

Key wrote, “I am still a slaveholder, and could not, without the greatest inhumanity, be otherwise.” His noteworthy efforts on Blacks’ behalf—remarkable in many ways at that time and in comparison to contemporaries—were nonetheless offset in other ways.

Although Key never lived in Montgomery County, he passed through on his travels between his boyhood home and the nation’s capital. In 1813, the year before he witnessed the battle at Fort McHenry in Baltimore and was moved to write the words that became the National Anthem, he purchased two enslaved people in the county seat of Rockville, then known as Montgomery Courthouse. According to another Key biographer, Sina Dubovoy, he wrote to his father: “I bought at Montg[omer]y Court an old woman & a little girl about 12 or 13 yrs old...the girl is used to housework & the old woman chiefly to plantation work.” Dubovoy added, “He purchased them not for himself, but for his mother’s use.... In the years to come, he would cease to buy slaves.”

Of the seven enslaved people Key held who ultimately gained their freedom, only a six-year-old girl and a 65-year-old woman were manumitted by Key outright.¹ He specified that two boys, six months and two years old, were not to go free until they “attained the age of 25 years.” He allowed a man 40 years of age to buy his freedom for just one dollar, but set the price at \$300 for another man in his mid-20s. The seventh was the one who continued to work for Key. His will left his remaining enslaved people to his wife, freeing them after her death “unless (which I wish she would do) she...manumit them” sooner. There is no indication she did so.

Main sources:

Sina Dubovoy, *The Lost World of Francis Scott Key*, 2014

Marc Leepson, *What So Proudly We Hailed: Francis Scott Key, A Life*, 2014

¹ The 65-year-old woman, biographer Leepson surmised, was “freed to rid [Key] and his wife of the burden of caring for an aged enslaved woman.”