Episode 10, 2006: Philadelphia Freedom Paper
The Bronx, New York

Tukufu: Our last story examines a mysterious document that may have kept a Virginia man out of slavery. It's 1821: the cry of freedom is in the air. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Haitian Revolution have fired imaginations around the world. Yet, in the United States, the economies of the Southern states are growing ever more dependent on slave labor, and even free blacks are viewed with suspicion, interrogated as possible escaped slaves and seen by the white ruling classes as a threat to the status quo. For these individuals, documents proving they were free often made the difference between liberty and a return to slave quarters. Almost 200 years later, a man in the Bronx owns what he believes is just such a document: a freedom paper that once proved the status of a 40-year-old man from Virginia.

Charlie Watson: When I hold this paper in my hand, I feel, like, a charge. I feel elated. Something really goes through my body.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I'm heading to Charlie Watson's antique shop to see what he's found.

Charlie: This is one of my most prized documents.

Tukufu: Where'd you get it from?

Charlie: Somewhere outside of West Virginia, I seen a sign saying "Flea Market," and I met an old man who had a stack of papers; this article was amidst them. What struck me about the document was it says, "A free black man," and we're talking about 1821.

Tukufu: Such freedom papers were incredibly important to the people who carried them, and they are crucial today for historians who want to learn more about African-Americans living before the Civil War. It is very difficult to find documentation on African-Americans, especially individual African-Americans, in the 19th century. The document appears to have belonged to a man named John Jubele Jackson, who is described as a seaman. Now, what is it that I can find out for you?

Charlie: I would like to know whether or not this is an original document, was there an individual by the name of John Jubele Jackson, was he an American seaman?

Tukufu: So you don't know anything else about John Jubele Jackson?

Charlie: No, I do not.

Tukufu: To have a document which actually states the name and the free status of an African-American, well, this is simply fascinating. I'm going to go see what kind of other information I can find out about this document. Charlie's document reads that John Jubele Jackson appeared before a Philadelphia Justice of the Peace in 1821, but although it describes Jackson as free, I'm not sure this is a traditional freedom paper. Now, I made some copies of some freedom papers here. For example, this one reads, "I, Moses Atwater, do certify that Lewis Butter, a black or mulatto person, has exhibited satisfactory proof to me of his freedom." These are more informal than Charlie's; they are mostly handwritten and signed by the notary present. Charlie's document, on the other hand, appears standardized. A lot of it is pre-printed, it has an eagle there, it has a seal on it. And there is a witness, someone named Nathaniel Fisher. But it does appear to be a period document. It has the lines indicating that it was milled in the early 19th century, and also, if we look, we have the iron gall ink. This is all quite consistent with a period piece. There are two curious details in the text which also suggest the document is authentic. If you look at this name, John Jubele Jackson, "John" was probably his given name, and he would have assumed "Jubele" and "Jackson." John had probably been born a slave. If you look in the Old Testament of the bible, the day of jubilee is the day of the return of freedom. So it's no

accident that an ex-slave, a former slave, would assume such a name. It also mentions that he stutters. It was common to speak of African-Americans stuttering, being afraid to look someone directly in the eye, and these things really reflect the strategies and behaviors that African-Americans adopted for the very oppressive and brutal circumstances that they lived in. We need to find out what it was used for. The mystery document states that Jackson was from Accomack County, Virginia. By 1821, many of the local African-American families on the Virginia coastline had been there several generations, and a large number had been freed. If he was emancipated, then he should be listed in this record. Accomack County's register of free Negroes is a window on the experience of African-Americans almost half a century before the Civil War. Wait a minute. "John, alias Jack, born 1781." That would make this guy the same age as our guy, and they have the same name. "Height, 5'8 and one-quarter." Now, it says in our document that John J. Jackson was 5-feet-6 and one-half, so there's a little bit of a difference there. "Having a mark like a scar on the top of his head with which he was born, and a scar on the top of his left wrist." Our document lists very similar scarring. "And has a scar on the forehead and a scar on the back of the left hand." This individual was emancipated at the age of 37, only three years before our certificate was issued. Wait. Look at this. And on the next page, another clue. This is Nate -- "Nate, alias Nathaniel Fisher." A Nathaniel Fisher is the witness on our document. I'm pretty certain we have our man. What I don't know is why Jackson was carrying this document. It was issued in Philadelphia. I'm meeting with Professor Roger Lane, an expert in black Philadelphia in the 19th century. He tells me that it makes perfect sense Jackson would have made his way from Virginia to Philadelphia.

Roger Lane: I mean, to start with, just look at the map. Philadelphia is the first city across the Mason-Dixon line. And as a bonus, it had the biggest, the most influential, most politically outspoken free black community in the Northern states.

Tukufu: What was the situation in 1821 that may have motivated an individual to want to leave Virginia and move to Philadelphia?

