

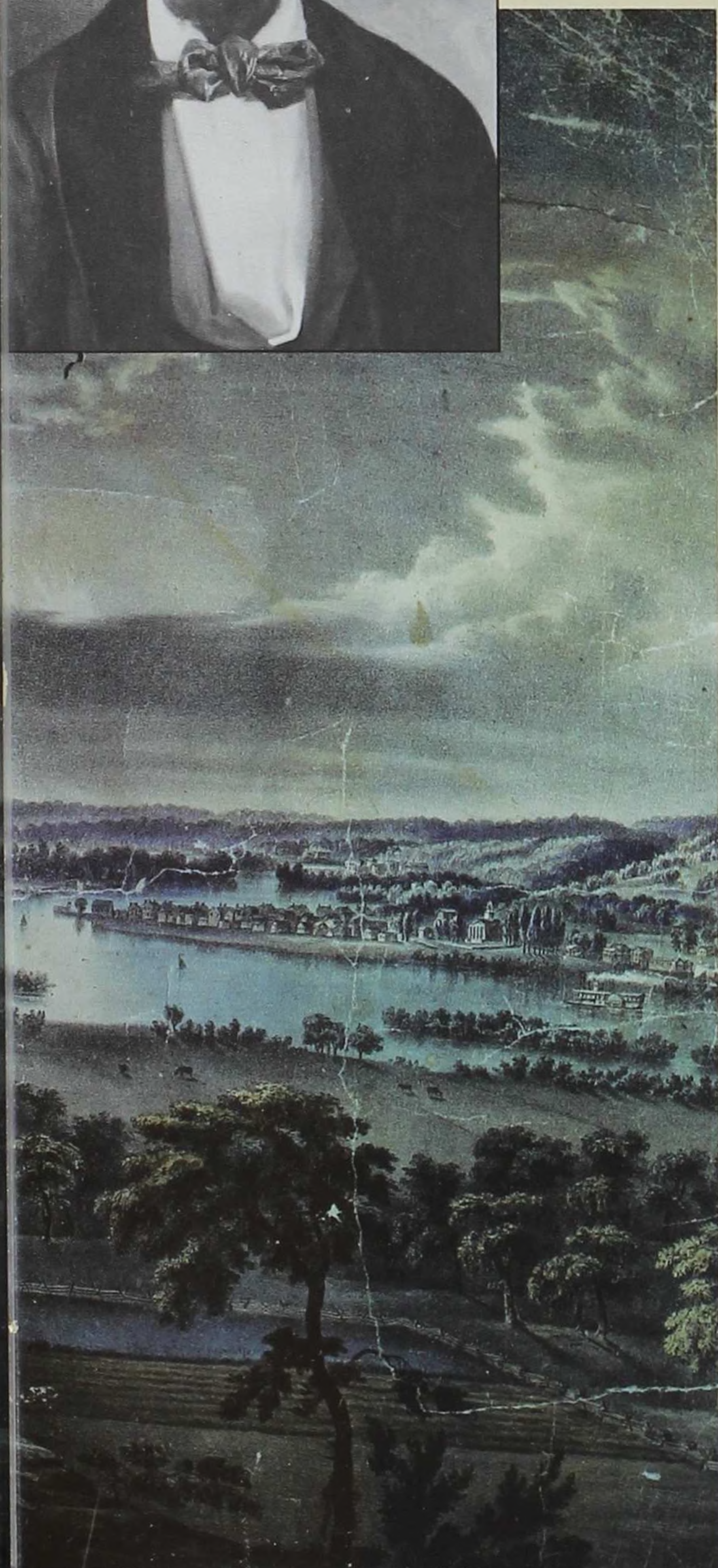
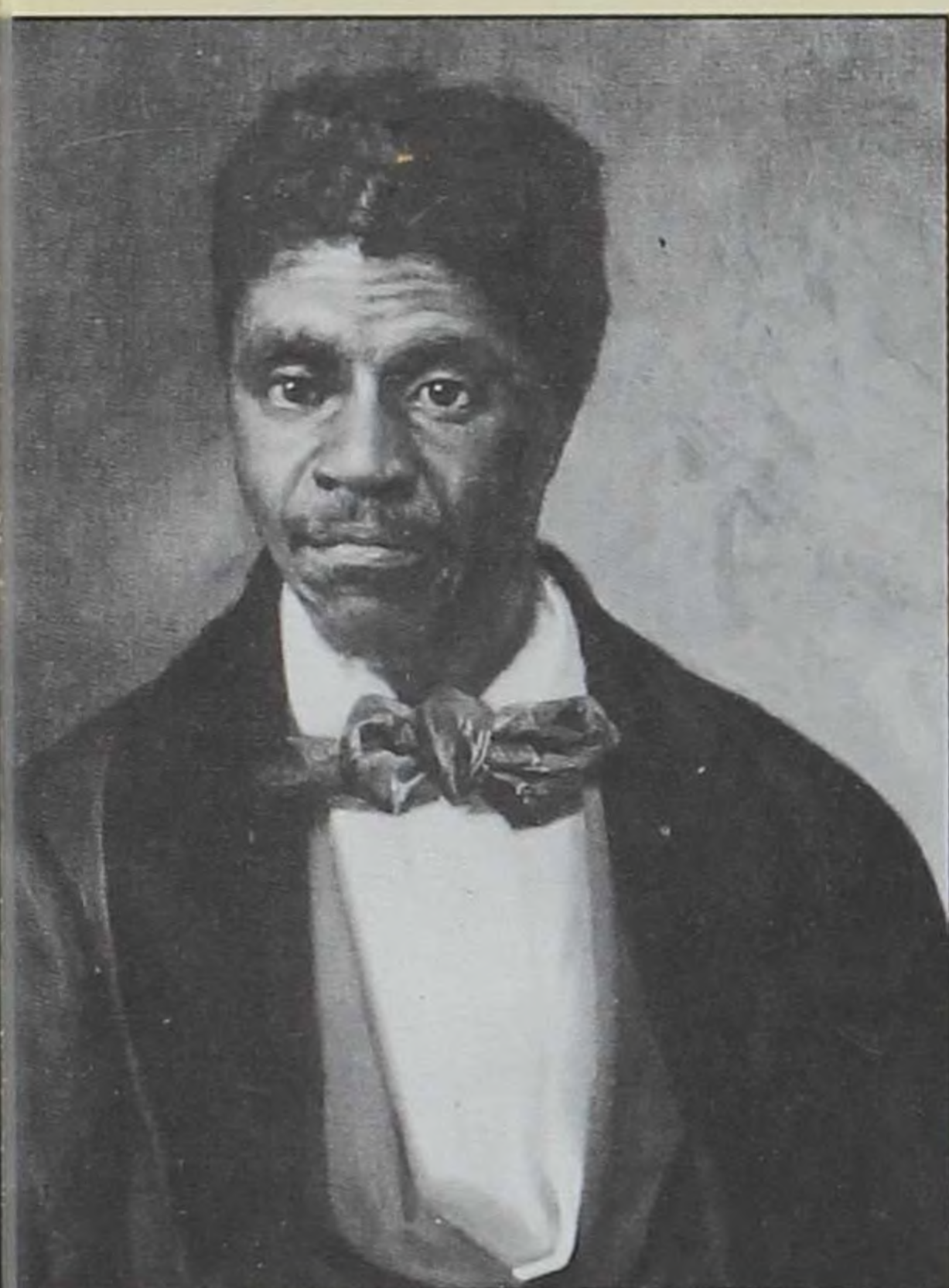
# Dr. Emerson's Sam

