

John Ross Miller

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Stiles, C. C. "John Ross Miller." *The Annals of Iowa* 19 (1934), 384-386.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.5703>

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JOHN ROSS MILLER

By C. C. STILES

The subject of this sketch was born in slavery in the state of Kentucky, November 8, 1841, and died December 29, 1923, being over eighty-two years of age at the time of his death, which occurred suddenly, being stricken with heart failure just as he was boarding a street car on his way to work at the Historical, Memorial and Art Building of Iowa, at which place he had been employed as janitor for a great many years. Funeral services were held in Des Moines, and the burial was at Newton, Iowa, his former home.

The writer of this article knew him intimately as he always came to me to do his writing for him and to ask my advice in business deals. He was frugal and saving in his expenses and had accumulated considerable property, owning property both in Des Moines and in Newton. He was of a jolly disposition and got a great deal of pleasure out of life. He was honest, faithful and true to his friends and respected by all who knew him.

He gave me an account of his life. His master was a man by the name of Graves, who left Kentucky and located in Missouri, in Nodaway County, near Maryville. When Graves left Kentucky he was compelled to leave a part of his slaves on account of their being mortgaged. The holder of the mortgage had levied on the slaves and among them was the subject of this sketch (he being a small boy known at that time as John Graves) and he and several of the small children were thrown in jail for safe keeping. The mother of the children was not thrown in jail for the reason that she would not run away and leave the small children. This man Graves afterwards returned to Kentucky and stole these slaves and took them away in the night time. By traveling at night and hiding during the day, when the mother would cover up the children with leaves, so they were hid in the timber or brush and let sleep, they finally landed in Missouri. Here they

remained with their master until after the breaking out of the Civil War. Excitement was running high in northern Missouri and the "Paw Paw" militia was aiding the slave owners in holding their slaves and capturing those that ran away to Iowa. Among the runaways were four colored boys by the names of John Graves, Alec Nicols, Henderson Hays and Anderson Hays.

John Graves gave me the story of their flight from Missouri. He said: "They were making preparations to send us all down to Texas, so us boys just *borrowed* two horses and two mules from our masters and lit out for Canada. We thought that it was just a little ways up there. We traveled after night and hid in the brush in the daytime. The second day we traveled during the day and landed in Winterset, Madison County, Iowa, about one o'clock. It was on Saturday in the latter part of October, 1861. I wanted to get some shoes put on my horse, but the blacksmith told me I would have to wait about two hours. There was a great crowd in, and a company of militia was drilling, so we done got scared and left. We had gone about two or three miles and was in a long lane when a crowd of men on horseback come on the run down the lane after us. They had shotguns and rifles and was rasing an awful dust and making a lot of noise. We was shore some scared and thought that our time had come to go to Texas, but it wouldn't do any good for us to run, on account of them mules, they couldn't run as fast as horses. One of the men after us was riding a big white horse and had a gun on the saddle in front of him. He run past us and then turned and headed us off. They surrounded us and took us back to town, but they couldn't find any officers to put us in jail and while they were lookin' for the officers they formed a ring around us boys to keep the crowd back. They got to talking pretty loud and some one dared any one to try to come inside that ring, and they hadn't more than said it than the coats began to fly and there wasn't any ring at all. The men that took us out of the ring gave us something to eat and told us which way to go, and we wasn't long in getting out of there. We started east and at the top of a long hill we hid in the brush till night. Then we traveled by the north star and landed in

Indianola the next morning. We went from there to Newton in Jasper County. I worked on a farm near Newton the following summer for a man by the name of Sherer. I took his name for you know that us colored boys had no names only the names of our masters. I enlisted under the name of John Sherer¹ in the First Regiment (Colored) Infantry, which was afterwards the Sixtieth Regiment U. S. Colored Troops. I served through the war and then come back to Newton. After the war was over I went back to the South and learned that my father had taken his father's name, which was Miller, so our folks all took that name and I have been known by the name of John Miller ever since."

Several years prior to the death of Mr. Miller the writer of this sketch was invited by the Historical Society of Madison County to appear on the programme at their annual meeting and present an article on the history of Madison County which had heretofore never been written. I asked Mr. Miller for permission to write a sketch of what he had told me, and also to go with me to Winterset, to which he consented, but with the remark "I don't know about that town of Winterset." I laughingly assured him that he would not be court-martialed for getting away from the mob that day, nor prosecuted for borrowing that horse from his master, for he still insisted that he just borrowed it and said, "Of course under the circumstances you couldn't expect me to take it back, and anyway my master learned me himself how to run away."

¹ See *Roster Iowa Soldiers, War of the Rebellion*, Vol. V, p. 1666.

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