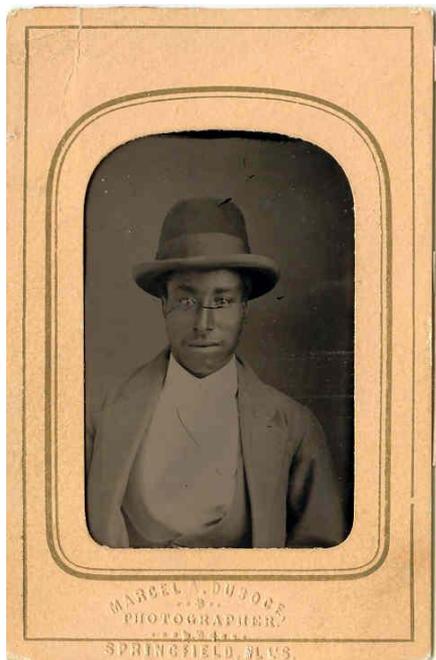


**THE SPIRIT OF SPRINGFIELD'S  
EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICANS**



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Sangamon County Historical Society  
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**Front Cover photograph:** The earliest known photograph of a Springfield African American. This tintype was taken by Springfield photographer Marcel Duboce circa 1860s. The original is in the collection of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

**Back Cover Photograph:** Cover page from Samuel S. Ball's report on his visit to Liberia.

Through its programs and publications, the Sangamon County Historical Society strives to collect and preserve the rich heritage of the Sangamon Valley. As both a destination and a crossroads of American expansion, its stories give insight into the growth of the nation.

All proceeds from the sale of this pamphlet will benefit the Sangamon County Historical Society.

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## **THE SPIRIT OF SPRINGFIELD'S EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to be here.

Your year of successful speakers with interesting glimpses of Springfield history proves true the old canard that “The City is full of a million stories.” What stories we have heard! But these stories touch only the tip of the untold past of our beloved Springfield. There are yet many untold stories---an almost unlimited supply for future Sangamon County Historical Society meetings.

The stories I will tell this evening will focus on one niche of Springfield’s past—the spirit of its early African Americans. My interest in this niche was sparked by a whispered comment made to me by Carroll Hall at some distant Historical Society function. As if revealing a dark and closely held secret, Carroll confided that some of Springfield’s early white residents were slave owners. I thought the comment rather odd, particularly because it was spoken as if a secret were being revealed. In fact, it was a revelation to me. I knew of Billy Fleurville and Maria Vance because of their connections to Lincoln. But beyond that I had no knowledge of or interest in Springfield’s early African-Americans until Carroll’s whisper sparked my curiosity.

I searched in my home library of Springfield and Sangamon County histories and in the indexes of the Sangamon Valley Collection and the Illinois State Historical Library. I found little on either slavery in Springfield or on early Springfield African-Americans. I reached the sad conclusion that there was no history of Springfield’s 19th century African-Americans. As one Springfield African-American observer put it:

## The Spirit of Springfield's Early African-Americans

The history of the colored people in Sangamon County, like the sources of the common law, is shrouded in some mystery. The writer is confronted with an embarrassing lack of available data and must draw his material from the memories of such of the older settlers as remain, and to a still larger extent, from their descendants.<sup>1</sup>

So in my spare time, I began an undisciplined search of newspapers, court proceedings, and church and county records. At first it was a rather short but interesting collection of materials. Something I could get my arms around. But it soon grew, and today I have here with me a print-out of the 350 pages of collected materials on Springfield's African-Americans before 1862. The search is not complete and I am sure there is much more to be discovered.

Tonight I would like to share some of the information I have found. But before doing so, I would like to give you a quiz. I will read a few quotes from those who have written about the history and nature of Springfield's African-Americans. After I read each one, I will ask you to tell me whether you believe it to be true or false.

The first observation is that of African-American W. T. Casey from his 1926 *History of the Colored People of Sangamon County*, which appeared in the "*Directory of Sangamon County's Colored Citizens*." Casey stated:

...tho slavery in a modified or indenture form existed in this state under legal sanction, there is

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<sup>1</sup> "*History of the Colored People in Sangamon County*," in *Directory of Sangamon County's Colored Citizens*, W.T. Casey, Springfield, Illinois, Springfield Directory Co., 1926. (Hereinafter "Casey".) The pages are unnumbered, and, therefore, page references are not used in these endnotes.

## The Spirit of Springfield's Early African-Americans

no record of its having stained the fair name of Sangamon.

True? False?

The second observation is that of Zimri Enos, the son of Pascal Enos, one of the early fathers of Springfield. Enos said:

Many of the well-to-do first immigrants brought ... their slaves, ..., and the relation of master and servant was by common consent recognized.

True? False?