## *Black Iowans before the Civil War*

by Robert R. Dykstra







TOWN SCENE: SHS (IOWA CITY); INSET: SHS (DES MOINES)

In the second decade of the nineteenth century two young slaves, Samuel Turner's boy Nat and Peter Blow's boy Sam, both of them slight in build and coal-black in color, approached adolescence in Southampton County, Virginia, a low, heavily wooded rural backwater abutting the North Carolina line. Both lads, in separate acts of rebellion against the world the slaveholders had made, created for themselves historic roles in the events leading to civil war.

One hot midsummer night in 1831 the elder of the two, now a moody Baptist preacher much given to visions and revelations, unleashed his personal apocalypse on the neighborhood of his birth. Twenty-four hours later he and his black companions had coolly butchered nearly sixty whites, mostly women and children, in the bloodiest slave uprising in American history. The slaughter electrified the entire white South, smothering the indigenous abolitionism of the region, stimulating an increasingly furious political defense of slavery against its critics and one last doomed effort to reform it as a way of life more bearable to blacks. The dogs of war, let slip in southern Virginia, ultimately led America to Harpers Ferry and Sumter and Bull Run.

Young Sam Blow would partake of neither the Nat Turner Rebellion nor its equally grim aftermath. He had gone west in his master's entourage to the Alabama frontier. A mecca for failed Virginia planters in the agriculturally depressed years following the War of 1812, Alabama unfortunately proved no promised land for the Blows. In 1820, after four seasons of hard-scrabble farming, Peter Blow, his family, and his slaves moved once again, locating this time in the burgeoning western city of St. Louis. Here Peter Blow purchased a boardinghouse where Sam spent his young manhood helping wait on guests. And here, a decade later, Peter Blow died, leaving many debts. To meet creditors' claims against the estate, "the Blow boy Sam," the frailest of the late proprietor's bondsmen, was sold at public auction, where he fetched the humiliatingly low price of five hundred dollars, less than a third of what slaves his age normally brought. The successful bidder in Sam's case was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania medical school, a struggling young St. Louis physician named John Emerson. After acquiring a commission as an army medical officer, Dr. Emerson took his wife, his daughter, and his new black manservant along with him when reporting for duty as post surgeon at Fort Armstrong, Illinois, in the winter of 1833-34.

