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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: JUDGE GEORGE T. ROBERTSON



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MERCER COUNTY — Born in Mercer County in 1780, Robertson was a lawyer, speaker of the Kentucky House, Kentucky secretary of state, congressman and chief justice of the Kentucky Court of Appeals.

A prominent Whig politician, he and Abraham Lincoln became friends in the 1840s. Their relationship became troubled in September 1862 when Lincoln issued a preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation. Robertson complained to Lincoln that Union troops were “forcibly detaining the slaves of Union Kentuckians.” Robertson asked Lincoln to prevent this, and the president drafted (but never sent) an irritated response, in which he said, “I may as well surrender this contest, directly, as to make any order, the obvious purpose of which would be to return fugitive slaves.”

Lincoln’s policies affected Robertson when one of his slaves fled to the camp of the 22nd Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, commanded by Col. William Utley. The colonel refused to return the slave and banned the judge from the camp. Robertson had Utley indicted for harboring a slave and sued the officer in U.S. District Court.

An exasperated Utley wrote to Lincoln about the situation, and Lincoln offered Robertson \$500 if Utley could free the slave. Robertson refused, and, in 1871, he received a \$935 judgment against Utley. Two years later, however, the U.S. Treasury paid the bill. Six years after the Civil War, the federal government reimbursed Robertson for his lost slave.

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. Letters, diaries, oral histories and photographs, as well as the first and second Kentucky Constitutions, are included. Find these and other KHS collections online at khscatalog.kyvl.org

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