The third observation is that of Harvard Professor David Donald from his 1995 biography of Abraham Lincoln. Donald wrote:

...Of nearly 5,000 inhabitants of Springfield in 1850, only 171 were blacks, most of whom labored in menial or domestic occupations. ... These were not people who could speak out boldly to say that they were as American as any whites, that they had no African roots, and that they did not want to leave the United States.<sup>2</sup>

True? False?

Professor Donald's dismissive characterization of African-Americans in Lincoln's Springfield is erroneous. After my study, I have concluded that the most significant observation that I could make about Springfield's African-Americans was that in light of their circumstance their spirit

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<sup>2</sup> *Lincoln*, David Herbert Donald, Simon & Schuster, New York, New York, 1995, p. 167. Mark Neely reached a similar conclusion when he stated that "For the first time in his life, however, Lincoln encountered Negroes who were not servants or menials." *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, Mark E. Neely, Jr., A Dacapo Paperback, 1982, p. 219.

was magnificent. It was a spirit that should not be ignored by historians, such as Donald, and one that cannot be ignored by anyone who actually delves into the record. It should be noted and bring pride to the descendants of Springfield's early African-American citizens. I would like to present five examples of that spirit and activism that contradict Dr. Donald's passive characterization. Two of the examples are of the individual spirit and the other three are of the communal spirit of Springfield African-Americans.

### **CELEBRATION OF EMANCIPATION DAY**

The first story is of Springfield African-Americans' colorful annual celebrations of the English emancipation of 800,000 slaves in the West Indies. The 1834 emancipation energized the American anti-slavery movement and "Emancipation Day" was celebrated each August by African-Americans in Kentucky and Illinois. Springfield's African-Americans participated in these celebrations.

On August 2, 1858, Springfield's *Journal* newspaper reported that, "the colored people of our city...celebrated the 24th anniversary of the British West Indies emancipation. They formed a procession and with music and banners, marched through the principal streets. They then proceeded on to Kelly's Grove, where they had a number of speeches."<sup>3</sup>

The following year on August 1, a Monday and presumably a work day, the *Journal* reported that "...They went out to the Fair ground, where speeches were delivered." P. L. Donnegan spoke on "West India Emancipation." Rev. Myers spoke on "Sabbath Schools."

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<sup>3</sup> *Journal*, August 5, 1858, p. 3, cl. 1.

“It was amusing to see every one take their baskets and retire on the blue grass, to partake of their pic-nic dinner. After which the audience was called on to rally around the stand to hear more speeches... a young man from Belleville, John W. Menard, Jr., came to the stand. His voice is very strong and his manner impressive. Subject “American Slavery,” which he painted in its darkest hues, and gave able remarks in defense of Liberty and equality. His speech was truly the best of the day; after which all retired with hearty cheers for Menard, Fred. Douglass, and others.”

Close your eyes and conjure up the parade of African-Americans with banners and music winding their way through the streets of Springfield to a picnic and speeches at Kelly’s Grove. There truly was a communal sense of purpose and pride among these people. They had a communal spirit.

### **SAMUEL S. BALL**

The second story is that of Springfield African-American barber and Baptist elder, Samuel S. Ball.<sup>4</sup> In 1848, at age 35, Ball traveled to the African Republic of Liberia and upon his return made a written report on its advantages as a place for Illinois African-Americans to relocate. The plan of relocation, known as “colonization,” was considered a possible solution to the racism and legal discrimination experienced by Illinois African-Americans.

Ball’s adventure began in August of 1847 when he attended the annual meeting of the Colored Baptist Association in Madison County, Illinois. The Association reviewed reports on the “condition of the Republic of Liberia favorable to us in America” and resolved to “...send Elder S. S. Ball to Liberia, as an Agent to inquire into the

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<sup>4</sup> Lincoln would have been 36, one year older than Ball.

condition of the aforesaid country, and to report to this Association on his return, provided means can be raised and procured to defray his expenses.”<sup>5</sup>

Ball accepted the mission and in preparation for his visit to Liberia obtained a letter of introduction from Illinois Governor August C. French, a supporter of the colonization movement as was Lincoln.<sup>6</sup> Governor French’s letter stated that he had personally known Mr. Ball for some time and regarded him to be a man of strictest integrity and veracity and “worthy of the encouragement and confidence of all friends of colonization.”

On April 11, 1848, Ball departed for Liberia from the port of Baltimore. The *Journal* reported: “S. S. Ball, a very respectable colored man, late of this city, left Baltimore in a schr. On the 11th April for Liberia, for the purposes of examining that country as an asylum for free blacks.”<sup>7</sup>

Ball arrived in Liberia on May 16, 1848. By August 24, he had returned to America and his homecoming appearance before the annual meeting of the Colored Baptist Association was reported as follows:

Friday morning August 25, intelligence being brought to the Association of the arrival ... of Elder Samuel S. Ball, our missionary to Africa, whereupon the Association immediately adjourned to receive him ...and conduct him to

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<sup>5</sup> *Liberia, The Condition and Prospects of that Republic; Made From Actual Observation (A Report Made to the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Colored Baptist Association)*, Elder S. S. Ball, Printed at the “Telegraph” Office, Alton, Illinois, 1848.

