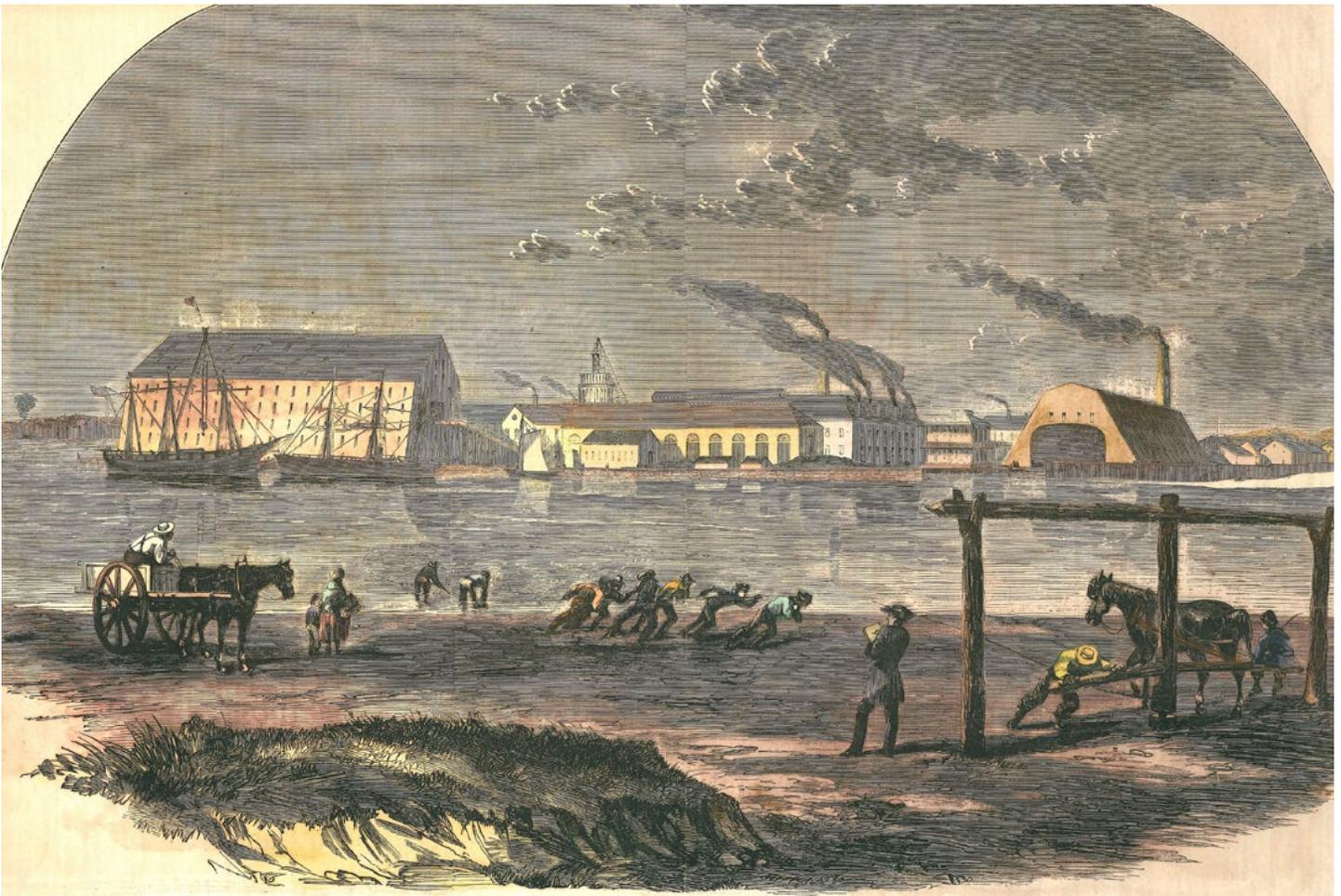




NAVAL HISTORY *and* HERITAGE COMMAND

The Experience of Michael Shiner, an African American at the Washington Navy Yard, 1813–1869: Student Packet



Hand-tinted woodcut depicting fishermen working in the Eastern Branch (present-day Anacostia River), April 1861. The shiphouses and shops of the Washington Navy Yard are visible in the background.

Source: U.S. Navy Art Collection, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.

