

THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW

Anne Meister

Anne Meister, register of wills for the D.C. Superior Court, helped create a permanent exhibit of the wills of famous Washingtonians. Meister searched through the archives and found the probate documents for 12 prominent Washingtonians, and is looking to add more.

Whose wills did you find?

The prize of the collection is the will of Frederick Douglass, and seven presidents or first ladies — James Madison; Dolley Madison; James Monroe; Woodrow Wilson; Grover Cleveland; Julia Grant, the wife of Ulysses S. Grant; and President Franklin Pierce. We have also the wills of Oliver Wendell Holmes, a Supreme Court justice; Edwin Stanton, the secretary of war under Abraham Lincoln; and Euphemia Lofton Haynes. She was the first African-American woman in the country to receive a Ph.D. in mathematics. She got it at Catholic University in 1943. We also have Alexander Graham Bell and Daniel Webster.

Alexander Graham Bell was a D.C. native?

He died in Canada, but he had so many ties to D.C. that we had a copy. The Bell family lived here and he set up a laboratory here [at 1537 35th St. NW].

What do the wills show?

They show what mattered to the person. So in the case of Frederick Douglass, after he makes provisions for his wife, he talks about his writings and papers. Franklin Pierce gives two swords to his nephews and talks about where he got them, and if there's a need for the defense of the country, to not dishonor them [the swords].

What's the most surprising thing you found?

I'm the register of wills, so I find them all interesting. I think the one that is the most interesting is the Frederick Douglass will. He leaves his home, which now is the museum, and leaves property equally to all his children, male and female. He treated all of his children equally. He died in 1886. He was ahead of his time. — Scott McCabe