<sup>6</sup> *Abraham Lincoln The Prairie Years*, Carl Sandburg, Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York, 1926, v. II, p. 101. (Hereinafter “*Sandburg*.”) In 1857, Lincoln was a member and officer of the Illinois State Colonization Society.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal*, May 25, 1848, p. 2, cl. 7.

the ... preaching stand. ...Elder Ball responded with much feeling, after which in the shaking of hands, many tears were shed for joy, and praises were offered to God for his kind providence. Saturday at 3 p.m. was appointed for Eld. Ball to make his report to the Association. ...and after hearing it it was ordered printed, and it came out in pamphlet form and was sold to defray expenses and to remunerate Elder Ball for his services in the trip. Elder Ball exhibited numerous African curiosities.

“Money received for his voyage to Africa and back, (\$)8,358.23: amount expended, (\$)8,356.33: balance in hand \$1.90.”<sup>8</sup>

Ball’s report was published in a 13-page pamphlet entitled *Liberia, The Condition and Prospects of that Republic; Made From Actual Observation*. The report is well organized and well written, describing the climate, geography, government, agriculture and religion of Liberia. One cannot read Ball’s report without concluding that he was a literate and a sophisticated observer entitled to more than Professor Donald’s patronizing characterization of “servant” or “menial.” At the age of 35, this African-American Virginia native left his young family and 3,912 fellow Springfield residents and ventured across the Atlantic to an unknown country for the purpose of determining if it would be suitable for settlement by African-Americans. He was obviously disturbed by the condition of African-American life and concluded that there might be a better life elsewhere. He took affirmative steps to investigate one alternative.

Back in Springfield, Ball went about his regular daily life. He earned a living as a barber, cleaner and

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<sup>8</sup> *Wood River Baptist Association, Semi-Centennial Jubilee Session*, 1881, p. 48.

bathing room operator—a Springfield niche for African-American males discovered by Ball and his business competitor, William Fleurville. Ball's business was located on the south side of the square and in close proximity to Lincoln's law office at Sixth and Adams Streets. During the period 1849 through 1851, the *Journal* printed a number of advertisements for Ball's barbershop. One such advertisement on March 28, 1849 stated that his shop would be open at all times from Monday morning until Saturday night and would have on hand "Ball's celebrated Restorative, so famous for the restoration of hair, and preventative of baldness."<sup>9</sup>

Ball continued to advocate colonization and in 1851 he spoke at Springfield and St. Louis where he declared, "I am the warm friend and enthusiastic admirer of Liberia." He described Liberia as "the brightest spot on this earth to the colored man. Liberia not only protects the colored man in the enjoyment of equal rights, but...its institutions fostered merit, developed the moral and intellectual faculties of its citizens, and produced great men."<sup>10</sup>

That same year, Ball drew up a bill for submission to the Illinois State Legislature proposing that state financial support be provided to free Illinois African-Americans wishing to migrate to Liberia. Springfield's *Journal* newspaper supported Ball's efforts.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Journal*, March 28, 1849, p. 3, cl. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *The Impartial Citizen*, September 27, 1851. Edited and published by Samuel R. Ward at Boston and elsewhere before Ward went to Canada.

<sup>11</sup> *Journal*, January 17, 1851, p. 2, cl. 2. "We understand that a bill is about to be introduced into the Legislature, making an appropriation to aid in the establishment of a colony in Liberia, under a plan which has been drawn up by Elder S. S. Ball, of this city. We view it as a laudable and philanthropic enterprise, and we hope the members of the Legislature will give it a favorable consideration. Mr. Ball has visited that country, and is acquainted with all the difficulties which emigrants have to encounter. ... As to Mr. Ball, he is too well known to the

On September 16, 1852, at age 42, Ball died after a short but deadly bout with typhoid fever. He left a widow and six children and real estate valued at \$1,018.59.<sup>12</sup> Samuel Ball is an example of the vigorous spirit of an individual Springfield African-American in early Springfield.

## **AFRICAN-AMERICAN ANTI-COLONIZATIONISTS**

Not all Springfield-African Americans favored Ball's colonization efforts. In fact there was a considerable split among Springfield's African-Americans on the subject of colonization. Ball was probably in the minority in advocating the resettlement of free African-Americans to Liberia. The third story is of the Springfield African-Americans opposed to colonization. It is a more cerebral example of the communal spirit of Springfield's African-American community.

