

Civil War Era Module

Slave Receipt

Slavery, legally sanctioned in the south, and for a long time in the north as well, was supported at every turn by legal structures. So, something that I like to use a lot in teaching, just to get students thinking about this, are—these are receipts, these are receipts. And, the one I'm holding right now is dated Norfolk, September 17, 1853. It's a printed receipt that's been filled out. It's something that, it's very similar in a way, to something that you might buy at an office supply store. If you went and needed a book of receipts because, you know, you had a business.

It's got a blank space that you can fill in the place and date. And then it says 18-five and blank.

So just like today in writing a check you might have—or a set of receipts—just to make things easier they might write two-zero-zero and then you can put in 2009, or 2008, or something like that. Just to make it just a little easier in filling out a receipt. It's got this, it's for—it's obviously a book of receipts that you can fill out all through the 1850s. Then it says, “Received of ‘blank,’ ‘blank’ dollars, being in full for the purchase of 'blank' Negro slave named 'blank.' The right and title of said slave ‘blank’ warrant and defend against the claims of all persons whatsoever, and likewise warrant 'blank' sound and healthy, as witness my hand and seal,” and then the title of this. And it's a very elegant 19th-century receipt. It's in a nice filigreed kind of handwriting, it's got lovely illustrations on the side that depict kind of the engines of commerce for the time. There's a steamboat and there's a clipper ship and there's a railroad.

And it says, “Murphy and Company, Printers, Baltimore.” Thinking about it, how many people are involved in this receipt? It's been printed by a printer in Baltimore, but it's been printed for probably a lot of people. But, this one in particular, it's noted it's sold by a bookseller in Richmond. This particular receipt is dated in Norfolk.

Now, if you were teaching students, using this for the classroom, one of the first things you might want to do is list all of the locations that are on this receipt and any of the other receipts, you know, so that students get a sense of the geography of the place. Like, where is Baltimore in relationship to Richmond? Where is Norfolk and why might this receipt be dated in Norfolk?