

ON BUYING ONE'S FREEDOM

SELECTIONS FROM
18th- & 19th-CENTURY
SLAVE NARRATIVES

Opportunities to attain freedom were few to none for most enslaved African Americans. Their options were flight, emancipation by their slaveholders (manumission), and "self-purchase." In 1839 almost half (42%) of the free blacks in Cincinnati, Ohio — across the Ohio River from slave territory — had bought their freedom.¹ Here we read the rare and arduous process described by John Berry Meachum, William Troy, Elizabeth Keckley, Moses Grandy, and Venture Smith.

John Berry Meachum

"to show what industry will do"

■ Dear Friends: — The author of this little book was born a slave in Goochland county, Virginia, May 3d, 1789. I belonged to a man by the name of Paul Meachum who moved to North Carolina and lived there nine years. He then moved to Hardin county, Kentucky, where I still remained a slave with him. He was a good man and I loved him, but could not feel myself satisfied, for he was very old and looked as if death was drawing near to him. So I proposed to him to hire my time, and he granted it. By working in a saltpetre cave I earned enough to purchase my freedom.

Still I was not satisfied, for I had left my father in old Virginia and he was a slave. It seemed to me, at times, though I was seven hundred miles from him, that I held conversation with him, for he was near my heart. However this did not stop here, for industry will do a great deal. In a short time I went to Virginia and bought my father and paid one hundred pounds for him, Virginia money. It was a joyful meeting when we met together, for we had been apart a long time. . . This was in the year 1811, when I was about twenty-one years old. My father and myself then earned enough to pay our expenses on the way, and putting our knapsacks on our backs walked seven hundred miles to Hardin county, Kentucky. Here the old man met his wife and all his children, who had been there several years. Oh there was joy!

In a short time, my mother and all her children received their liberty, of their good old master. My father and his family settled in Harrison county, Indiana.

I married a slave in Kentucky, whose master soon took her to St. Louis, in Missouri. I followed her, arriving there in 1815, with three dollars in my pocket. Being a carpenter and cooper I soon obtained business and purchased my wife and children. Since that period I have purchased about twenty slaves, most of whom paid back the greatest part of the money, and some paid all. They are all free at this time, and doing well, excepting one, who happened to be a drunkard, and no drunkard can do well. One of the twenty colored friends that I bought is worthy to be taken notice of, to show what industry will do. I paid for him one thousand dollars. He worked and paid back the thousand dollars. He has also bought a lot of ground for which he paid a thousand dollars. He married a slave and bought her and paid seven hundred

National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Some spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing modernized; all italics in original texts. Texts courtesy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library; full text of narratives in online collection Documenting the American South at docsouth.unc.edu/. Image on this page: manumission certificate of Sam Barnett, 3 March 1859 (detail); reproduced by permission of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (Ohio). Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Loren Schwening, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 66; cited in Colin A. Palmer, *Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America*, Vol. I: 1619-1863 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 2002), p. 187.

dollars for her. He has built a house that cost him six hundred dollars. He is a blacksmith and has worked for one man ever since he has been in St. Louis.

—John Berry Meachum, *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States*, 1846

William Troy

“He did not, however, purchase his freedom just as soon as he was able”

■ My father was the son of his master, and, during a portion of his master’s life, his domestic servant. His master died and left him still a slave, to be, with the rest of the property, divided among several lawful children. When the estate was divided, my father was fortunate enough to fall into the hands of one of the daughters, named Jane. Jane had taken a liking to my father. My father then commenced making boots and shoes and became a first-class workman. He afterwards hired himself out through a medium which the law required. He was then living upon a plantation called Hunter’s Hill, He afterwards moved to a village called Loretto, in the same county. There his business in the shoe trade increased rapidly, and he soon acquired sufficient means to purchase his freedom. He did not, however, purchase his freedom just as soon as he was able to do so; for, had he purchased his freedom, he would have been obliged to leave the State [Virginia] — the law explicitly saying that it is not permitted to a slave to purchase himself and remain.

My father, however, soon became tired of that sort of life and paid the value of himself through the hands of my mother. A bill of sale was passed into my mother’s hands, thus making him the property of my mother. She, however, soon gave him papers of manumission [emancipation].

—Rev. William Troy, *Hair-breadth Escapes from Slavery to Freedom*, 1861

Elizabeth Keckley

“Free! the bitter heart-struggle was over.”

