compensation.⁹

Furthermore, nothing is known regarding the circumstances under which Frank enrolled in the army. Although the federal legislation functioned essentially as a draft, it is unknown if Frank willingly enlisted, was forced to enlist by Union officers "recruiting slaves," or was voluntarily delivered to the army by his owner or master. A small receipt in Jane Ricks' estate file shows that William Young purchased a new pair of shoes for Frank four days after he enlisted, which indicates he may have supported or even encouraged the former slave's desire to serve in the military. What role, if any, did William Price, the man to whom Frank was hired out at the time of his enlistment, play in all of this? Persons hiring slaves were the legal masters of their hired slaves and were accountable for the protection as well as the actions of the slaves they hired. The settlement report proves that Price paid for the short period of time he hired Frank, so it is unlikely, though not impossible, that Frank enlisted against Price's will. Moreover, Young's purchase of the pair of shoes indicates that Frank did not run away from Price in order to enlist, as did occur with many slaves during the

latter years of the war.¹⁰ If Frank had run away, it is doubtful he would have had any contact with his owner after enlistment. These questions will likely remain unanswered because of the lack of written evidence of slaves' lives. Yet, the discovery of the above information demonstrates that such evidence does exist.

Frank Ricks' enlistment form and related documents do far more than provide some details about the life of one slave. Despite the questions left unanswered, these records provide a glimpse of the unsettled nature of slave property in Missouri at the end of the Civil War. Primarily, because most slaveholders in Missouri owned few slaves, slavery in Missouri, while not benign, was at least less brutal than in the Deep South. Owners at times allowed their slaves modest freedoms, such as allowing the use of a horse to visit family at another farm or not requiring them to work on Sundays. These small concessions only heightened the possibility that slaves would run away or that they might come in contact with abolitionists inciting insurrection or confiscation of slave property. In turn, this heightened the anxiety slaveholders felt for the security of their most valuable property. The Civil War in Missouri only exacerbated those fears. Slaves leaving their masters to become Union soldiers or taking advantage of the unsettled political and social situation to run away only added to the peril in which the very nature of Missouri slavery placed slave property.¹¹ Given this situation, perhaps William Young and William Price simply surrendered to the inevitability of the circumstances.

Court records processed by the Missouri Secretary of State Local Records Program document various other aspects of slavery, such as lawsuits against railroad companies for illegally transporting slaves, slaves running away prior to being sold at estate sales, the appearance of slaves in court, the intersection of black and white cultures that occurred during the hiring of and trading with slaves, criminal indictment of slaves, and many other facets of the institution that reveal the intricate and often tenuous nature of slavery in Missouri.¹² Frank Ricks' story demonstrates the value of these court records in piecing together the lives of black Missourians—slave and free—and points us toward new questions and supplementary resources that will continue to enhance our understanding of Missouri's past.

¹ Much has been learned from autobiographies written by former slaves and from the narratives of former slaves collected as part of the Federal Writers Project during the 1930s and 1940s. Although they are invaluable sources, they can be tainted by publisher bias, the author's agenda, and simply the vagaries of memory. Hence, the authenticity of the information contained in those sources can be legitimately questioned and must be critically used in conjunction with other sources. The Missouri slave narratives can be found online at <http://www.umsl.edu/~munstr/focus/good/slaves/moslave.htm>.

The secondary literature on American slavery is massive, yet the literature specifically on slavery in Missouri is limited, but growing. Many still point to Harrison Trexler's *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1914) as a definitive source and much of the more recent literature references Trexler heavily. Although Trexler's work largely perpetuates the romanticized version of slavery and its supposedly benign nature in Missouri that was popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, it does represent a great deal of research and provides very important groundwork for the study of slavery in Missouri. More recent dissertations, theses, books and articles that begin to dispel some of the myths regarding the nature of Missouri slavery include Donnie D. Bellamy, "Slavery, Emancipation, and Racism in Missouri, 1850-1865" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1971); Terrell Dempsey, *Searching for Jim: Slavery in Sam Clemens' World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003); George R. Lee, *Slavery North of St. Louis* (Lewis County Historical Society, Missouri, 1999); Robert W. Duffner, "Slavery in Missouri River Counties, 1820-1865" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1974); R. Douglas Hurt, *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri's Little Dixie* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992); Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Harriet C. Frazier, *Slavery and Crime in Missouri, 1773-1865* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2001). Arvarh Strickland, "The University of Missouri—Columbia History Department: Training Scholars in the Black Experience," *Missouri Historical Review* 95 (July 2001), 413-430, is a fine review of University of Missouri theses and dissertations written on slavery and the African American experience. For free blacks in Missouri, see Donnie D. Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri, 1820-1860," *Missouri Historical Review* 67 (January 1973), 198-226. The reader should visit the *Missouri Historical Review's* website to find many more articles on Missouri's African American history (<http://shs.umsl.edu/publications/mhr/index.shtml>).

Case files of the St. Louis Circuit Court for the period 1866-1868 demonstrate that African Americans began to take advantage of their newly won citizenship by going to court for a variety of reasons and, thus, creating documentary evidence of their experiences. These records are housed and accessible at the Missouri State Archives-St. Louis.

