

# **The Emancipation of Hannah Richards**

## **By Virginia Key**

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The discovery of an Emancipation Bond in the McMinn County Archives for James and Hannah Richards has sparked new interest in the story of William Henry Richards, who once held the office of Mayor of McMinn County. He was an African American man born to free parents in 1856.

William Henry was the grandson of Hannah Richards, a former slave of Gabriel Richards of McMinn County. On April 3, 1826, Gabriel Richards wrote his will, in which he expressed his wish to free his slaves, Hannah and James, if the state would allow it, upon his death. Gabriel died April 4, 1826. His will was proven June 5, 1826. Hannah and James were set free, according to Gabriel's wishes. Hannah's freedom would be in jeopardy as she struggled to support herself and her daughter cleaning houses and doing laundry. According to papers in the Library of Congress, the William Henry Richards Collection,

McMinn County court records show she allegedly violated a law regarding "fraternizing" with a slave, a young boy, who occasionally stayed with her in her dwelling. The boy's owner had not given him permission to be in her company. Hannah was arrested and put in jail. She was also fined and informed that she had to pay the fine or face re-enslavement. Hannah took her case to court, appealing all the way to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which sent her case back to McMinn County court. We have not found any documents that inform us how her case was decided, but she apparently kept her freedom, at least until 1855, when she was abducted and forced into bondage on a plantation in Alabama.

Hannah managed to get away and find her way back to McMinn County. She was listed on the 1850 U.S. Census as head of household, (Black), with Mary J., an 18-year-old female living with her. Mary was Hannah's daughter, William Henry's mother. By 1860, Hannah was recorded on the U.S. Census in McMinn County with Wilham H., mulatto, age four. Mary had died by the time William was four years old. Hannah took care of him, and supported them both by working in people's houses, taking him with her to work. In 1860 William was

kidnapped. Hannah enlisted help from her friends and neighbors, who managed to get him back home to her.

When Quaker schools were established in McMinn County, according to the William H. Richards papers, William attended until he was 17, then began teaching in the Quaker schools. With assistance from a teacher, Julia Nelson, by 1878 William was enrolled in Howard University Law School. His career after Law School is thoroughly documented. He had a stellar rise from his beginnings when his grandmother, Hannah, former slave, provided him a home and gave him the chance to succeed. He came back to Athens after working in the U.S. Treasury Department for 4 years to pay back the loan he had been advanced by his mentor to go to law school. Hannah was around 85 years old when William returned to Athens. He cared for her until she passed away in August of 1887.

While he resided in Athens William had a law practice and was active in politics. He was elected as a council member (alderman) in 1887, and was elected to serve as Interim Mayor of Athens for a year 1888-1889. William's story goes on, a life full of accomplishments and accolades, in McMinn County and other places. But it all began with Gabriel Richards' will that gave Hannah her freedom, and her determination to make a good life for herself and her loved ones.

*( McMinn County Historical Society, Athens, TENN)*