Roger: Well, Virginia was cracking down on free blacks. Beginning in 1791, there was a slave rebellion in the French colony of Haiti, and after a century of oppression, half a million Haitian slaves, outnumbering 40,000 whites, overturned the situation and established the Free Republic of Haiti. The Haitian Revolution terrified slave owners, forcing them to become ever more restrictive and punitive. It traumatized Southern whites. All African peoples in states such as Virginia were now viewed as potential revolutionaries. And they were afraid of a Haitian-style rebellion carried by free blacks, who would have the news from Haiti and carry dangerous ideas. In 1821, Philadelphia was the busiest port in the nation. As a seaman, John Jackson would have found work and heard all the latest news from around the world. Being a seaman, he has freedom of movement, freedom of travel, freedom to talk to other peoples that would give him news and information for the black community.

Tukufu: I have a document here. I want you to tell me what you think about it.

Roger: "John Jubele Jackson, 40 years -- Accomack County, Eastern shore." He would have been acquainted with the sea. And of course, he signed with an "X." He was illiterate, as the great majority of blacks were, and many whites.

Tukufu: Where could I find out more about this specific document? Roger says the reference to Jackson being a seaman is probably our best lead. When most people think about African-Americans and the sea, they often recall the middle passage, when blacks were shipped to the new world on slave ships. But a new exhibit called "Black Hands, Blue Seas" expands upon that history. And we wanted to look at how enslaved and freed black people were involved in maritime trades, both on-ship or onshore, and all the contributions that they've made to our U.S. maritime culture and economy. Historian Elysa Engelman is with the Museum

of America and the Sea in Mystic, Connecticut. What would attract a formerly enslaved African-American from the South to this trade?

Elysa Engelman: It's a good question because it's hard work. It's long hours and it's dangerous, but it offered much better opportunities than most of the jobs available onshore. It offered a chance for some dignity, some economic independence, and also, I think, the sense of adventure. On land, the plantation system set black and white in conflict. At sea, the close quarters of the ship often created a very different environment. Because of his race, there's a good chance that he was given the dirtiest, smelliest jobs, so there certainly was rarely a sense of equality onboard ship, but there was a sense of grudging respect because the men depended on each other regardless of their race, their background, their language, to work together and be able to sail the ship.

Tukufu: I tell Elysa about the story I'm working on and show her the document.

Elysa: Oh, look at this! You know, this looks a little familiar to me.

Tukufu: Inside, she is able to make a precise identification.

Elysa: It's a federal document, it says "United States of America" on it. These were issued by the government starting in the 1790s, and they were protecting the seamen from getting picked up by the British and forced to work on their ships. What you have here is a seaman's protection certificate.

Tukufu: Elysa explains that a seaman's protection certificate codified a sailor's status as an American citizen.

Elysa: It was a vital piece of identification, especially for African-Americans, who were vulnerable at sea and on land. It would've served a particular function, especially by the 1820s and 1830s, as many Southern states are passing laws authorizing port officials to jail any free black mariner who comes into their port. And they have the right to sell them as a runaway slave if they don't have a document like this.

Tukufu: Elysa suggested I might learn more about John Jackson from crew lists of the merchant ships which sailed from Philadelphia. These are stored in that city's local branch of the national archives. I'm starting on December 12, 1821, the date of our document. These papers are full of the forgotten stories of people's lives; the reasons they went to sea, what they may have been escaping or searching for. December 8th, December 9th... 13 December, 1821. "John Wollard," no. "John Phillips..." no "John J. Jackson." Okay... No... This is our guy. "14 December, 1821. John J. Jackson. Place of birth, Virginia. Place of residence, Philadelphia. Age, 40." Our document is dated December 12th, only two days before Jackson set sail. This is why he needed the sailor's certificate, because he was about to get onboard a ship. "List of person composing the crew of the schooner Favourite, bound for Aux Cayes." Now, Aux Cayes, that's in Haiti. Strangely, Jackson is not listed as a crew member for the return to Philadelphia. Then I make an odd discovery. I can't wait to tell Charlie. I let him know his document is not a freedom paper, but that John Jubele Jackson was a real flesh-and-blood sailor. It is referred to as a seaman protection certificate.

Charlie: So, what you're saying to me is John Jubele Jackson did really exist. Probably acquainted with the ocean growing up on the Virginia coast, Jackson had been freed late in life.

Tukufu: He did really exist, and he was a seaman. As a 40-year-old, he'd booked passage on a merchant vessel sailing from Philadelphia. In normal circumstances, I would tell you that that is great in itself. I would tell you that this is a historically priceless document. I explain that Jackson had traveled to the free republic of Haiti only two days after his certificate was issued. However, that isn't the most fascinating thing. Look at this.

“J .J. Jackson not onboard. All the rest returned.”

Charlie: I wonder what that’s about.

Tukufu: “J.J. Jackson, above named, deserted at Aux Cayes!” our guy deserted! Although crew lists show Jackson had eventually returned to the United States, it’s quite possible he signed up for the trip to Haiti knowing he was going to desert.

Charlie: Oh, wow.

Tukufu: Who knows what information he brought back to the United States when he returned, who knows what word he spread, who knows what information he gave, and who knows who he inspired. This is a beautiful thing. His experience there had to be more than enlightening.

Charlie: Oh, you made my day. You made my week. You made my year. I mean, it’s the idea of being in possession of something such as this, you know, I’m going to cherish this moment and this document for a long time.

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