

Iowa's history to more fully consider the experiences and perspectives of Black and other racial, ethnic, religious, and social minorities, we add depth to our shared past. Through this dynamism, we will discover that while our state may be flat, our history certainly isn't.

Iowa, The Bright Radical Star of the Civil War Era

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DURING THE DECADES following the Civil War, Iowans participated in various community and statewide celebrations. Memorial days, Emancipation Day celebrations, and even a special Battle Flag Day held in Des Moines in 1894 commemorated how Iowans had sacrificed during the nation's greatest conflict. Many Iowans also reveled in the abolitionist spirit that existed in some Iowa communities before the war and took great pride in the fact that Iowa was one of the first Northern states to vote to grant Black men suffrage. From that time until now, many have contributed in various ways to preserving the memory of Iowa during the Civil War era.¹

Today, Iowans are still proud of their state's participation during the antebellum conflict over slavery. Iowans influenced the national debate on slavery through their abolitionist efforts and support of the Free-Soil movement in Kansas. For example, more Iowans accompanied John Brown on his ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry than participants from any other state. However, many Iowans were staunchly proslavery, antiwar copperheads. In the decades after the war, county histories and the State Historical Society recorded some of the reminiscences of Iowa abolitionists and of the freedom seekers who came through the network that led through Kansas, Nebraska, and across Iowa to Illinois.²

1. *Report of the Battle Flag Committee, Battle Flag Day: August 10, 1894* [. . .] (Des Moines, 1896), 14; Leslie Schwalm, "Emancipation Day Celebrations: The Commemoration of Slavery and Freedom in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 62 (2003), 291–332.

2. For more, see Lowell Soike, *Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle Against Slavery* (Iowa City, 2013); Lowell Soike, *Busy in the Cause: Iowa, The Free State Struggle in the West, and the Prelude to Civil War* (Lincoln, NE, 2014); Hubert Wubben, *Civil War Iowa and the Copperhead Movement* (Ames,

During and after the war, Iowans also took great pride in the fact that Iowa sent more troops per capita than any other state in the Union. Of the over 76,000 Iowans who fought, 13,001 never returned. Because of this great service and sacrifice, shortly after the war Iowans began to remember and record the histories of these soldiers. An important factor in keeping the memory of the sacrifice of Iowa's Civil War soldiers alive was the work of veteran organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), which had hundreds of posts throughout Iowa, including an all-Black post in Keokuk.³ In addition, various early county histories incorporated information on the soldiers and regiments that served from their counties, and newspapers throughout the state continued to publish articles about the service of Iowa regiments and remembrances of veterans well into the 1940s.⁴

As veteran numbers started to dwindle and the fiftieth anniversary of the war approached, Iowans, like the rest of the country, took a special interest in remembering these soldiers. In 1903, Benjamin F. Gue published a four-volume history of Iowa entitled *History of Iowa from its Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Volume two focused on the causes of the rebellion and a summary of each of Iowa's regiments during the war.⁵ The first extensive examination of the politics of Iowa during the Civil War and Reconstruction period came in 1911 when Olynthus B. Clark, a student at Columbia University, wrote a dissertation entitled "The Politics of Iowa During the Civil War and Reconstruction."⁶ As a student of William Dunning, the namesake of the historiographical school of thought known as the Dunning School, Clark's work followed the works of political historians of his day. Dunning and other historians wrote about the Civil War and Reconstruction in support of Southern conservatism, which had attempted to "redeem" the South from the

1980); Morton M. Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* (Norman, OK, 1972).

3. For a recent study of the GAR in Iowa, see Jonathan Neu, "'Produce Patriots as well as Scholars': GAR Educational Reform and the Establishment of Mason City's Memorial University," *Annals of Iowa* 79 (2020), 211–46.

4. The last Iowa Civil War veteran to die was Robert A. Millen in 1947. "Iowa's Last Civil War Soldier," *Annals of Iowa* 29 (1947), 67–69; Charles Thurman Mindling, "The Grand Army of the Republic in Iowa Society and Politics," (MA thesis, University of Iowa, 1949).

5. Benjamin Gue, *History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1903), 2:366.

6. Olynthus Clark, "The Politics of Iowa During the Civil War and Reconstruction" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1911).

policies of Radical Republicans who wanted to create an interracial political democracy in the South. As such, the Dunning school legitimized the acts of violence perpetrated against Black people and, with it, the system of Jim Crow segregation. This view of history dominated the first half of the twentieth century throughout the country, including in Iowa. This interpretation, along with growing prejudice against Black Iowans, led many to disregard and whitewash Iowa's history concerning the service of Black Iowans during the Civil War and early Black activists in their continual fight for equal rights during the Reconstruction period.

The Dunning School ideology remained prevalent in Iowa and throughout the nation until the Civil Rights movement inspired a new generation of historians to reexamine and revise these long-held erroneous beliefs. In 1948, Leola Bergmann wrote the first extensive reexamination of Iowa history, "The Negro in Iowa." Like others reexamining narratives, such as Benjamin Quarles, Dudley Cornish, James McPherson, and Eric Foner, Bergmann recognized a lack of diversity in the dominant histories and sought to re-center Black Americans and their experiences.⁷

In the decades that followed, other historians continued to explore how the Civil War era led to a political and social transformation in Iowa and the role of Black Iowans in that transformation. One key example is Robert Dykstra's 1993 *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* that recounts Iowa's radical transformation "from perhaps the most racially conservative free state in the Union into one of its most progressive" in less than a decade.⁸ Dykstra explains that Iowa went from passing Black laws and exclusionary acts that denied citizenship rights to Black Iowans to becoming a "bright radical star," after Iowa became one of the first Northern states to vote for full suffrage rights for Black men in 1868.