Essential Question

- ⚙ How might we use Michael Shiner's diary to understand his values, aspirations, and accomplishments?

Student Packet:

The Experience of Michael Shiner, an African American at the Washington Navy Yard, 1813–1869

Context

Slavery in the United States and Washington, DC, before the Civil War

Until the 1860s, slavery was legal in much of the United States. The purpose of slavery was to amass profit for the enslavers and extract labor from the enslaved.

In the antebellum period, the decades before the Civil War, patterns of slavery changed. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced some 100,000 Native Americans westward, off their land, opening the fertile Mississippi delta to further cultivation by cotton farmers. These farmers established large and brutal plantations, which relied on the backbreaking work of enslaved people to turn a profit; as the demand for slaves increased, so too did the trade in enslaved people. That trade in large part centered on Washington, DC.

The nation's capital became a kind of emporium for slave traders and enslavers, even as the city accommodated more and more free African Americans. Free and enslaved African Americans had to contend with a set of laws, the Black Code, which aimed to reduce them to noncitizens and even nonpersons. The city's African-American communities responded by forming tight-knit networks of assistance and resistance. Some of these networks, such as the so-called Underground Railroad, managed to spirit enslaved people out of the South and all the way to Canada, perhaps the safest place in North America for a person of African descent. Most of the capital region's African Americans remained in and around Washington, however, and relatively few enslaved African Americans managed to free themselves before the Civil War.

The Civil War itself was the product of a conflict that developed in the 19th century over the institution of slavery: whether it should exist, whether it should extend to newly annexed parts of the United States, and whether there would need to be a war to settle these questions. Until 1860, enslavers and their pro-slavery allies dominated the federal legislature (Congress), the federal government, and the federal city itself.

Michael Shiner at the Washington Navy Yard

The Washington Navy Yard was one of the Navy's principal shipbuilding and weapons manufacturing sites. Located in the city of Washington and less than two miles from the U.S. Capitol, the Washington Navy Yard served as one of the area's largest employers and the point of entry for visiting dignitaries and even presidents, who liked to arrive by boat at a Navy Yard pier along the Anacostia River.

The day-to-day operations of the Yard, however, had little to do with dignitaries and everything to do with hard and dangerous labor. Bosses reserved some of the most dangerous tasks for the Yard's enslaved workers, hired out to the Navy by their enslavers (i.e., their "owners" or "masters") for a fixed term and price. Shiner's enslaver sold Shiner's labor to the Navy in this way from 1813 to the 1830s. In 1832, Shiner's enslaver died, and his will freed ("manumitted") Shiner according to an agreement the two had made. Shiner then became one of the Navy Yard's wageworkers.

Still, freedom in the District did not equate to safety. In 1833, Shiner's wife Phillis and their daughters were kidnapped from near the Navy Yard and trafficked to Alexandria, still a part of the District of Columbia (now in Virginia), where they were nearly sold onward by the District's most notorious slavers, Isaac Franklin and John Armfield. "I got my wife and children clear," Shiner writes, and back to the Navy Yard safe and sound, with the help of some powerful naval officers.

Shiner worked at the Yard long enough to witness the comings and goings of the U.S. Navy during the Civil War, the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the course of that conflict, and the end of slavery as an institution in the United States. He died in 1880.

