Naming the Enslaved

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Naming the Enslaved

Frost had killed off the gardens. Firewood was stacked. And as subscribers of the Page County Herald glanced through the paper that late October day in 1859, no doubt some of them read this brief article:

"Wednesday of last week, a bright, intelligent looking mulatto, about 18 years of age, passed through Clarinda, inquiring the way to Hawleyville; and as soon as he had got beyond the limits of our town he was pursued and over-taken by a citizen, who, by friendly promises induced him to accompany him home. Shortly after dark the services of three other citizens and a team were obtained and about 10 o’clock at night he was tied, hand and foot—against his appeals to their humanity—against his cries and entreaties."

It’s chilling to read this.

Did such indignity and cruelty ever fall upon the fine couple on this issue’s front cover? Perhaps. We don’t know much about them when they were the "property" of a Missouri slave-
holder. We do know that they escaped and traveled across Iowa with abolitionist John Brown (whom some might call a terrorist).

Years later, in the 1890s, the Harpers posed in a photographer’s studio for this portrait.

We are fortunate to have the names of this couple: Jane and Samuel Harper. Rarely can historians uncover the full names of enslaved people, a point made by Galin Berrier in this issue. Sometimes only a first name is discovered, and perhaps a subjective physical description.

In 1846, for example, we know of an enslaved woman named Lucy who was “about 36 years old, very stout and heavy made, very black, very large feet and hands.” We know this about Lucy because either her owner or a slave catcher advertised a reward for her return. The ad appear in the Keokuk Argus in June 1846.

The story of the “bright, intelligent looking mulatto” who was seized in Clarinda was discovered by Eric Lana a few years back; he found a reprint of the article in the Albia Weekly Republican. He and John Zeller diligently looked through every extant Iowa newspaper between the 1830s and 1862, searching for any and all articles related to antislavery and underground railroad activities in Iowa.

This topic has been the subject of an intensive, multi-year project funded with a federal grant through the Iowa Department of Transportation and led by historian Lowell Soike in the historic preservation office of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Zeller also searched through census records, and Doug Jones worked with volunteers and professionals in archaeological efforts to uncover any evidence of structures and sites associated with the underground railroad. Presentations in communities across the state drew large audiences. Historic markers trace the last trip by John Brown across Iowa.

Many of the articles in this issue are the fruits of those labors. Others are written by historians Galin Berrier and James Patrick Morgans and preservationists Leah Rogers and Clare Kernek.

I’ve learned a lot from working with all these individuals. For instance, among American antislavery proponents, abolitionists were the radical subset. Most who were antislavery in Northern states took a “not in my backyard” approach: “Yes, of course, slavery should be ended,” they said, “but that doesn’t mean I will tolerate freed blacks in my state.” Others believed that colonization was the only solution: send blacks to Haiti or Africa. Some were antislavery for political reasons; some for moral or religious reasons. Few believed that slaves were entitled to equal rights.

I also learned that runaways seldom hid in tunnels and secret rooms—more likely in outbuildings or off in the timber or on the tallgrass prairies.

Legally assisting fugitives could result in six months in jail and a $1,000 fine (about two years’ salary for a school principal), but no Iowans ever received jail sentences. Underground railroad “conductors,” as they were sometimes called, were farmers and sawmill operators, attorneys and politicians. We can assume that women also participated, but hardly ever were their names or their deeds recorded or acknowledged.

Although the front cover of this magazine seldom features non-Iowans, for this issue, Jane and Samuel Harper deserve the spotlight. During the volatile and uncertain 1850s, they were sojourners in our state.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor