

# Slave and Soldier

## *A Glimpse at the Life of Frank Ricks*

BY WILLIAM GLANKLER

The lack of sources documenting black lives—slave and free—is a persistent source of frustration for African American genealogists and historians, especially for the period prior to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The simple fact is that slaves themselves did not leave written records of their experiences and, although there were some free blacks in Missouri prior to the Civil War, most notably in St. Louis, the overwhelming majority of African Americans in Antebellum Missouri were slaves. After the Civil War, when African Americans began to take advantage of their citizenship, documentary evidence of vital statistics and other manuscript evidence accumulated. Most Antebellum documentary evidence relates only to the small communities of free blacks, ignoring slaves. Moreover, most of the sources that do exist on slavery are from white authors and, therefore, tell us very little about the slave experience.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, public records,

especially probate and other court records, although recorded by white officials, do provide a relatively unbiased entry point for studying the slave experience in Missouri. Frank Ricks' experience is but one example.<sup>2</sup>

Probate estate files contain information about the administration of personal and real property belonging to recently deceased persons as well as the financial administration of the deceased's estate. The inventory and appraisal of property, settlement reports, documents regarding partition of property, accounts and receipts for slave hire contracts, and other court documents contain a great deal of information about slave property. They often record the ages of slaves and document transfer of ownership, but they seldom provide the level of information that three probate files in Lincoln County provided for Frank Ricks. The discovery began with the unearthing of the enlistment paper pictured here, a remarkable find since there