Relevant Dates

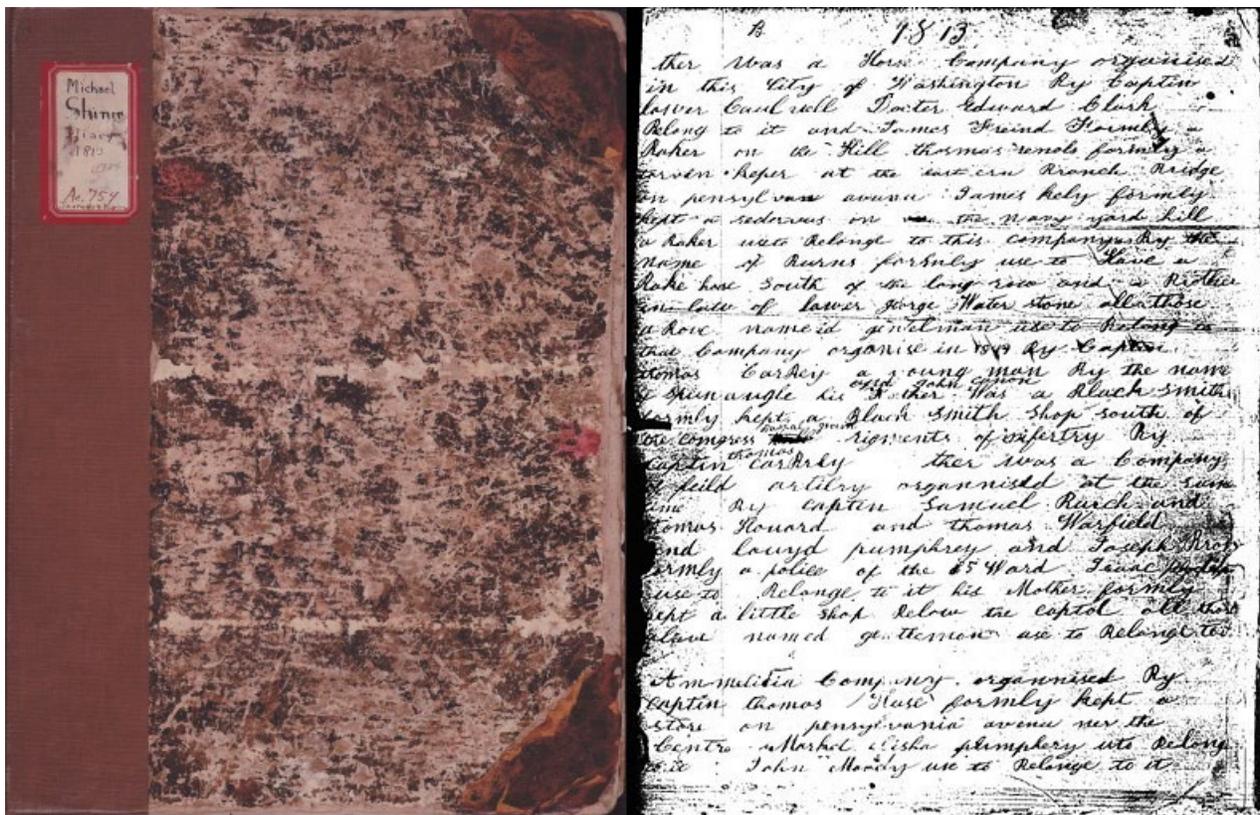
1835	Race riots in Washington, DC: White workers attack free and enslaved African Americans.
1861	The conflict over the institution of slavery erupts in war when the Southern states secede and attack a federal fort near Charleston, South Carolina.
1862–65	Slavery ends in the United States as Union (United States) forces prevail and African Americans achieve legal emancipation.

Source: Diary of Michael Shiner¹

The three selections that follow come from Michael Shiner's the diary. The selections have been edited for clarity and context.

About This Source

Who wrote this?	Michael Shiner, an enslaved man working for the U.S. Navy
What is it?	a diary
Where was it written?	Washington, DC, near or at the Washington Navy Yard, one of the U.S. Navy's shipbuilding yards
When was it written?	1813–69
Why was it written?	We do not know Shiner's reasons for keeping a diary.



The diary of Michael Shiner.

Source: Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

1. Source: The diary of Michael Shiner, available for download in the original script and also as a transcription by John G. Sharp at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/d/diary-of-michael-shiner.html>.

Selection 1. Nautical and Engineering Terms Used In the Diary Entries of Michael Shiner

Shipbuilding Terms²

beam

width of a ship at its widest point

draft

vertical distance from waterline to the bottom of the ship

foremast

the mast closest to the front of the ship

keel

a long piece of timber or metal at the very bottom of the ship

larboard

the right-hand side of the ship (if the viewer is on board and facing forward), synonymous with starboard

propeller

a revolving shaft with angled blades attached to it (how a steamship moves in the water)

starboard

the right-hand side of the ship (if the viewer is facing forward), synonymous with larboard

stock

the crossbar of an anchor

Artillery terms

cannonade

a ship's short-barreled cannon

shell

a hollow projectile filled with explosive material and fired from a gun

Rigging terms

rigging

ropes, lines, cords, lanyards, etc., serving various purposes on and above the higher structures of a ship