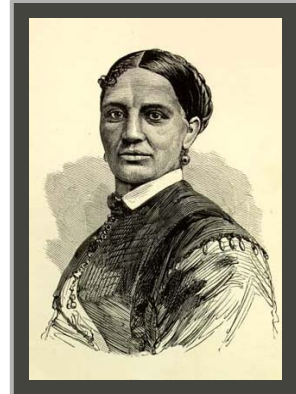
Enslaved in St. Louis, Missouri, Elizabeth Keckley sought to purchase freedom for herself and her son. Her slaveholder finally agreed to a sum of \$1200, but her plans to go to New York and raise money as a seamstress were thwarted when she was unable to acquire enough signed guarantees that she would return. Help arrived from her clients among the wealthy women of St. Louis, as Keckley relates here. Later in Washington, DC, she became a valued dressmaker and seamstress to Mary Lincoln and other women of the governing elite.

■ . . . Mrs. Le Bourgeois, one of my kind patrons, got out of it [carriage] and entered the door. She seemed to bring sunshine with her handsome cheery face. She came to where I was, and in her sweet way said:

“Lizzie, I hear that you are going to New York to beg for money to buy your freedom. I have been thinking over the matter, and told Ma it would be a shame to allow you to go North to *beg* for what we should *give* you. You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them. I have two hundred dollars put away for a present; am indebted to you one hundred dollars; mother owes you fifty dollars, and will add another fifty to it; and as I do not want the present, I will make the money a present to you. Don’t start for New York now until I see what I can do among your friends.”

Like a ray of sunshine she came, and like a ray of sunshine she went away. The flowers no longer were withered, drooping. Again they seemed to bud and grow in fragrance and beauty. Mrs. Le Bourgeois, God bless her dear good heart, was more than successful. The twelve hundred dollars were raised, and at last my son and myself were free. Free, free! what a glorious ring to the word. Free! the bitter heart-struggle was over. Free! the soul could go out to heaven and to God with no chains to clog its flight or pull it down. Free! the earth wore a brighter look, and the very stars seemed to sing with joy. Yes, free! free by the laws of man and the smile of God — and Heaven bless them who made me so!

—Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, 1868



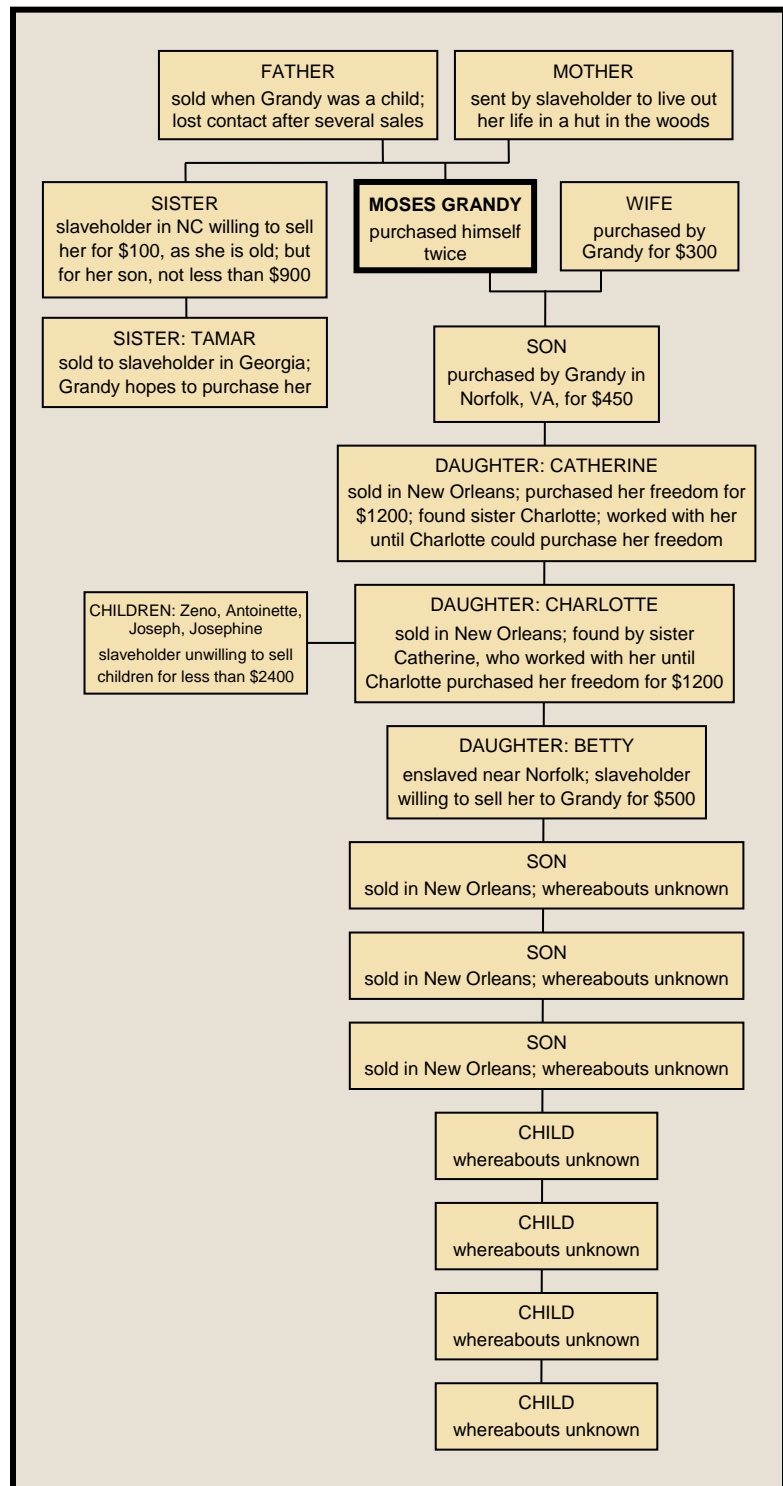
Moses Grandy

“she had paid the entire sum of 1200 dollars for her freedom”

Born enslaved in North Carolina, Moses Grandy purchased his freedom twice (the first slaveholder took his purchase money and then sold him). After he purchased his wife and moved her to Boston, he set out to find and free all of his children. At the end of this selection, he informs the reader of his mother's and two sisters' situations.

■ From Maurice's Creek I traveled to Philadelphia, and at that place had a letter written to my wife at Boston, thanking God that I was on free land again. On arriving at Boston, I borrowed 160 dollars of a friend, and going to New York I obtained the help of Mr. John Williams to send the 450 dollars to Norfolk: thus, at length, I bought my son's freedom. I met him at New York, and brought him on to Boston.

Six others of my children, three boys and three girls, were sold to New Orleans. Two of these daughters have bought their own freedom. The eldest of them, Catherine, was sold three times after she was taken away from Virginia: the first time was by auction. Her last master but one was a Frenchman: she worked in his sugarcane and cotton fields. Another Frenchman inquired for a girl on whom he could depend, to wait on his wife, who was in a consumption. Her master offered him my daughter; they went into the field to see her, and the bargain was struck. Her new master gave her up to his sick wife, on whom she waited till her death. As she had waited exceedingly well on his wife, her master offered her a chance of buying her freedom. She objected to his terms as too high; for he required her to pay him four dollars a week out of her earnings, and 1200 dollars for her freedom. He said he could get more for her, and told her she might get plenty of washing at a dollar a dozen; at last she agreed. She lived near the river side, and obtained plenty of work. So anxious was she to obtain her freedom, that she worked nearly all her time, days and nights, and Sundays. She found, however, she gained nothing by working on Sundays, and therefore left it



off. She paid her master punctually her weekly hire and also something towards her freedom, for which he gave her receipts. A good stewardess was wanted for a steam boat on the Mississippi; she was hired for the place at thirty dollars a month, which is the usual salary: she also had liberty to sell apples and oranges on board; and commonly, the passengers give from twenty-five cents to a dollar, to a stewardess who attends them Well. Her entire incoming, wages and all, amounted to about sixty dollars a-month. She remained at this employment till she had paid the entire sum of 1200 dollars for her freedom.

As soon as she obtained her free papers, she left the steamboat, thinking she could find her sister Charlotte. Her two first trials were unsuccessful: but on the third attempt she found her at work in the canefield. She showed her sister's master her own free papers, and told him how she had bought herself: he said, that if her sister would pay him as much as she paid her master, she might go too. They agreed, and he gave her a pass. The two sisters went on board a steamboat, and worked together for the wages of one, till they had saved the entire 1200 dollars for the freedom of the second sister. The husband of Charlotte was dead: her children were left behind in the cotton and canefields; their master refuses to take less than 2400 dollars for them: their names and ages are as follows: Zeno, about fifteen; Antoinette, about thirteen; Joseph, about eleven; and Josephine about ten years old.

Of my other children, I only know that one, a girl named Betsy, is a little way from Norfolk in Virginia. Her master, Mr. William Dixon, is willing to sell her for 500 dollars.

I do not know where any of my other four children are, nor whether they be dead or alive. It will be very difficult to find them out; for the names of slaves are commonly changed with every change of master: they usually bear the name of the master to whom they belong at the time. They have no family name of their own by which they can be traced. . . .

I have yet said nothing of my father. He was often sold through the failure of his successive owners. When I was a little boy, he was sold away from us to a distance: he was then so far off, that he could not come to see us oftener than once a year. After that, he was sold to go still further away, and then he could not come at all. I do not know what has become of him.

When my mother became old, she was sent to live in a little lonely log-hut in the woods. Aged and worn out slaves, whether men or women, are commonly so treated. No care is taken of them, except, perhaps, that a little ground is cleared about the hut, on which the old slave, if able, may raise a little corn. As far as the owner is concerned, they live or die as it happens; it is just the same thing as turning out an old horse. . . .

My eldest sister is in Elizabeth City. She has five children, who, of course, are slaves. Her master is willing to sell her for 100 dollars: she is growing old. One of her children, a young man, cannot be bought under 900 dollars.

My sister Tamar, who belonged to the same master with myself, had children very fast. Her husband had hard owners, and lived at a distance. . . . After a time, Long sold her to go to Georgia: she was very in at the time, and was taken away in a cart. I hear from her sometimes, and am very anxious to purchase her freedom, if ever I should be able. Two of her children are now in North Carolina, and are longing to obtain their freedom.

I know nothing of the others, nor am I likely ever to hear of them again.

—Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, 1843

Venture Smith

“I . . . paid an enormous sum for my freedom”

Born in west Africa, Venture Smith was enslaved as a child and brought to Barbados in the Caribbean and later to Rhode Island and Connecticut in New England. Resolutely determined to become free, he purchased his own freedom by 1765, and, by 1775, he earned and saved enough money to purchase his entire family — his wife, son, and two daughters.

■ . . . This was the third time of my being sold, and I was then thirty-one years old. As I never had an opportunity of redeeming myself whilst I was owned by Miner, though he promised to give me a chance, I was then very ambitious of obtaining it. I asked my master one time if he would consent to have me

purchase my freedom. He replied that he would. I was then very happy, knowing that I was at that time able to pay part of the purchase money, by means of the money which I some time since buried. This I took out of the earth and tendered to my master, having previously engaged a free negro man to take his security for it, as I was the property of my master, and therefore could not safely take his obligation myself. What was wanting in redeeming myself, my master agreed to wait on me for, until I could procure it for him. . . I again solicited my master for a further chance of completing it. The chance for which I solicited him was that of going out to work the ensuing winter. He agreed to this on condition that I would give him one quarter of my earnings. On these terms I worked the following winter, and earned four pounds sixteen shillings, one quarter of which went to my master for the privilege, and the rest was paid him on my own account. This added to the other payments made up forty four pounds, eight shillings, which I had paid on my own account. I was then about thirty five years old.

The next summer I again desired he would give me a chance of going out to work. But he refused and answered that he must have my labor this summer, as he did not have it the past winter. I replied that I considered it as hard that I could not have a chance to work out when the season became advantageous, and that I must only be permitted to hire myself out in the poorest season of the year. He asked me after this what I would give him for the privilege per month. I replied that I would leave it wholly with his own generosity to determine what I should return him a month. Well then, said he, if so two pounds a month. I answered him that if that was the least he would take I would be contented.

Accordingly I hired myself out at Fisher's Island, and earned twenty pounds; thirteen pounds six shillings of which my master drew for the privilege, and the remainder I paid him for my freedom. This made fifty-one pounds two shillings which I paid him. In October following I went and wrought six months at Long Island. In that six month's time I cut and corded four hundred cords of wood, besides threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, and received of my wages down only twenty pounds, which left remaining a larger sum. Whilst I was out that time, I took up on my wages only one pair of shoes. At night I lay on the hearth, with one coverlet over and another under me. I returned to my master and gave him what I received of my six months labor. This left only thirteen pounds eighteen shillings to make up the full sum for my redemption.

My master liberated me, saying that I might pay what was behind if I could ever make it convenient, otherwise it would be well. The amount of the money which I had paid my master towards redeeming my time, was seventy-one pounds two shillings. The reason of my master for asking such an unreasonable price, was he said, to secure himself in case I should ever come to want. Being thirty-six years old, I left Col. Smith once for all. I had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom.

—Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself*, 1798

