



Episode 9, 2012: Bill of Sale

Jeanie Hans: My name is Jeanie Hans. I'm from Wichita, Kansas. My grandfather purchased a lot of Civil War memorabilia. And when he opened it, he was horrified to see really what he had. It's this bill of sale. It's for a slave girl named Willoby.

She would have been almost 60 when the slaves were emancipated. I want to know...What happened to Willoby? Did she make it through Emancipation?

Eduardo Pagan: I'm Eduardo Pagan, and I'm in Charleston, South Carolina. It's a beautiful city with a very complicated past. In the era of our nation's history when people were bought and sold, Charleston played an important part in that trade.

Eduardo Pagan: Omigosh! This is it. What it is recording is disconcerting, to say the least. This is about the sale of another human being.

Jeanie Hans: It really makes your blood run cold.

Eduardo Pagan: This is from the State of South Carolina. It's clear that Asa Brown for \$335.00 is selling to Stephen McWhite, a negro girl aged about 17 years, named Willoby. 23rd day of November, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and twenty nine. You know what actually captures my attention immediately is her age.

Jeanie Hans: I think the document states what happened on this date. I'd like to know if, if Willoby was ever emancipated, if she died a slave, if she ever had a family.

Eduardo Pagan: There are many dead ends and brick walls when it comes to researching African American genealogy. I might not come up with much.

Jeanie Hans: We're hopeful for anything.

Eduardo Pagan: Ok.

Eduardo Pagan: My first step is to meet with Nichole Green, director of the Old Slave mart Museum. Very nice to meet you.

Nichole Green: Nice to meet you.

Eduardo Pagan: She suggests we walk over to Charleston's old Exchange building. I sent Nichole a scan of this bill of sale, so she could help me get a head start with some of the research.

Nichole Green: This site, which was just an empty lot, was a very active site for slave sales during the time that Willoby was sold. There would have been large crowds, sometimes hundreds of enslaved people waiting to be sold.

Eduardo Pagan: Oh my. This is the bill of sale. I imagine you've seen several of these before.

Nichole Green: Yes, I have. I see here that it's just one enslaved person: a negro girl named Willoby, beautiful name, is about 17 years of age. At 17, she would've been a, I would say – a number one woman.

Eduardo Pagan: A number one woman would indicate her value on the market, is that what it means?

Nichole Green: Yeah, and what went on was slave traders came up with different almost a short hand – to describe enslaved people. And instead of saying, that I have a woman here, she's within childbearing years, she has a good disposition...instead of saying all of that, the short hand was, I have a number one woman.

Eduardo Pagan: I was curious about the price.

Nichole Green: In 1829, three hundred and thirty five dollars is a lot of money. Today, would be anywhere between 25 and 30 thousand dollars.

Eduardo Pagan: Really?

Nichole Green: Yes.

Eduardo Pagan: Nichole speculates that the high price was due to Willoby's health and age. But also, the year she was sold, 1829, twenty one years after the ban of the international slave trade.

Nichole Green: So that means that after 1808, it was illegal to bring enslaved Africans into this country. For the most part, the domestic slave trade grew after that. What do you think happened to the prices of the enslaved people that were already here?

Eduardo Pagan: Oh, I'm sure they went up.

Nichole Green: They went up drastically.

Eduardo Pagan: So we know that Willoby was sold to Stephen McWhite. What can you recommend that I do next to try and trace what happened to her?

Eduardo Pagan: Nichole lays out our challenge: Birth or death records are very rare. As property, slaves appear in ledgers and inventories, or listed in the census by age, sex and a tick mark in slave schedules. Only after emancipation are freed people listed in the census by name, but finding them is still difficult.

Nichole Green: Like in this bill of sale, it's just Willoby. You have no idea what her last name is. So, some people look at that as that 1870 Census as a wall, and trying to get past that is very hard.

Eduardo Pagan: To get us started, Nichole looked for documents relating to Asa Brown, the man who sold her and Stephen McWhite, the purchaser and she found a will.

Nichole Green: Stephen McWhite passed away in 1831, so just two years ---

Eduardo Pagan: Ok.

Nichole Green: --- um, after he bought Willoby. "I, Stephen McWhite, of South Carolina, and Parish of Saint Stephen's..."

Eduardo Pagan: So, that tells us where she was living.