² While uncommon, it is not unheard of to find depositions taken from slaves and free blacks during the antebellum period in Circuit Court case files in both civil and criminal suits. Slaves and free blacks were not allowed to testify against a white person, but their testimony was allowed in court in other circumstances. Such depositions are rich with details about slaves' lives and their relationships with other slaves, free blacks, and whites. A fine example of how court records can illuminate African American history is Georgena Duncan, "Manumission in the Arkansas River Valley: Three Case Histories," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 66 (Winter 2007), 422-443.

³ The files reviewed are John Ricks, estate file, October 1853; John M. Ricks, estate file, October 1853; Jane Ricks, guardianship file, November 1864; Jane Ricks, estate file, January 1864; Lincoln County, Missouri, Probate Court. Frank Ricks' enlistment form is filed in Jane Ricks' estate file.

⁴ Names of slaves were often recorded differently within the same file, and at times on the same document. This resulted from the prevalent use of nicknames for slaves, the lack of standardized name spelling and pronunciation, moderate literacy, and the fact that different persons recorded the names within the same file, persons who were not necessarily a part of the slaveholding family or were even acquainted with them.

⁵ Most estate files for slaveholding estates in Franklin and Lincoln counties in Missouri contain ample documentation of slaves being hired out to generate income for the estate. See also John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press), 17-21; James William McGettigan, Jr., "Slave Sales, Estate Divisions and the Slave Family in Boone County, Missouri, 1820-1865," (MA thesis, University

of Missouri, 1938). Such disruption on the estate also prompted slaves to run away. For runaway slaves in Missouri, see Harriet C. Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004).

⁶ See also *Descriptive Recruitment Lists of Volunteers for the United States Colored Troops for the State of Missouri, 1863-1865*, National Archives and Records Administration Microfilm Publication M1894, Roll 6 Frame 248. Frank is listed as the former slave of the heirs of John Ricks. Albert Ricks also appears on this list (Roll 6 Frame 296) as the former slave of Thomas Ricks and was likely the slave Albert that appeared in the Ricks' probate files. These were accessed online through the St. Louis County Public Library at <http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/jkh/usctmo/recruits-reece.htm>.

⁷ Missouri State Archives, Soldiers' Records: War of 1812-World War I, Record of Service Card, Civil War, 1861-1865, Box 69, microfilm reel s874, accessed online at <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/soldiers/details.asp?id=S262251&conflict=Civil%20War&txtName=ricks,%20frank&selConflict=Civil%20War&txtUnit=&rbBranch=all#>. The Missouri State Archives also has a guide to its African American history collection online at <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/africanamerican/guide/table.asp>. The MSA website also contains numerous digital collections and educational material useful for studying African American history. Ricks' military record card only indicates the date of death. His regiment's location and duty were found at The Civil War Archive, Union Regimental Histories, <http://www.civilwararchive.com/Unreght/uncolinf3.htm>.

⁸ 13 Stats. 11 (1864). The Secretary of War was to "appoint a commission in each of the slave States represented in Congress, charged to award to each loyal person to whom a colored volunteer may owe service a just compensation ... payable out of the fund derived from commutations." A second act governing slave-owner compensation was passed in July 1866, 296 Stats. 321 (1866). Neither of these statutes indicates where the slave owner was to file his claim, whether at a county court, with the Provost Marshal, or elsewhere. Rudena Kramer Mallory, *Claims by Missourians for Enlisted Slaves* (Kansas City, R.K. Mallory, 1992) documents numerous compensation claims filed with the U.S. District Court in Kansas City. For a thorough treatment of the recruitment of slaves in Missouri, see John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Missouri during the Civil War," *Missouri Historical Review* 58 (April 1964), 326-337.

⁹ Neither William Young nor Frank Ricks appears in the slave compensation claims held by St. Louis County Public Library, <http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/jkh/slaveclaims/index-links.htm>. His regiment, the 68th, is not included in that collection. The Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Adjutant General's Office in Record Group 94 housed at the National Archives in Washington, DC, contains descriptions of registers that record slave compensation claims made in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and West Virginia. These records have not been microfilmed.

¹⁰ See, for example, the estate file of John Thompson, Lincoln County Probate Court, February 1864. Thompson owned two slaves, Henry and Stephen, but the inventory noted that Stephen was "now run off in the US service."

¹¹ For example, the estate file of Charles R. Morris, Lincoln County Probate Court, September 1865, contains an affidavit from C.T. Grimmett in which Grimmett says he hired a slave, Frank, from Morris in 1864 for \$150. Yet, "said Frank, taking the privileges allowed slaves about said time absconded from him on 23rd September," so he only paid Morris' estate for the time of service rendered by Frank.

¹² The Missouri Secretary of State Local Records Program has processed a very large quantity of court records throughout the state; records that have been microfilmed and are available at the Missouri State Archives in Jefferson City. Of particular interest for this region are the case file collections for the St. Louis Circuit Court (1804-1835, 1866-1868), St. Louis Probate Court (1804-1900), St. Charles Circuit Court (1805-1845), Lincoln County Circuit Court (1819-1840), Lincoln County Probate Court (1819-1860), and Franklin County Probate Court (1819-1845). The St. Louis court records are available at the Missouri State Archives-St. Louis. Several of the collections have been digitized and are available online through the Missouri Digital Heritage Initiative (<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mojudicial/>).