Dykstra's work led to further examinations of Black Iowans during the Civil War era, like the First Iowa Regiment of African Descent (60th USCI). William S. Morris's chapter "Black Iowans in Defense of the Nation: 1863–1990" published in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838–2001*, and David Brodnax's article "'Will They Fight? Ask the Enemy': Iowa's African American Regiment in the Civil War," both shed

7. Bergmann, "The Negro in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 46, no. 1 (1948). This issue was eventually published as a monograph, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969). Bergmann later cited fellow graduate student and Black Iowa native Lulu Merle Johnson as part of her inspiration for the project.

8. Robert Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 238.

light on the racial prejudice Black Iowans had to overcome to secure the right to organize a regiment during the war.⁹ They further emphasize the role of Black soldiers and their commendable service in challenging white supremacist perceptions to gain the right to vote after the war.

One of the most significant examinations that emphasizes the radical transformation experience in Iowa and the rest of the Upper Midwest during the Civil War era is Leslie Schwalm's 2009 *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*. Schwalm argues that the effects of emancipation and Reconstruction were not isolated to the Southern states but extended well beyond as Black Americans migrated throughout the Upper Midwest and forced communities throughout the region to renegotiate the terms of Black community participation.¹⁰ Schwalm's extensive examination, drawn from various regional and national archives, demonstrates the important role the politics of race, emancipation, and Black migration had on transforming the Upper Midwest. Further, it brought Iowa and the rest of the Midwest into the historical discussion of Reconstruction history.¹¹

Historians in recent years have explored more of the lived experiences of average Iowans during the Civil War era, such as common soldiers and women. The sources for these histories have mostly arisen from various collections of Civil War letters and diaries of Iowans such as Charles O. Musser, William Henry Harrison Clayton, William and Mary Vermilion, Jacob and Emeline Ritner, and Annie Wittenmyer.¹² Comprehensive studies of Iowa and the Civil War experience like Thomas Baker's *The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa and the Civil War* and

9. William S. Morris, "Black Iowans in Defense of the Nation," in *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*, ed. Bill Silag (Des Moines, 2001), 91; David Brodnax Sr., "'Will They Fight? Ask the Enemy': Iowa's African American Regiment in the Civil War," *Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 289.

10. Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), 1.

11. David Brodnax also discusses extensively the long fight for equality in Iowa during this period in "Breathing Freedom's Air: The African American Struggle for Equal Citizenship in Iowa, 1830–1900," (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2007).

12. Barry Popchock, *Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser* (Iowa City, 2008); Charles Larimer, *Love and Valor: Intimate Civil War Letters Between Captain Jacob and Emeline Ritner* (Denver, 2000); Donald Elder, *Love Amid Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (Iowa City, 2007); Donald Elder, *A Damned Iowa Greyhound: The Civil War Letters of William Henry Harrison Clayton* (Iowa City, 1998); Annie Wittenmyer, *Under the Gun: A Woman's Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Boston, 1895).

Kenneth Lyftogt's three-volume series *Iowa and the Civil War* have often drawn on and synthesized these individual studies.¹³

While each of these works has contributed to our understanding of Iowa during the Civil War era, they represent a beginning and not an end. The work of historians on this subject is only expanding as our views of who is worthy of study continue to widen. Also, rather than running out of materials and topics to research and write about concerning the Civil War era, historians continually uncover more of what was once discarded and forgotten by many. Some of the most striking research being done by historians today on this transformative period is on how Black Iowans fought for equal rights by petitioning to repeal Iowa's Black laws, organized Colored Conventions to leverage Black political power, and petitioned for further rights through community engagement and participation in social organizations.¹⁴ As a result, the next 175 years look bright for the study of Iowa during the Civil War era.

Immigration to Iowa: A Brief History & Historiography

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NATIVE PEOPLE HAD LIVED IN IOWA for thousands of years before Europeans first set foot in it and can be considered the state's first immigrants. Millions of others have come to Iowa since the 1830s—the removal of Iowa's original inhabitants in the 1840s opened its prairies for

13. Thomas Baker, *The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa and the Civil War* (Iowa City, 2016); Kenneth Lyftogt, *Iowa and the Civil War, Volume 1: Free Child of The Missouri Compromise, 1850–1862* (Iowa City, 2018); Kenneth Lyftogt, *Iowa and the Civil War, Volume 2: From Iuka to the Red River, 1862–1864* (Iowa City, 2020).

14. For research on Iowa's participation in the Colored Conventions movement see some of the resources discovered by the Iowa Colored Conventions Digital Project at www.coloredconventions.org. For examples of the work being done on topics of race, gender, and Iowa communities, see Brie Swenson Arnold, "An Opportunity to Challenge the 'Color Line': Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Women's Labor Activism in Late Nineteenth-Century Cedar Rapids, Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015), 101–41; Dwain Coleman, "Still in the Fight: The Struggle for Community for African Americans in the Upper Midwest," (MA thesis, Iowa State University, 2016).