On February 12, 1858, Lincoln's 49th birthday, the "colored citizens of Springfield" held a public meeting to protest the Dred Scott decision and to express opposition to the colonization movement.<sup>13</sup>

The meeting was prompted by the Illinois State Colonization Society's request of the State Legislature for

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people of this State to require any thing from us in commendation of his character..." The bill failed to get out of committee.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel S. Ball's obituary stated that "He was a man of good native talent, well cultivated for one in his circumstances. He was one of the most active, intelligent and useful colored Ministers in the State. He was extensively known by his visit to the Colony of Liberia, in 1848, as an exploring agent of the Colored Baptist Association of Illinois. He published an account of his travels, which was widely disseminated, and contains much useful information. He was affable in his deportment, respectable in scholarship, kind and affectionate in his social relations, esteemed by all."

<sup>13</sup> *Journal*, February 18, 1858, p. 3, cl. 2.

money to assist in the resettlement of African-Americans to Africa.

Landen C. Coleman, a 28-year-old Springfield African-American shoemaker, acted as chairman of the meeting that adopted a resolution<sup>14</sup> that speaks to us forcefully and eloquently from the distant past.

The meeting opened with prayer and then several addresses were made by “distinguished gentlemen.” A committee then reported to those assembled that at its last meeting in Springfield, the Illinois State Colonization Society had voted in favor of asking the Illinois Legislature for money to help remove African-Americans from the State. The Society asserted that “some of the most intelligent and enterprising of the people of color in the State of Illinois desire the assistance of the Colonization Society, to enable them to remove to Liberia or some other part of Africa.”

The Springfield African-Americans gathered at their meeting then adopted a resolution in response to the Colonization Society. The resolution read in part:

“...after careful inquiry, we have been unable to ascertain that any intelligent man of color, having the confidence of the people here assembled, either desires to remove to Africa, or requires aid for such an enterprise.”

The resolution went on to state that the Illinois State Colonization Society was not a charitable institution that should be supported by taxpayer funds as no benefit would be realized by the State.

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<sup>14</sup> A committee chaired by Presley L. Donnegan and consisting of members L. Donnegan, Nathaniel B. Smallwood, Albert W. Collier, and T. Coleman presented the resolution.

“We do not interfere with other people, and only ask that we may be let alone, and simply protected in our “inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as are other citizens of the State. We have no desire to exchange the broad prairies, fertile soil, healthful climate and Christian civilization of Illinois, for the dangerous navigation of the wide ocean, the tangled forests, savage beasts, heathen people and miasmatic shores of Africa.”

The resolution went on to oppose the re-opening of slave trade and pointed out the contradiction of importing African slaves at the same time that free African-Americans were being exported to Liberia.

Finally, there is a heart wrenching plea to include African-Americans within the scope of the Declaration of Independence.

That we do ... most earnestly protest against the recent decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of Dred Scott ... because said decision misrepresents, ... the great charter of American liberty, the Declaration of Independence and the spirit of the American people, as well as the Constitution of the United States. We take that Declaration as the Gospel of freedom; we believe in its great truth, “that all men are created equal, endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” ... We also claim the right of citizenship in this, the country of our birth. We were born here, and here we desire to die and to be buried. We are not African. The best blood of Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky and other States, where our brethren are still held in bondage by their brothers, flows in our veins. We are not, therefore, aliens, either in blood or in race, to the people of the country in which we were born. Why then should we be disfranchised and denied

the rights of citizenship in the north, and those of human nature itself in the south? We here, most solemnly protest against this decision of the Supreme Court, as designed to rob us of the inherent rights of humanity, as well as of the soil upon which we were born and to countenance the tyrannical and odious doctrine that we “have no rights’ which the white man is bound to respect, and that one may be justly and lawfully reduced to slavery by another.”<sup>15</sup>

This moving statement of Springfield’s African-Americans was adopted at a public meeting and quoted in its entirety in the *Journal*. Clearly Springfield’s African-Americans not only had an understanding of current events, but knowledge of and deep respect and love for the document that best embodies the American soul—the Declaration of Independence. They had a communal spirit.

If Professor Donald knew of this resolution, it is difficult to see how he came to the conclusion that Springfield African-Americans, “...were not people who could speak out boldly to say that they were as American as any whites, that they had no African roots, and that they did not want to leave the United States.”

### **AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCHOOLS**

The fourth story is another example of Springfield African-Americans’ communal spirit. This time the spirit is displayed in their efforts to establish schools for Springfield’s “colored children.” Springfield’s early African-Americans were left to their own initiatives in providing schools for their children.

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<sup>15</sup> *Journal*, February 18, 1858, p. 3, cl 2.