crosstree

a long, thin piece of wood attached to the mast and used for rigging the sails to the mast

deadeye

circular block of wood with holes for a rope

double blocks

a double pulley

lanyards

cord (rope) used to rig sails

mizzen

a type of sail

stopper

a rope or chain used to block the movement of another rope or chain

trestletrees

strong bars of wood used to support a crosstree

Mechanical engineering terms

hydraulic cylinder

tube through which fluid is forced under pressure to create hydraulic power

pile

pole driven into the ground and usually made of timber, steel, or concrete

steam cylinder

a particular part of a steam engine

trip hammer

a powered hammer of great size

2. Note: Definitions taken from Deborah W. Cutler and Thomas J. Cutler, *Dictionary of Naval Terms* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005); Tony Atkins and Marces Escudier, *A Dictionary of Mechanical Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

Selection 2. National- and World-Historical Events Recorded In the Diary Entries of Michael Shiner

<p>1810s</p>	<p>1814:Treaty of Ghent—<i>Beginning of the end of the War of 1812</i></p> <p>1815: Battle of New Orleans—<i>Late battle in the War of 1812</i></p> <p>1817: Inauguration of President James Monroe</p>
<p>1820s</p>	<p>1820: Missouri Compromise—<i>An agreement in Congress over the extension of slavery to newly annexed territories of the United States</i></p> <p>1829: Inauguration of President John Quincy Adams</p>
<p>1830s</p>	<p>1833: Inauguration of President Andrew Jackson for his second term</p> <p>1836–39: Creek Indian Wars—<i>Violent actions by the U.S. military to crush the resistance of Native Americans in the southeastern United States</i></p> <p>1837: Inauguration of President Martin Van Buren</p>
<p>1840s</p>	<p>1841: Inauguration of President William Henry Harrison</p> <p>1845: Annexation of Texas</p> <p>1845: Inauguration of President James K. Polk</p> <p>1846–48: Mexican-American War—<i>War of conquest against Mexico</i></p> <p>1848: Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—<i>The agreement ending the Mexican-American War</i></p> <p>1849: Inauguration of President Zachary Taylor</p>
<p>1850s</p>	<p>1853: Inauguration of President Franklin Pierce</p> <p>1856: Election of Nathan P. Banks as Speaker of the House</p> <p>1856: Presidential election of 1856</p> <p>1857: Inauguration of President James Buchanan</p> <p>1859: John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry—<i>Failed antislavery revolt in Virginia (now West Virginia)</i></p>
<p>1860s</p>	<p>1860: Secession of South Carolina from the United States</p> <p>1861: Inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln</p> <p>1861: Confederate attack on Fort Sumter—<i>Start of the Civil War</i></p> <p>1861: Pratt Street Massacre—<i>Confederate sympathizers attack volunteers and soldiers arriving in Baltimore for U.S. military duty; a riot ensues.</i></p> <p>1862: Emancipation of enslaved people in the District of Columbia</p> <p>1863: Emancipation Proclamation—<i>An executive order to free all enslaved people in parts of the United States still belonging to the Confederacy</i></p> <p>1864: Battle of Gettysburg—<i>Major Confederate defeat in Pennsylvania</i></p> <p>1864: Battle of Vicksburg—<i>Major Confederate defeat in Mississippi</i></p> <p>1865: Inauguration of President Lincoln for a second term</p> <p>1865: Fall of Richmond, Virginia—<i>capture by U.S. forces of the seat of government of the Confederacy</i></p> <p>1865: Surrender of the Confederacy and the end of the Civil War</p> <p>1865: Assassination of President Lincoln</p> <p>1869: Inauguration of President Ulysses S. Grant</p>

Selection 3. Michael Shiner's Use, for Emphasis, of His Own Name

Events of February 12–17, 1827

One cedar tree planted in the Washington Navy Yard and one apple tree, planted by Michael Shiner, in front of the boatswain house, and the boatswain said to me, "Those trees will not live," and my reply to the boatswain was, "Sir, those trees will be here when you and I are dead and gone."

