

Dear dr. Markha Valenta and NASA board members,

I am writing to express my gratitude for the generous support provided by the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA) to conduct research in various archives across the United States. The assistance from the association has been invaluable in furthering my academic pursuits and advancing my understanding of freedom in the early nineteenth-century United States. In this report I will share some of my insights gained from the support provided by the Rob Kroes Travel Grant and the consultation of the archives for my research, as well as highlight key moments of my research trip.

My research first brought me to Virginia, where I visited the Library of Virginia in Richmond. The library's extensive collection on enslaved and free people of African descent enabled me to study the engagement of free Black people with laws that criminalized their residency and undocumented movements. Among the archive's materials, I found various travel passes and hundreds of witness statements carried by free people of African descent to register their freedom as the law required. These documents reflect the consideration of free Black people that travelling without any certificates of freedom, or in other words, being "undocumented," carried certain risks. These materials not only provide insight into the strategies free people of African descent adopted to facilitate geographic mobility and protect their freedom, but also allude to the uncertainties which confronted undocumented free African Americans on the move in nineteenth century Virginia.

From Richmond, I travelled to Maryland to visit the state archives in Annapolis. Here, I consulted a variety of source materials on the free Black experience, including freedom records and the Maryland Penitentiary Papers. These documents allow me to answer questions about the compliance of free African Americans to Maryland's registration system, the degree of enforcement of mobility control laws, and punishment in the state.

I ended my trip in Philadelphia, where I visited the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Here, I consulted the Society of Friends Records, the Cox-Parrish-Wharton papers, the Chew Family papers, the Joseph Watson Papers, and the Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). The Cox-Parrish-Wharton and Joseph Watson papers broaden our understanding of the experience of freedom in slaveholding state of Delaware. The Joseph Watson papers demonstrate the vulnerability of free people on the move in Pennsylvania and Delaware to kidnapping and illegal enslavement. The growing number of free Black inhabitants and its close proximity to the Deep South states made free African Americans in this region particularly susceptible to kidnapping. Moreover, the records on the Delaware Abolition Society from the Cox-Parrish-Wharton papers offer insight in the crucial work of the society in the struggle against slavery and to advance the rights of free people in the state. Both records demonstrate that despite the efforts of free Black communities and abolitionists, documented and legal freedom, or what Edlie Wong has termed "lawful liberty" did not always protect free African Americans from unpredictable acts of violence.

Another informative source is the Chew Family Papers. These documents made it possible to access the viewpoints of white southerners in Maryland and Delaware and to understand their

motivations for supporting mobility control laws or the casual enforcement thereof. Correspondence of the Chew family members reveal the frustration of white southerners with the migration of (self-)emancipated Black people, which encompassed both slave flight and circular labor migration.

In the PAS records I found valuable documents related to Black mobility, among which affidavits and travel documents free people of African descent used in various southern states. The presence of these documents in the records of the PAS, which date prior to the passage of compulsory identification laws throughout the Upper South region, raises interesting questions about the use of documentation by free people of African descent and about the role of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in supporting free African Americans in states such as Maryland and Virginia in safeguarding their freedom.

The value of the support from the NASA extended beyond my time in the archives. My travel route allowed to make a stop at the Banneker-Douglas museum and learn more about Maryland's African American history. I was not only inspired by the museum's exhibitions on famous African American Maryland residents, such as Benjamin Banneker, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Thurgood Marshall, but also about its exhibitions on African American art.

The chance to participate in an academic conference at the beginning of my trip was another special highlight. At the "For 2026" conference hosted by Colonial Williamsburg, William & Mary University, and the Omohundro Institute in Williamsburg, I participated in a panel with other early career scholars, titled, "New Perspectives on Rebellion and Resistance in the Long Age of Revolution." This gave me an opportunity to discuss my recent findings on how free African Americans in the early-nineteenth century Upper South states found ways to build meaningful lives within a legal context that criminalized their mobility. My participation allowed me to gain new insights for my research project and helped me to connect with other US scholars working on marginalized groups and mobility in early America.

The opportunity to consult a broad range of archival materials has allowed me to gather a wealth of information and insights that will greatly contribute to my research project. From uncovering primary sources to gaining a deeper appreciation for the historical context surrounding my topic, this experience has been immensely enriching and fulfilling. Once again, I would like to thank the NASA for its generosity and support. I am honored to be a recipient of the Rob Kroes Travel grant, and I look forward to sharing the outcomes of my research with you in the future.

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christine Mertens", written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Christine Mertens

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