The first evidence of these efforts is an advertisement in the *Sangamo Journal* of May 28, 1846. It reads:

A SCHOOL MASTER WANTED,

To teach a School of colored children in Springfield. He must be qualified to teach Spelling, Reading and Writing, Arithmetic, Geography and Grammar. The compensation will be reasonable and every effort made to render the situation of the teacher comfortable. Enquire of

THOMAS COX, or  
WILLIAM FLEURVILLE  
JOHN MASON<sup>16</sup>

There is a four year gap between this ad and the next which appeared in the June 14, 1850 *Journal*. The ad was signed by eight African-American men, including Samuel Ball,<sup>17</sup> and announced that there would be a public supper at the Colored Baptist Church to raise funds for the support of the colored school. Springfield's whites were asked to assist.

The efforts at private funding were difficult at best. Reliance upon public suppers and the benevolence of the white community were neither fair nor reliable. At this point efforts were made to persuade the Illinois State Legislature to fund colored schools by requiring that the taxes paid by African-Americans be used to support

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<sup>16</sup> *Journal*, May 28, 1846, p. 3, cl. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Journal*, June 14, 1850, p. 3, cl. 1. "Whereas the people of color in this place desirous of educating their children, and finding themselves too weak in point of numbers to sustain a school permanently amongst them, therefore we, the Trustees of this the Colored School, in view of our weakness, propose giving a PUBLIC SUPPER, in aid of this School, on Thursday, the 20th of this month, at the Colored Baptist Church, in this city. We have appointed a committee of females to solicit donations among our white friends towards making the Supper, and we hope that their claims will not be disregarded. Thomas Cox, James Blanks, Jno. Jackson, Wm. Baker, Wm. H. Butler, Aaron Dyer, H. W. Baylor, S. S. Ball."

separate colored schools. But there was a split in the African-American community on this issue. Some African-Americans favored public funding and others opposed such funding.

On Monday, November 8, 1852, Springfield's African-Americans met and 20 African-American men<sup>18</sup> signed a resolution opposing a proposal for separate State-funded, colored schools, and stating that they would not ask for State-funded support. They were prompted by an article by the Wood River Colored Baptist Association which appeared in the *Western Citizen* advocating a common or publicly supported system of public schools for colored people.

We... do not desire any such system of common school education, under the name of one distinct sect or denomination; nor will we join in with it; nor give our support to it ...

The resolution went on to say that such a school system would injure the existing colored schools, and hinder the energy of those who are willing to aid. The resolution concluded with a statement of support for education:

That we... feel a deep, very deep interest, in our schools, and think it the only sure way to redeem ourselves from the bondage we are now in ..., and will do everything that is in our power to educate our children ...without the boldness to ask aid from the people of the State;

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<sup>18</sup> *Journal*, November 11, 1852, p. 3, c.1. James Reynolds, David Callyhan, Gilbert Johnson, Isaiah Chambers, Michael Millington, Wm. McCoslin, John Handsom, J. W. Hill, Aaron Dyre, (Dyer) , A. J. Petete, John Lee, Spencer Donnegan, Andrew Broadwaters, James Hendrix, William Lee, Wm. Donnegan, Patterson Bannister, George Burras, Benjamin Williams, James Blanks.

The following January, 1853, Springfield African-American Presley L. Donnegan petitioned the Illinois State legislature to exempt African-Americans from paying school tax.<sup>19</sup> The legislature took no action on the petition.

Finally, in 1855 the Illinois legislature adopted a law that required townships with Negro residents to use the school taxes paid by Negroes for colored children.<sup>20</sup>

On April 13, 1855, the *Journal* reported that two Springfield African-Americans, Landen C. Coleman<sup>21</sup> and M. Donnegan, as Trustees of the Springfield Negro School, sought a teacher for the colored school. Applications were to be made at Coleman's shoe shop--one door east of the American House at the southeast corner of Sixth and Adams Streets.<sup>22</sup>

Three years later, on February 18, 1858, the *Journal* reported that Coleman was Chairman of a meeting of colored citizens of Springfield held at Clinton Hall on February 12, 1858, to consider the Liberia question. In addition to the Liberia question, the meeting's resolution urged the colored people of this State to petition the Legislature at its next session ...to give them the benefits of

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<sup>19</sup> *The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century Illinois*, Robert L. McCaul, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Illinois, 1987, p. 23. ...divisions within the ranks of the blacks occurred on the issues of whether they should pay a school tax and, if so, whether the tax should be returned to them and for what purpose it should be used. Three schooling petitions from blacks or blacks and whites were presented in the General Assemblies of 1853 and 1855. The first, from Presley L. Donnegan and other blacks of Springfield, presented on January 11, 1853, prayed that the blacks be exempted from the school tax and assured the legislators that the blacks would then "sustain" their own schools.