Events of July 4, 1828

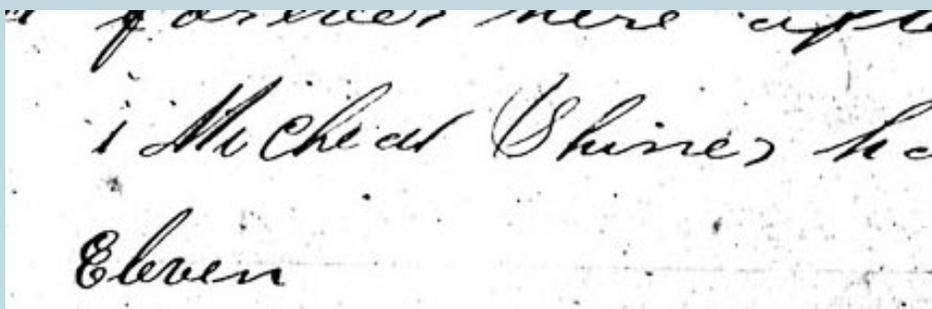
Commodore Tingey's gig was ordered to be ready to carry past Georgetown the honorable John Quincy Adams, president of the United States. The coxswain of the commodore's gig was John M. Green. The crew was Thomas Payne, Henry Over, John Williams, John Thompson, Basil Brown, and Michael Shiner. Colored men, except the coxswain, composed the crew.

Events of 1861

On the 1st day of June 1861, Justice Clark was sent to the Washington Navy Yard to administer the oath of allegiance for the mechanics and the laboring class of working men—without distinction of color—that they should stand by the Stars and Stripes and defend the Union. Captain Dahlgren was present. I believe that I, Michael Shiner, was at that time the first colored man to take the oath in Washington, DC, and that oath still remains in my heart. When I took that oath, I took it in the presence of God and without prejudice or enmity to any man, and I intend to sustain that oath with the assistance of the Almighty God until I die. For when a man takes an oath for a just cause, it is more than taking a drink of water or sitting down to his breakfast.

Events of 1869

The honorable Major General Grant has taken his seat on the 4th of March 1869. May the Lord be with him during his administration and forever hereafter. I, Michael Shiner, have seen eleven presidents take their seats, and some of those presidents, I have seen take their seats twice.



The image shows a close-up of a handwritten note in cursive ink on aged paper. The text is partially obscured by a light blue background. The visible words are "Eleven" and "Michael Shiner".

Selection from the diary of Michael Shiner, 1861.

Source: Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/d/diary-of-michael-shiner/1860-1865.html>.

Name _____ Date _____

Worksheet (Formative Assessment)

Directions: Write your answers in complete sentences.

A. Use **Selection 1** to make a list of what you think Shiner's skills might have been.

B. Why do you think the Navy contracted with Shiner's enslaver?

C. Use **Selections 2 and 3** to list the kinds of historical events that were important to Shiner.

D. In **Selection 3**, what are the possible reasons that Shiner refers to himself by first and last name? Explain your answers.

Extension Exercise

Read the following source and then use it, along with the selections from Michael Shiner’s diary, to list and explain the dangers facing Shiner as an enslaved African-American man. Each danger should have at least two sentences of explanation.

Next, assuming it is the year 1830 and that Shiner will remain in Washington, DC, for the rest of his life, explain the new dangers that Shiner will face should his enslaver choose to manumit (free) him. Again, each danger should have at least two sentences of explanation.

You should use outside knowledge from your textbook or other readings to answer these questions. You will need some of this outside information to interpret the laws in the source below. For example, to see some of the underlying dangers, you will want to know about the newer plantation economy of the Deep South (i.e., the cotton-growing region around the Mississippi Delta). You will also need to know the social-historical context of these laws: the racial and ethnic makeup of American cities like Washington, DC, in the antebellum period; the economic forces shaping Americans’ experiences of the first half of the 19th century; and the changing conditions under which African Americans in the District of Columbia and elsewhere were living.

Nevertheless, remember to keep focused on Shiner and his experience: What are the dangers that Shiner, an enslaved African-American man in the employ of the U.S. Navy, would face in slavery and freedom, given the legal racism inherent in the Black Code of the District of Columbia?

