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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: CAROLINE DENNENT (FREEDOM SEEKER)



Kentucky Historical Society collections

LOUISVILLE — A petition from an African American woman named Caroline Dennent provides a fascinating window into the complex issues surrounding slavery and emancipation in the Upper South during the Civil War era. Dennent fled from slavery in Tennessee and sought freedom inside Union lines. With nowhere else to go, she followed the Union army when it moved north to defend Kentucky in the fall of 1862, and eventually joined a large African American refugee community in Louisville. There, city police

arrested Dennent as a fugitive slave. Even through the Emancipation Proclamation had not taken effect and Kentucky was exempt from its power, thousands of African Americans in the state took the proclamation to be the first step towards freedom.

Dennent was sent to serve a local family as a domestic worker “until such time as her master might come & take her back to Tennessee.” Her experience suggests the complex and contradictory personal relationships associated with small-scale slavery in the Upper South. She showed great affection for the children she cared for, and the family regarded her as “faithful & trustworthy” — until one of the children died of apparent poisoning. Dennent immediately was accused of murder, tried and convicted on superficial evidence.

Unable to effectively defend herself, she begged the aid of sympathetic white patrons and threw herself on the mercy of two governors, James Robinson, who rejected her plea, and his successor, Thomas Bramlette, who eventually pardoned her.

The Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) links Kentuckians with their past via archival collections that document people from every walk of life, reaching back to 1509. The “Civil War Governors of Kentucky” (CWG-K) is a multi-year documentary-editing project dedicated to publishing documents associated with all five of the state’s Civil War governors: the three Union governors, Beriah Magoffin (1859 – 1862), James F. Robinson (1862 – 1863), and Thomas E. Bramlette (1863 – 1867); and the two provisional Confederate governors, George W. Johnson (1861 – 1862) and Richard Hawes (1862 – 1865).

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