<sup>20</sup> *Lincoln and the Negro*, Benjamin Quarles, 1962, Da Capo Press, Inc., p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> 1860 census, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> *Journal*, April 13, 1855, p. 2, cl. 5.

common schools for which they are now taxed, without having any provision made for their instruction.<sup>23</sup>

On December 21, 1858, the Springfield board of school inspectors adopted a resolution to have the superintendent organize a colored school and to hire a teacher and select a room. The room chosen was a “shanty” at the rear of St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the teacher and principal hired was Thomas York. He began teaching on January 10, 1859, going about his duties in a “dilapidated” room where he had to instruct forty to sixty pupils divided into nine age and achievement levels. His annual salary was \$900 compared to \$1,250 for all other male principles.<sup>24</sup>

Springfield African-Americans’ struggle to educate their children is yet another example of their community spirit.

### **NANCE -- THE SLAVE OF THOMAS COX**

The last story is of “Nance,” a “girl of color,” who fought for years to assert her independence and whose legal battles resulted in her being the basis for important Illinois law pertaining to the status of African-Americans.

Nance’s story starts with Thomas Cox, her master. Cox was an important man in early Illinois. Since moving from Kentucky to Kaskaskia, Illinois in 1809, he had been a deputy-sheriff, an Indian Scout, Justice of the Peace and state senator. From 1820 until 1823, Cox served as Register of the District of Illinois land-office at Vandalia, an appointment made by President Monroe.

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<sup>23</sup> *Journal*, February 18, 1858, p. 3, cl. 2.

<sup>24</sup> “*Here I Have Lived*,” *A History of Lincoln’s Springfield, 1821-1865*, Paul M. Angle, The Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, Illinois, 1935, p 201. *Casey*.

In 1822 or 23, 35 year-old Cox and his wife and his two African-American female slaves, Nance and Dice, moved to Springfield. Why did Cox come to Springfield from Union County? In the age old tradition of Springfield, because he received a political appointment.

The United States land office for the Springfield District was first opened in the fall of 1823. The President of the United States had the power to appoint a Register and a Receiver for the new District. On January 28, 1823, President Monroe commissioned Thomas Cox as the first Register of the United States Land Office at Springfield for a four year period. Pascal P. Enos was appointed Receiver at the same time. In relative terms, the Receiver and Register were responsible for the management and sale of hundreds of thousands of acres of land--assets having a value today much greater than those of many of our largest corporations.

Thirty-five year-old Cox's career was on the ascendancy -- he was a young man on the make. He bought out the Kelly improvements and entered the quarter section where they were located. He was one of the owners and developers of the young village of Springfield, the Register of the Land Office in one of the most promising districts in the United States -- a Presidential appointment.

He immediately engaged in some expensive improvements for that day of limited means, such as his mill, distillery, his hewn log dwelling house with a hall and brick chimneys, one of the finest houses in the county. He also erected a two-story building adjoining the back of his dwelling.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Description of Springfield*, Zimri Enos, Publication No. 14, Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society, 1909, Publication of the Illinois State Historical Library, p. 197. Cromwell, Nathan (\_\_\_\_-18\_\_) north side of Jefferson, bet. 1st & 2nd. But the great misfortune that happened him

The family, including at least two African-American slaves, Nance and Dice, resided at the northeast corner of First and Jefferson, the finest house in Sangamon County and the present site of the Alzina Building. Without question he was an important public person. But he was about to fall.

But what does all of this have to do with Nance, the African-American slave of Cox? Well, in order to understand the fall of a man one must first understand where he fell from and who fell with him. Nance is one of

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at this time and, that finally ruined him, was that he became too great a patron of his own distillery. He acquired so great a passion for, and indulged to such an extent in liquor, that he became totally incapacitated and indifferent to his business and suffered all his property to be covered with mortgages, judgments, liens, and executions, and it was to satisfy two of these judgments and executions that these girls were finally put up at public auction and sold. (July 1827) Many persons would regard this as but the dream of a six year old boy, and would not believe it, but the facts were so indelibly impressed upon my mind, that I went to the Circuit Clerk's office, and giving him the names and dates, the old records were soon found. Circuit Clerk Jones kindly furnished me with the copies, that are hereby attached. Colonel Cox shortly after moved to the lead mines, and then across into Iowa, where he reformed and became a leading citizen, and was elected presiding officer of one of its legislative bodies.

The name of one these judgment creditors mentioned in the records, Nathan Cromwell, a merchant who came here about the year 1825, and had a store in a little frame building on the north side of Jefferson st., and on the west side of Lot 8, Block 6.