Source: The Black Code of the District of Columbia, 1848¹

About This Source

Who wrote this?	Lawmakers in Maryland and the District of Columbia
What is it?	a set of laws pertaining to people of African descent living in and around the District of Columbia before the Civil War
Where was it written?	Maryland and Washington, DC
When was it written?	1848 ²
Why was it written?	to regulate the interactions and relationships between white people and black people for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing white supremacy

Extension of the laws of Maryland over the District of Columbia

The laws of the State of Maryland, as they now exist, shall be and continue in force, in . . . the . . .]District (of Columbia), which was ceded by that State to the United States, and by them accepted, for the permanent seat of government of the United States. Laws of the United States, 1801, Feb. 27; Sect. 1.

Reward for taking up runaways

Every person, seizing or taking up runaways³, shall have and receive two hundred pounds of tobacco. Laws of Maryland, 1715: Ch. 44, Sect. 7.

1. Source: Snethen, Worthington G., ed. *The Black Code of the District of Columbia: In Force September 1, 1848*. New York: A. & F. Anti-Slavery Society, 1848.

2. The Black Code contained laws originating as far back as 1715. This particular edition of the Black Code was published in 1848 and contains all the relevant laws up to that year.

3. runaways: as in runaway slaves

Dealing with slaves without license from their masters—prohibited

No person shall trade, barter, commerce, or any way deal with any . . . slave belonging to any inhabitant of this province . . . without . . . license first had from such slave[’s] master . . . under penalty of two thousand pounds of tobacco. Laws of Maryland, 1715; Ch. 44, Sect. 11, 12, 13.

Who shall be slaves

All negroes and other slaves . . . , and all children now born or hereafter to be born of such negroes and slaves, shall be slaves during their natural lives. Laws of Maryland, 1715; Ch. 44, Sect. 22.

Baptism no title to freedom

No negro, by receiving the sacrament of baptism⁴, is thereby manumitted⁵ or set free, nor hath any right or title to freedom or manumission more than he or she had before. Laws of Maryland, 1715; Ch. 44, Sect. 23.

Manumitted slaves not entitled to the right of suffrage or of office

No slave manumitted agreeably to the laws of this state, shall be entitled to the privilege of voting at elections or of being elected or appointed to any office of profit or trust. Laws of Maryland, 1796; Ch. 67, Sect. 5.

Abduction of colored persons—how punished

If any person shall forcibly . . . transport⁶. . . any free negro⁷ or mulatto⁸, knowing such free negro or mulatto to be free, every such person shall forfeit and pay the sum of eight hundred dollars, for every negro or mulatto so transported. Laws of Maryland, 1796; Ch. 67, Sect. 15.

Penalty against importing free colored persons and selling them into slavery

If any person shall import or bring into this state any free negro or mulatto . . . and dispose of such free negro [or] mulatto as a slave⁹ . . . , every such person shall, for every such offence, forfeit and pay the sum of eight hundred dollars. Laws of Maryland, 1796, Ch. 67, Sect. 16.

Free persons of color living idle without any visible means of subsistence, and going at large—how punished

Upon the information, on oath or affirmation of any credible person, to any judge, associate justice or justice of the peace of any county of this state, that any free negro or mulatto is found living idle¹⁰. . . such judge or justice [may] order such free negro or mulatto to give security¹¹ for his good behavior in a penalty¹² not exceeding

4. baptism: the ceremony by which someone becomes a Christian

5. manumitted: released from slavery

6. transport: kidnap and move to another place (i.e., to traffic in human beings)

7. free negro: a nonenslaved person of African descent

8. mulatto: a person of mixed African and European ancestry

9. dispose of such negro [or] mulatto as a slave: force into slavery someone who is legally free

10. idle: unemployed

11. security: a deposit of money or property to be returned in the event that the depositor does what is required of him or her—similar to posting bail or paying a security deposit for an apartment today

12. penalty: in this case, the amount of money required as security

thirty dollars, or on default of such security¹³ to order such offender to depart from the state within five days; and such offender, refusing to comply with the requirements of this act, or after leaving the state, shall return again within six months, may be again taken up and carried before some judge or justice of the peace, who may commit the said free negro or mulatto to the common jail of the county, and if such offender, so committed, shall not within twenty days thereafter pay his or her prison charges, it shall be lawful for the sheriff of the county, with the approbation¹⁴ of any two justices of the peace of such county, to sell such free negro or mulatto, to serve for a period of time not exceeding six calendar months. Laws of Maryland, 1796; Ch. 67, Sect. 20.

