

Freedom Through Bondage

By [ADAM ARENSON](#)

In the spring of 1861, two men appeared before the St. Louis County clerk to sign a document. One of the men, as described in detail in the document's margins, was a "barber and boathand," 37 years old and 5 feet 7-and-a-half inches tall. Other such documents described signees as "light," "dark," "copper," "high yellow," "bright" — and even though it did not say so here, everyone knew the man who signed his name in a wide script, Moses Dickson, was a free African American.

Below his signature was that of the other man, John How. Though the document left off How's profession, age and height, everyone in the courthouse would have known him — he was, after all, the former mayor of St. Louis. As the battles between the Union and Confederacy began, How and Dickson signed a free negro bond, one of the most peculiar public documents of the war era.

"Know all Men by these Presents," begins the legal boilerplate of the St. Louis free negro bond affidavits, "that we, Moses Dickson as principal, and John How as security, are firmly bound" for the "full sum of five hundred dollars." The second paragraph of the short form lays out Dickson's rights and responsibilities. The bond gave Dickson "license to reside in the state of Missouri, during good behavior" — in other words, conditional freedom, despite having never been a slave. Should Dickson run into trouble, he and How would have to pay \$500 (easily a year's salary) to the county clerks.

There were 1,500 such bonds signed in St. Louis alone. Thousands more existed in cities across the South — and, in some cases, the North. Free blacks often faced overwhelming discrimination and local segregation laws, but until a few years before the war, they were understood to have basic, if often highly circumscribed, rights. As the war approached, though, those rights were increasingly considered null and void, particularly in the South and border states. In response, though not citizenship papers, free negro bonds nevertheless provided security. If they functioned correctly, they could save a free African American from kidnapping or imprisonment.

The richest free blacks could put up the money for these bonds themselves. But most required the signature of white allies, whether former masters, childhood playmates, abolitionist activists or bond men, who gauged the risk and signed the form for a fee. In St. Louis, the list of white guarantors is a fascinating cross-section of the public: William Greenleaf Eliot, the antislavery Unitarian minister who founded Washington University, but also long-established slaveholding families, including the Chouteaus, the Carrs, the Lucases and the Campbells; the African-American minister and antislavery activist John Berry Meachum and the slave trader Bernard Lynch. These documents testify to the personal white-black relationships that structured the boundaries of slavery and freedom for African Americans in St. Louis.

Know all Men by these Presents,

That we, Moses Dickson as principal,
and John New as security,
are hold and firmly bound unto the State of Missouri, in the just and
full sum of Five hundred Dollars, lawful money of the
United States, for the payment of which we bind ourselves, our heirs,
executors and administrators, firmly by these presents, sealed with
our seals, and dated this 19 day of
April A. D. 1861.

The condition of the above Obligation is such, that whereas, the said
Dickson has applied to the Board of
County Commissioners of St. Louis County for, and obtained a
license to reside in the State of Missouri, during good behavior:
Now, if the said applicant shall be of good character and behavior
during residence in the State of Missouri, then this
obligation to be void, else of full force and virtue.

Moses Dickson § L. S. §
John New § L. S. §
John New § L. S. §
John New § L. S. §
John New § L. S. §

5, 7-12-57 mutilated. 2nd finger
off left hand.

PH 2

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Though free negro bonds had been required of all free African Americans in St. Louis since 1843, the law had mostly been honored in the breach; only when the regulation was first passed, in 1843, and when the United States went to war, in 1846-1848, did the filing of these bonds spike. Then, in 1857, the Supreme Court issued the Dred Scott decision, named after the plaintiff, a former St. Louis slave, whose wife and daughters still lived in the city and likely knew Dickson. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney famously declared

that all blacks, free or slave, had always been “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

Nevertheless, demand for the bonds returned only with the onset of war. Given the social, political and military [tumult of 1861 Missouri](#), it’s no surprise that more African Americans than ever in St. Louis sought to guarantee their freedom. The swarm of African Americans overwhelmed routine business at the county court, annoying commissioner Peregrine Tippet. “Free negroes and mulattoes had crowded the room for several days,” he wrote at the start of June 1861, saying they erroneously believed the licenses were “certificates of citizenship.” Tippet felt the process should be halted and, citing the Dred Scott decision as his authority, that all emancipations, licenses and free negro bonds issued since 1840 be voided and all African Americans be subject to slavery if they did not agree to be colonized overseas. Yet Tippet was

These peaks of interest demonstrate the political knowledge of African Americans before the Civil War – not just what members of the black elite, like Dickson, knew, but what rumors could reach slaves no matter how isolated (Dickson had other ideas for achieving freedom; before the war, he claimed to have organized the Knights of Liberty, a secret group planning to bring a mass revolt to the South, to end slavery).

On November 3, 1862, Mary E. Turner, a 40-year-old “bright”-skinned mulatto housekeeper, filed what became the last free negro bond in St. Louis, with her husband John guaranteeing the bond alongside a white acquaintance, J.W. Owings. Legally, there was no reason for the bond system to cease. Though the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect a few months later, Missouri’s slaves were not free; Lincoln had only freed those slaves held in enemy territory, in an effort to maintain support among loyal slaveholders in Union-controlled territory. But by the time Missouri passed a general emancipation law in January 1865, just months ahead of the 13th Amendment, slavery in Missouri was over: through their own actions, Missouri’s slaves had freed themselves.

In 1861, though, unsure of what was to follow, free African Americans in St. Louis registered for free negro bonds by the dozens. And so, with John How’s help, Dickson guaranteed his own freedom, so he could work for that of his brethren.

Sources: A database of the freedom bonds and emancipation records from St. Louis, as compiled by the National Park Service and the Missouri History Museum, [is available here](#). See also: Loren Schweningen, ed., “From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas”; David W. Blight, “They Knew What Time It Was: African-Americans and the Coming of the Civil War,” in Gabor Borrit, ed., “Why the Civil War Came”; Steven Hahn, “A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration.” Other sources and additional materials on St. Louis during the Civil War can be found at [the author’s Web site](#).



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