*Sandburg*, v. I, p. 301. ...Colonel Cox, who had come twenty-three years before, as Register of the Land Office, appointed by President Monroe, had bought out the Kellys, put up a mill and distillery, and a hewn-log house with a hall and a brick chimney. Then debt and drink broke him, and the law turned him out of house and home and he and his wife and two children took shelter in a deserted log cabin a mile and half from town. First they had sold Nance and Dice, and the circuit-court clerk entered on the records that, on July 12, 1827, John Taylor bought at public auction the person, Nance, for \$151.00, and the person, Dice, for \$150.00, and the court commission was \$15.40

those who fell with him. But in doing so Nance left a remarkable record.

The story has all of the elements of a Greek tragedy. Zimri Enos, Pascal's son, was a young man at this time. He later described the cause of Cox's fall.

But the great misfortune that happened him at this time and, that finally ruined him, was that he became too great a patron of his own distillery. He acquired so great a passion for, and indulged to such an extent in liquor, that he became totally incapacitated and indifferent to his business and suffered all his property to be covered with mortgages, judgments, liens, and executions...

The tragedy begins on August 24, 1824, when Thomas Cox borrowed money from Elijah Iles and John Taylor, two of his fellow town proprietors, and pledged his two African-American slaves, Nance and Dice, as security for his debt. A year later, he did the same thing with Nathan Cromwell, a recently arrived merchant. Cox borrowed \$300 at 12 1/2% interest from Cromwell. Again, as security for the loan Cox gave Cromwell a mortgage on real estate and pledged his personal property-- one negro girl named Nance and another named Dice "for the term which they are bound to serve me according to the constitution and laws of this State..."<sup>26</sup> And yet again, on March 9, 1826, Thomas Cox was in need of still more cash and borrowed an additional \$500 from another town proprietor, John Taylor. He gave another mortgage on the property he had pledged to Nathan Cromwell in 1825, and Taylor and Iles in 1824. But you just can't do that—pledge the same property over and over again as collateral for various loans. But Cox's back was up against the wall and he did make multiple pledges and borrowed large sums of

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<sup>26</sup> The recorded document evidencing this loan and pledge of security are found in the records of the Sangamon County Recorder of Deeds.

money. We all know of the reputation that the officers of Enron and Arthur Anderson enjoy today. Cox must have been in a similar position in 1826. His being Register of the land office was the equivalent of being the CEO of a large modern day corporation. Cox began a free fall in the late fall of 1826.

On November 21, 1826, Cromwell recorded a bill of sale for Cox's personal property--including Nance--which had been pledged on June 24, 1825.<sup>27</sup> On January 5, 1827, Cox's term as Register of the Springfield Land Office ended and he was not reappointed.

Six months later on July 12, 1827, Cox's end finally came when his slaves, Nance and Dice, were sold at public auction to satisfy his debts.

The events are described in various affidavits filed in the Circuit Court of Sangamon County. From them, we can deduce that sixteen year old Nance was taken by the Sangamon County Coroner -- John Howard -- and confined and restrained with chains. Nance became very sick. Howard then sold her at public auction for \$151 to secured creditor Nathan Cromwell, who asked Nance to come and live with him. Nance refused and Cromwell told Howard to take Nance back to where she came from. Howard tied her up and took her back to the "old salt" house. Later Cromwell came and took her away.

And now Nance takes center stage. In October of 1827, three months after being sold at public auction to

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<sup>27</sup> In addition, the bill of sale lists other personal property which is a good inventory of the possessions of one of early Springfield's wealthier residents -- 1 distillery and all the apparatus, towit 63 mash tubs and two rectifying tubs, 1 boiler and pipes and 2 wooden stills, cooler, and warmer and 5 beds and clothing, curtains and steeds, 2 cows and calves, 2 yearling calves, 1 yoke of steers, 11 oxen on the mill wheel, 12 volumes of encyclopedia.

Nathan Cromwell, Nance filed suit in the form of a habeas corpus against Cromwell,

Nance a negro girl  
vs.  
Nathan Cromwell.

Nance requested that she be taken from Cromwell and returned to Cox. She didn't like living with Cromwell. Nathan Cromwell answered Nance's writ of habeas corpus stating that he had purchased her at public auction and that thereafter Nance had come to live with him at Sangamo Town of her own free will. Nance responded by saying that she had not gone of her own free will or choice and was being restrained of her personal liberty by Cromwell. She requested the court order her release from Cromwell.

I have been unable to find records of what final disposition was made in the circuit court, but this matter was appealed. At its December 1828 term sitting at Vandalia, the Illinois Supreme Court rendered an opinion in the case of *Nance, a girl of color, Plaintiff in Error, v. John Howard, Defendant in Error*. The opinion of the Court written by Justice Samuel D. Lockwood, held that registered servants are goods and chattels and can be sold on execution.<sup>28</sup>

After Nance lost the habeas corpus case, Cromwell sold her to David Bailey and took Bailey's promissory note in payment. At Cromwell's death, the note remained unpaid, and in 1839 a suit was brought by Cromwell's estate against David Bailey to enforce the note. Stephen T. Logan represented Cromwell's estate and Abraham Lincoln represented Bailey. The trial judge entered judgment for

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28 *Reports of Cases at Common Law and In Chancery, Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Illinois (1819-1831)*, Sidney Breese, Chicago, Callaghan & Company, 1877, 242-247.

