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**2017 George C.
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Award**

The George C. Herring Graduate Student Writing Award is awarded to a graduate student who has written an outstanding paper while attending a Kentucky university. The paper may be on any historical topic. This year's award winning essay was sponsored by Dr. Glenn Crothers, History Department, University of Louisville

“It is Doubted Whether He is Entitled to the Protection of the Law’: Free Blacks in Early National Mercer County, Kentucky” by Hannah O’Daniel, University of Louisville

“It is Doubted Whether He is Entitled to the Protection of the Law”:

Free Blacks in Early National Mercer County, Kentucky

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Abstract:

In early national Mercer County, Kentucky, an anomaly occurred: Humphrey James, a free black, purchased and owned his enslaved father, Marlboro. After James’s death, Marlboro and allied local slaveholders overstepped the normal local emancipation procedure. They advocated for and achieved Marlboro’s legal freedom through the Kentucky General Assembly in 1817. The resulting statute marked the first time that the Kentucky legislature granted freedom to a specific slave. In their exceptional story, James and Marlboro illustrate the changing conditions and possibilities of freedom for southern blacks in white-dominated society. White interests in perpetuating slavery and the racial social order, and close ties between the slave and free black population, shaped the everyday experience of freedom for blacks in early national Mercer County. The socio-economic order circumscribed free black opportunity, limiting them to employment under whites in jobs similar to that of slaves. Whites threatened the security of relationships between free blacks and slaves, and limited the autonomy of free blacks to manage their family affairs. In the context of such limitations, some free blacks succeeded in negotiating and executing the purchase of their relatives to assert a measure of control over the fate of their families. Calculating the likelihood, advantages, and disadvantages of legal manumission, some free blacks determined that holding their loved ones as nominal slaves better served their interests than the pursuit of legal manumission. The experience of freedom as a nominal slave depended upon white respect of that informal condition. After James’s death, some locals challenged Marlboro’s status as a nominal slave. Marlboro and his white allies lacked confidence

that he could use the local courts to protect his freedom. Instead, he drew on his connections with elite whites to negotiate his freedom at the state level. Marlboro and his allies successfully crafted and navigated his emancipation bill through the Kentucky legislature by appealing to the economic interests, anticolonization atmosphere, and paternalism of the legislative body. Marlboro succeeded by framing his manumission as a protection of slavery and the racial social order, while simultaneously constructing his own definition of freedom.