Much has been made about the fact that Ulysses S. Grant owned a slave prior to the Civil War. Some reports say that Grant, through his wife, Julia, owned slaves throughout the war, doing nothing to free them. This story often goes on to discuss the irony that Grant owned slaves while Robert E. Lee did not. And, finally, some accounts have used Grant as a defense that the Civil War was not fought over slavery. It was stated that “Grant said it best, if the war was to free the slaves, he would draw his sword for the other side.”1 Presented here are facts about these incidents, and Grant’s own words, from his letters and from his Memoirs.

We do know that Grant owned one slave prior to the war. Colonel Dent, his father-in-law, owned slaves, and Grant acquired William Jones from Colonel Dent, freeing him in March 1859. The manumission paper does not state when Grant got Jones, nor does it explain why he freed him.2 On the positive side, historians have used this to show that Grant freed William Jones at a time when Ulysses needed cash and could have sold him for approximately $1,000. While Grant’s poor financial situation is correct, we do not know if William Jones may have purchased his freedom through hiring himself out. The records do not reflect that any payment was made, nor does it appear Grant suddenly had a large sum of money. One other fact is that even though it was common in St. Louis for slaves to hire themselves out, it was illegal to do so by state law, and any monies generated were the property of the slave owner. If Grant allowed William Jones to hire himself out and keep the money in order to purchase his freedom, it was in a climate that was trying to subjugate African Americans following the 1857 Dred Scott decision.

Julia and her sisters recalled that their father had given each of them three or four slaves when they were little, to be their childhood playmates and then to serve them in adulthood. Julia does take at least one of the slave women, “Black Julia,” along with her at the beginning of the war as she traveled with the children to join Grant at his headquarters. This caused no small amount of trouble for Grant when reports were made to President Lincoln that Grant was unfit to command Union troops given that his “secesh” wife with her “own little slaves to wait upon” her was in camp.3 We do not know how Grant responded to this, but we do know that Julia did not own those slaves. Colonel Dent made no legal transfer of slaves to his daughters prior to the war but in May 1862 he was at risk of losing his property, including the enslaved. When Grant learned of this, he wrote Julia,

“Your father sent Emma a bill of sale for the negroes he gave her. To avoid a possibility of any of them being sold he ought to do the same with all the balance. I would not give anything for you to have any of them as it is not probable we will ever live in a slave state again but would not like to see them sold under the hammer.”

Julia did not receive any of the Dent slaves at this time, and many of them left White Haven during the war years, not waiting to be freed when Missouri’s constitutional convention

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1 Reported in the Democratic Handbook in ??, as quoted from a newspaper account. The account is questionable as hearsay, given that one individual overheard another say that Grant said this.
2 Manumission of William Jones, March 1859, original at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.
abolished slavery in the state in January 1865. Because Julia did not legally own the slaves she claimed as hers, Grant was not in a position to free them.

Having established the fact that Grant did own a slave prior to the war, we now turn to the question of whether Robert E. Lee owned slaves. Much has been made of Lee’s reflection after the Civil War that “So far from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I would cheerfully have lost all that I have lost and have suffered all that I have suffered to have this object obtained.” Robert E. Lee administered his father-in-law’s estate, Arlington House, following George Custis’ death in 1857, including a large number of slaves. An exhibit at Arlington House entitled “We Have A Claim on This Estate” includes text that describes Lee as “a more stringent taskmaster than Custis.” Although Lee may have been glad that slavery was abolished at the end of the war, it is telling that he did not free any of the enslaved after he acquired them in 1857.

Grant did not consider himself an abolitionist (a term that implied a fanatic at the time), but he saw that the war was about slavery very early. He also declared his unwavering loyalty to the Union and all that it represented. Grant feared that the Republican Party was too radical, but his support for the Union cause took precedence over party affiliations. On April 19, 1861, Grant wrote his father-in-law:

“The times are indee[d] startling but now is the time, particularly in the border Slave states, for men to prove their love of country. I know it is hard for men to apparently work with the Republican party but now all party distinctions should be lost sight of and evry true patriot be for maintaining the integrity of the glorious old Stars & Stripes, the Constitution and the Union...In all this I can but see the doom of Slavery. The North do not want, nor will they want, to interfere with the institution. But they will refuse for all time to give it protection unless the South shall return soon to their allegiance, and then too this disturbance will give such an impetus to the production of their staple, cotton, in other parts of the world that they can never recover the controll of the market again for that comodity. This will reduce the value of negroes so much that they will never be worth fighting over again.”

Two days later, he wrote his father:

“We are now in the midst of trying times when evry one must be for or against his country, and show his colors too, by his every act...Whatever may have been my political opinions before I have but one sentiment now. That is we hav[e] a Government, and laws and a flag and they must all be sustained. There are but

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4 Slaves in Missouri were not freed under President Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation because Missouri had not seceded from the Union. The Proclamation only freed slaves who lived in states that were in rebellion against the Union; since the Confederate States did not recognize Washington’s authority, in reality the Proclamation did not free a single slave. However, it did have Lincoln’s desired effect on the enslaved, who, regardless of the legality, left their owner’s homes to begin new lives in freedom.

5 Byrne, Karen. “‘We Have A Claim on This Estate,’ Remembering Slavery at Arlington House” CRM, v. 25, no. 4, 2002, pp.27-29.

6 U.S. Grant to Colonel Frederick Dent, April 19, 1861. The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, v. II, 3-4.
two parties now, Traitors & Patriots and I want hereafter to be ranked with the latter, and I trust, the stronger party.”

Three months later, on July 13, 1861, he again shared his views with his father:

“I assure you my heart is in the cause I have espoused, and however I may have disliked party Republicanism there has never been a day that I would not have taken up arms for a constitutional Administration.”

Although Grant foresaw that slavery would be ended as a result of the war, he did not initially believe universal emancipation was legal. The preservation of the union took precedence over freeing the slaves, but they were ultimately intertwined. In another letter to his father in November 1861 he wrote:

“My inclination is to whip the rebellion into submission, preserving all constitutional rights. If it cannot be whipped in any other way than through a war against slavery, then let it come to that legitimately. If it is necessary that slavery should fall that the Republic may continue its existence, let slavery go.”

In the Conclusion of his Memoirs, written twenty years after the end of the war, Grant wrote, “The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery.” He goes on at length here and in Chapter XVI to explain the situation in the country prior to the war, and how a minority of Southerners (slave owners who held power in the South and in Congress) believed that their power was shrinking and that Republicans were set on abolishing slavery. When you get the chance, take time to read these sections of the Memoirs. I think you will come away with an appreciation of Grant’s insights, and a greater awareness of the cause of the Civil War.

Pam Sanfilippo

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7 U.S. Grant to Jesse Grant, April 21, 1861, ibid., v. II, p. 7.
9 U.S. Grant to Jesse Grant, November 27, 1861, ibid. v. III, 226-228.