\$431.97 in favor of Cromwell's Estate. Bailey appealed the case to the Illinois Supreme Court, where Lincoln contended that the note was void, as it was given as the purchase price for a human being who the evidence showed was free and, therefore, not the subject of sale.

Writing for the Illinois Supreme Court, Judge Breese reversed the trial court and held, contrary to the established rule in many of the southern states, that the presumption in Illinois was that an African-American was free and not the subject of sale.<sup>29</sup> This case established a broad new principle in Illinois jurisprudence. Under the old rule, the burden was upon the African-American to establish that he was free, and the African-American who asserted he was not a slave was required to bring forward his proof, which he often could not do.

This is where Nance exits. What a life. Thank goodness for Thomas Cox's problems that required the use of the public records and courts. Without his problems, we probably would know little of Nance and her indomitable spirit.

As an aside, Thomas Cox moved from his fine home to a shanty west of town. He remained in Springfield until at least the 1830 census and thereafter moved to the lead mines of northwestern Illinois and then across into Iowa where he reformed his habits and became one of the leaders of that state -- Speaker of the House and the person responsible for selecting Iowa City as the capital city.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 3 Scammon, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Thomas Cox*, Harvey Reid, Iowa Biographical Series, edited by Benjamin F. Shambaugh, Iowa City, Iowa, 1909, p. 39. The extensive land speculations in which Colonel Cox had engaged for several years, together with unwise endorsements for friends into which his generous nature had led him, culminated in financial embarrassments from which he was unable to free himself. Most of his property passed out of his hands by legal proceedings and otherwise--Governor Ninian Edwards being a

These five stories are evidence of the spirit of a people. A spirit that contrary to Donald's characterization shows that they could speak out boldly to say that they were as American as any whites, that they had no African roots, and that they did not want to leave the United States, or in some cases that they might consider that option.

But so what? Who is interested? Who cares? Maybe no one at this late date. If for no other reason, the record should be set straight. Donald's erroneous assertion should be corrected and noted for the record. Beyond that there may be those who are searching for a connection to their past in the history of Springfield's African-American community. For them, there is much to be proud of and spirited about. And as I said at the outset, these are but a few of the many stories of Springfield's early African-Americans.

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creditor who pressed his claims in the courts. In the career of Colonel Cox this was a period of great gloom and despondency, which sapped his energy and almost destroyed his ambition

Richard E. Hart was born in Ottawa, Illinois, and attended school and was raised in Springfield. He attended the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana where he received his B.A. and his J.D. He was admitted to practice law in 1967 and has been a practicing attorney in Springfield, Illinois for the last forty years. He is a partner in the firm of Hart, Southworth & Witsman.

Hart is a past President of The Abraham Lincoln Association and was a member of the Illinois Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. He is a past president and board member of the Sangamon County Historical Society, past president of Springfield Preservation, Ltd., a for profit corporation that has restored and leased Lincoln era houses in Springfield's German Settlers Row, past Chairman of the advisory board of The Lincoln Legal Papers and past President and member of the Board of Directors of the Elijah Iles House Foundation. In 1999, he was given the City of Springfield's Preservationist of the Year award. Mr. Hart suggested the format for the Looking for Lincoln project in Springfield and gave his personal research which was used for the project.

Hart is the author of *Springfield's African Americans as a Part of the Lincoln Community*, published in the Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, *Lincoln's Springfield: The Early African American Population of Springfield, Illinois (1818-1861)*; *The Underground Railroad in Lincoln's Springfield*; *Lincoln's Springfield, The Public Square (1823-1865)*; *Springfield, Illinois' Nineteenth Century Photographers (1845-1900)*; *Lincoln's Springfield: Springfield's Early Schools (1819-1860)*; *Philemon Stout Cemetery, Ball Township, Sangamon County, Illinois*; *Christopher Newcomer Cemetery, Woodside Township, Sangamon County, Illinois*; *Vigal Cemetery, Cotton Hill Township, Sangamon County, Illinois*; *Abel W. Estabrook, Robert Todd Lincoln's Abolitionist Teacher*, and was the editor of *Early Sangamon County Antiques: The Barringer Exhibit* and editor and compiler of *Lincoln in Illinois*. Mr. Hart is also editor of For The People, the newsletter of The Abraham Lincoln Association and the Iles Files, the newsletter of the Elijah Iles House Foundation.



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