Persons held to labor in any state and escaping into this district shall be delivered up

The Chief Justice of the said District [of Columbia] shall be and is hereby empowered and required, to cause to be apprehended and delivered up¹⁵ such persons fleeing from service who shall be found within the District. Laws of the United States, 1801, March 3, Sect. 6.

Powers of the corporation of the city of Washington, in regard to colored persons

The Corporation of Washington¹⁶ shall have the power and authority, to restrain and prohibit the nightly and other disorderly meetings of slaves, free negroes and mulattoes, and to punish such slaves by whipping, not exceeding forty stripes¹⁷, or by imprisonment, not exceeding six months for any one offence, and in case of the inability of any free negro or mulatto to pay any such penalty¹⁸ and cost¹⁹ thereon, to cause him or her to be confined to labor²⁰, for any time not exceeding six calendar months; to prescribe the terms and conditions upon which free negroes and mulattoes may reside in the city²¹;

to punish corporeally²² any colored servant or slave for a breach of any of their laws²³ or ordinances²⁴, unless the owner or holder of such servant or slave shall pay the fine in such cases provided; and to pass all laws, which shall be deemed necessary and proper, for carrying into execution the powers vested by this Act in the said Corporation. Laws of the United States, 1820, May 1; Sect. 8.

[continued on next page]

13. default on such security: In this case, default would occur in two ways. Either the depositor could not pay the security in the first place, or the depositor did not do what was required in order to get the money back.

14. approbation: approval

15. apprehended and delivered up: arrested and brought before a judge, magistrate, justice of the peace, or other official of the law

16. Corporation of Washington: the government of Washington City, a municipality within the District of Columbia, which at the time had two other, separate municipalities, Georgetown and Alexandria

17. stripes: single lashes of the whip

18. penalty: a fine in dollars

19. cost: the costs of imprisoning someone, trying someone in court, and otherwise processing someone through the criminal justice system

20. confined to labor: imprisoned and forced to do hard, physical work

21. prescribe the terms and conditions upon which free negroes and mulattoes may reside in the city: dictate anything and everything about how and where a person might live and work in the city

22. punish corporeally: beat, whip, clap in irons, etc. (i.e., punishments of a physical variety)

23. laws: regulations enacted by a legislature, in this case Congress

24. ordinances: regulations passed by the city government, in this case the "Corporation of the city of Washington"

Slaves brought into this city to hire or to reside must be recorded

Every person, bringing or sending any slaves into this city to hire²⁵ or reside therein, shall, within twenty days thereafter, cause the said slaves to be recorded on the books of the corporation, and shall deposit with the Register an affidavit, that such slaves are bona fide²⁶ his or her property. Ordinances of the Corporation of Washington, 1823, April 5, Sect. 5.

Terms upon which free colored persons are permitted to reside in the city of Washington

It shall be the duty of all free black or mulatto persons, males of the age of sixteen, and females of the age of fourteen years and upwards, who may then reside in the City of Washington, to exhibit satisfactory evidence of their title to freedom, to the Register of this corporation, together with a list of the names, ages and sex of all other persons of color under these ages. . . . [T]he Register of this corporation shall keep a record of all such free black and mulatto persons, and of their ages, sex, names and residence, and shall furnish a written permit, under the seal of the corporation, free of expense, to each head of a family, embracing all under his or her care, or to each individual, as the case may be, authorizing them to reside in the City of Washington. . . . Every negro and mulatto found residing in the City of Washington, after the passage of this act, who shall not be able to establish his or her title to freedom²⁷. . . shall be committed to the jail²⁸ of the County of Washington, as absconding slaves²⁹. Ordinances of the Corporation of Washington, 1827, May 31, Sect. 1, 2.

Note: Definitions taken from Donald T. Critchlow and Philip R. VanderMeer, The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Political and Legal History, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); The Oxford English Dictionary Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com> (accessed January 21, 2020).

25. hire: sell the labor of an enslaved person to an outside employer, such as the Navy in Michael Shiner's case

26. bona fide: in all honesty, without deceit

27. title to freedom: Entitlement to be free; i.e., proof that a person is not owned by another person

28. committed to jail: jailed

29. absconding slaves: enslaved people who have escaped from their enslavers