Nichole Green: You see, "I give and bequeath to my sister, Mary Daniels one negro woman named..."

Eduardo Pagan: "Willoby." There she is.

Eduardo Pagan: Although Stephen McWhite's will mentions seventeen negroes, Willoby was the only slave given to Mary Daniels. Again she was alone.

From what you describe, it sounds like they had no idea what their future was going to be like.

Nichole Green: No, most of them didn't.

Eduardo Pagan: Nichole says Willoby's new owners lived in the Marion district, in the region of the state surrounding the Pee Dee river.

Nichole Green: I think your best bet would be try to pick up Willoby there.

Eduardo Pagan: What was Willoby's new life like in the Pee Dee region, over one hundred miles from Charleston?

Eduardo Pagan: I'm recreating the journey that Willoughby would have taken in leaving Charleston. I'm heading to the Marion County Archives and History Center.

But along the way, I'm stopping to meet historic preservationist Joe McGill, who's from the Pee Dee region. He asked me to join him at two restored slave cabins to give me a better idea of what Willoby's life was like.

Eduardo Pagan: This is the document that I told you about.

Joe McGill: The fact that it is an original, that's rare. African Americans doing their genealogical research...uh...it's difficult for them because papers like this don't exist.

Eduardo Pagan: Joe notes that Willoby was sold alone.

Joe McGill: Uh, when I see slave sales, it's usually by lot. This purchase seems quite purposeful. There're all kinds of things that go through my mind...was it for breeding purposes? Was it for his own personal pleasure?

Eduardo Pagan: Joe can only speculate, but at that time, the Pee Dee region was undergoing dramatic change that required a great demand for labor.

Joe McGill: Unlike the Low Country, which was, uh, uh, acclimated to growing rice, this part of South Carolina was more uh, acclimated to growing cotton. They had to clear the land. And in clearing the land, there's opportunities.

Eduardo Pagan: In the first half of the 19th century, the slave population in the Pee Dee area tripled to keep up with the demand of both the timber and cotton economies. When Willoby arrived in 1831, she was nineteen, alone and vulnerable.

Joe McGill: These cabins were built here in 1836, uh on the Gregg Plantation. It was a cotton plantation. She would've been living in a place similar to this.

Eduardo Pagan: Can you give me a sense about personal relationships, marriages, for example.

Joe McGill: A lot of times, the slave owner would recognize marriages between slaves. If Willoby fell into that category, then she would be considered one of the lucky ones. But there's always that desire for the slave owner to have a product to match the outcome of his agricultural production. To that end, you get into selective breeding. I don't know what case, you know, Willoby would've fallen into, being owned by the Daniels.

Eduardo Pagan: Twenty-nine years passed between Willoby's arrival in the Pee Dee region and the Civil War, with South Carolina the epicenter of secession.

How much do you think she would've known about all these events that were happening around her?

Joe McGill: There are networks...for slaves, you know, a new slave being brought into the property, brings with him or her some type of information.

Eduardo Pagan: Right.

Eduardo Pagan: Did she stay on the Daniels' land? Did she live to see emancipation?

If I'm going to get answers to these questions, I have to get some information about her owners, Mary and James Daniels.

So, I'm meeting with Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell, who's a scholar at Duke University, who's doing her research on her own family that lived in the Pee Dee area.

She and archivist, Maxcy Foxworth will guide me through the Marion County records.

Eduardo Pagan: That is the original bill of sale.

Maxcy Foxworth: How wonderful.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: This is a story of survival in and of itself, this document that it still survives after 1829 and floods and fires and all sorts of things.

Maxcy Foxworth: You've told me that she ended up in the James Daniels family? And I have pulled his probate file. It is the account of his estate, how it was settled after his death.

Eduardo Pagan: Let's take a look at what we've got here

Eduardo Pagan: The file was compiled in 1857.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: Now, this one...

Eduardo Pagan: Willoby would have been approximately forty-six. Life expectancy for a slave at the time was less than forty. Was she still alive?

Eduardo Pagan: Look at that handwriting. All right this is some sort of receipt it looks like. "Cash paid." James Daniels paid taxes for one Negro.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: Right.

Eduardo Pagan: But this makes no mention of the slave's name.

Eduardo Pagan: All right, let's see what we've got here. Ah...Let's take a look at this.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: And it looks like there are names here.