View from Davenport, overlooking Fort Armstrong and Rock Island, 1844. Inset: Dred Scott—earlier known as Sam Blow.



Fort Armstrong commanded strategic Rock Island at the rapids of the upper Mississippi River, where during the War of 1812 a British cannon, three gunners, and the local Sauk and Mesquakie Indians had ambushed an American flotilla under Zachary Taylor. For Dr. Emerson, as for young Major Taylor before him, Rock Island turned out to be more than he'd bargained for, especially when subzero gales out of Canada hurtled down the frozen, snow-swept expanse of the great river. Pleading ill health, Emerson petitioned his superiors and his political friends for transfer to some more salubrious post. The surgery back at the St. Louis arsenal would do nicely, he suggested, but he did so to no avail. Spring came at last, the willow-shrouded riverbanks and islands greening in the bright April sun. As Emerson impatiently considered alternatives to Fort Armstrong, other members of the garrison drew his attention to the promising entrepreneurial prospects in real estate just across the river on the Iowa shore.

Two years earlier a rebellious faction of the Sauk had been decisively crushed in the Black Hawk War. Their cousins, the largely uninvolved Mesquakie (who would learn to loathe the connective term "Sac & Fox" insisted on by the government) had been forced to surrender an enormous swath of the Iowa country, a cession that included the site of Chief Poweshiek's village opposite Fort Armstrong. In the summer of 1833, six months before Emerson's arrival, Poweshiek's people had peaceably vacated the crescent-shaped flood plain below the bluff, joining the general Indian exodus into the interior. Before leaving they had insisted, however, that the ground on which their village stood be granted as a gift to Antoine LeClaire, their interpreter. The government honored this demand. Other whites, however, began moving across the river as squatters in the wake of the Mesquakie retreat. They built log shanties and cleared small corn patches in the cane and underbrush, hoping to establish claims that would qualify them, in due time, to buy prime riverfront land at the minimum government price. And so it was that Dr. Emerson pre-empted 640 acres of shoreline a few miles upstream from LeClaire's reserve. Years later, old-timers professed to remember that the good doctor's slave, a diminutive black man, occupied the shack on his master's behalf.

In the spring of 1836, however, War Department orders peremptorily closed Fort Armstrong and sent Dr. Emerson north to Fort Snelling. Sam went with him, never to return to Iowa. Emerson himself did. The army's medical corps suffered a cutback in strength at the close of the Seminole War, and Dr. Emerson found himself without a job. Pending reinstatement, he returned to the old site of Poweshiek's village, now a flour-

ishing young city named Davenport. While once again attending personally to his land claim, Emerson offered himself as physician to the local folk. Then, late in 1843, he died rather suddenly, possibly from an advanced case of syphilis. Emerson's wife, who inherited the bulk of his estate, returned to St. Louis, where three years later the slave she had known as Sam insisted that she sell him his freedom. Mrs. Emerson refused. Sam therefore brought suit against her, his attorneys arguing that Sam's onetime residence in the State of Illinois and the Territory of Wisconsin—both off-limits to slavery—had nullified their client's status as a slave.

By this date Sam also insisted on answering to the name Dred Scott, and for the next several years the litigation over his freedom drew increasing national attention as it slowly worked its way up toward a judgment, ultimately, from the highest court in the land.

**I**n the meantime, Dr. Emerson's Sam had not been the only black to take up residence on Iowa soil. In the mid-1830s men and women who had set themselves to pioneer a new land crossed the great river, fashioned tiny urban enclaves along the Mississippi shore, and then began to scatter inland, following the northwestward inclination of rivers into the southern Iowa drift plain, a country of level lowlands, timbered slopes, and grassy upland divides. From the level crests of these ridges curious land-lookers gazing westward could sometimes glimpse an illusion that the ancient, pre-alluvial contour of the earth's surface had somehow reconstituted itself, stretching ahead of them like some calm midwestern seascape, receding toward a flat horizon beneath the big pale sky. Upriver, above the Racoon forks of the Des Moines, the north bend of the Iowa, and the rapids of the Cedar and the Wapsipinicon, the streambeds finally opened out, their enclosing landforms giving way to the gentler roll of the great prairie. Here the land rose more authentically to an uncluttered skyline, its sweep suggesting the awesome infinity of space. It was, they were to discover, the most uniformly rich agricultural region of its size, perhaps, anywhere on earth.