Eduardo Pagan: "Tom, Nelson..." I think that's Willoby!

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: Yeah, I think that's Willoby.

Eduardo Pagan: Cynthia explains that slave names were recorded phonetically and spelling inconsistencies were common.

Eduardo Pagan: It's gotta be Willoby. Willoby and Essex.

Eduardo Pagan: Willoby had survived, at least to the eve of the Civil War. But who is Essex?

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: Why are they paired together? Are they husband-wife? We don't know yet.

Eduardo Pagan: But clearly. It's Willoby and Essex. So there was a relationship there.

Eduardo Pagan: The last mention of Willoby is an addendum to James Daniels' will from 1858, where her value is priced at \$400.00. What happened after the death of her owner? Did she live to see emancipation? Can we find her on the other side of the 1870 Census wall?

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: It wasn't unusual for slaves to adopt the last name of some the slaveholders for whom they worked. So let's try Daniels first. Alright. I don't see a Willoby here.

Eduardo Pagan: We next check "McWhite," for Stephen McWhite.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: Alright, McWhite. And so when we get to the W's.

Eduardo Pagan: Ah, yes, yes, yes! It's right there! "WilloughTY" though. Not "WilloBY."

Eduardo Pagan: WilloughTY McWhite, aged 55. She's listed with a "head of household", probably a husband.

Cynthia Greelee-Donnel: He's Sire McWhite, 60 years old.

Eduardo Pagan: Yes.

Eduardo Pagan: Is that Essex? Ten years later the 1880 Census lists "Six" McWhite as 70.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnel: So we have to be creative. The census was taken by a person who could get things wrong. They could have messy handwriting that we later as transcribers don't understand.

Eduardo Pagan: They could have heard things wrong as well.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: So, right so how do we go from Essex to Six to Sire? Well it's relatively easy in documents. Documents don't always disclose their mysteries to us.

Eduardo Pagan: Six McWhite and Willoby are husband and wife and they've got an 8 year old grand-daughter, Jane.

Eduardo Pagan: I gotta tell you. My mind is racing now as I'm thinking about that. What we're witnessing here, at least through the documents, is an entire revolution in Willoby's life.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: She went from being property

Eduardo Pagan: Yes.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: ..in 1829 to being a wife who is keeping house in 1870.

Eduardo Pagan: And free and independent! Yes!

Maxcy Foxworth: I have one more thing to show you I think you'll be really interested in seeing.

Eduardo Pagan: What is this?

Eduardo Pagan: I ask Jeanie to meet me at a special location in South Carolina.

Eduardo Pagan: Well, I warned you that it would be a very difficult journey, that there wouldn't be much that we'd be able to find. But we did find some information about her.

Jeanie Hans: You did!

Eduardo Pagan: I walk Jeanie through the documents that fill in more details of Willoby's life...

Eduardo Pagan: This is a copy of the 1870 census.

Jeanie Hans: Willoughby

Eduardo Pagan: I think there's very good evidence to believe that this is our Willoby that we're talking about. So what that tells us is that she lived to the point of emancipation.

Jeanie Hans: Isn't that great?

Eduardo Pagan: That is amazing. Wait till you see this. "W", what is that a T? "WT Daniels and others to Six McWhite. There's our Six!" For the sum of \$150, purchased 160 acres. So, Six and Willoby were able to purchase a sizeable piece of land from their former owners.

Maxcy Foxworth: This is fairly rare. It's extraordinary, and very early, in 1882.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: It's rare because this is a large ...

Maxcy Foxworth: It is a large track.

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: parcel of land. It's also a sizeable amount of money ...

Maxcy Foxworth: It is

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: ...by 1880 standards.

Maxcy Foxworth: It is

Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell: What does it say to us about the transition from slavery to freedom? It says an amazing amount of what, about what is possible.

Eduardo: Where we're standing right now was part of that property.

Jeanie Hans: Oh, Really?

Eduardo Pagan: That they purchased. Right here. And this is where she experienced life as a slave woman and this is where she experienced life as a free woman as well.

Jeanie Hans: What a great end to something. That you know, we wanted to see a future for her and she had a future.

Eduardo: During production, History Detectives tracked down a few of Willoby's living descendants, some who continue to live in the area. They declined to participate.

Since shooting completed, Jeanie has reached out to a few members of Willoby's now large and thriving family. She looks forward to a possible meeting.