Blacks accompanied these first pioneers. One such individual, a tall, very dark frontiersman, was reported to be living at Poweshiek's village on the Iowa River in 1838. The Mesquakie seem to have called him Magaahkwa, or "Big Timber," a good-humored reference to his build. Other blacks, their precise numbers unknown, came as slaves. In the early thirties, Isaac Campbell's John, his owner a prosperous Indian trader and merchant at Keokuk, the newly founded settlement





Nothing is known about the African American woman in this tintype labeled only "favorite slave" and donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1935, along with other images and manuscripts of the Jerome Dutton family, who settled in eastern Iowa during the 1850s.



at the mouth of the Des Moines, was "hiring out his own time," the phrase universally applied to slaves whose owners allowed them to work for wages and keep all or part of the proceeds. John, they say, was saving to buy his freedom. In 1834 a slavewoman came to the Iowa country with the household of the famous army officer, Stephen Watts Kearney. The first recorded death at the town of Bentonsport, founded on the lower Des Moines in 1839, was that of Shapley Ross's slave, "Aunt Mornin." Ross, an early surveyor who stoutly maintained that the area actually lay within Missouri, a slave state, also owned at least two other slaves. Forty miles upriver at the new Sauk and Mesquakie agency, two female slaves cooked meals for the construction gang putting up agency buildings. Two others, purchased in Missouri, belonged to a white trader and his Indian wife. The Indian agent himself, General Joseph Street, owned several slaves; all were freed at his death in 1840.

Iowa's achievement of separate territorial status in 1838—under a constitutional instrument that specifically forbade slavery—did not entirely suppress the tendency of owners to bring slaves with them from southern states. For a few years such transgressors included the two top officials in the territorial government. Ex-Congressman John Chambers of Kentucky, appointed governor by President William Henry Harrison, disembarked at Burlington in 1841 accompanied, wrote an eyewitness, by "a small troop" of slaves. The territorial secretaryship, also a presidential appointment, fell to O. H. W. Stull of Maryland. A visiting Illinoisan was shocked to learn that the Burlington quarters of the two federal officials contained "seven or eight colored people" who were flogged, otherwise treated as slaves, "and kept in profound ignorance of the fact that, when they touched the soil of Iowa[,] they were free."

Since Chambers objected to the remoteness of the raw new territorial capital, Iowa City, both he and Stull sojourned there only during legislative sessions. During such visits the governor would be admirably attended by his elegant black bodyservant, "Uncle Cassius," and Stull decided that he, too, should display a style appropriate to high office while among the legislators. Luckily, he found a slaveowner willing to sell. The household of Richard Chaney, a suburban Iowa City sawmiller from Virginia, included a likely mulatto boy less than ten years of age whom Stull purchased for \$250, sealing the bargain in the lobby of a local hotel. When Stull was dismissed in a patronage dispute in 1843, he sold this young man to a brother-in-law, a fellow Mary-

lander, who promptly took the lad south. But when Chambers's own term of office ended two years later, at least two of his slaves, Cassius and a young woman named Carey Bennett, claimed their freedom and remained in Iowa.

By this date slaveholding was fast becoming as socially unacceptable in most of the territory as it was illegal. As early as 1837 the Keokuk merchant and slaveholder, Isaac Campbell, responded to criticism by moving to the right bank of the Des Moines River from where, safe on Missouri soil, he continued to direct his many Iowa business ventures. A few years later, Shapley Ross angrily decamped to Texas after some of his Bentonsport neighbors interfered with his attempt to recapture a runaway slave. Other Iowa slaveholders simply dissembled. The territorial census takers counted 188 black Iowans in the summer of 1840, but less than 10 percent of them went into the record as slaves. Many owners, such as Chaney the miller, obviously mislabeled their chattels, for the benefit of the enumerators, as "free colored." Ten years later the census takers recorded no slaves at all in Iowa, though it is known that new settlers crossing the Missouri line occasionally brought slaves with them. In the early fifties, for example, an alcoholic farmer from North Carolina, a music-lover named L. P. ("Tune") Allen, brought into Ringgold County two teenaged slaves, a male and a female. He worked them a year before taking them south for sale. Settlers also held a number of slaves in adjoining Decatur County in the years just before the war. One of these blacks, John McDaniel's George, died in slavery and was buried in the village cemetery at Pleasanton. Years later some humane citizen, touched by George's story, erected a small monument to his memory.

Only at Dubuque could blacks be said to have constituted a community in Iowa's earliest years. Here a booming frontier village had blossomed by virtue of rich deposits of top-grade lead ore in the high wooded hills surrounding what had been, a few years before, an important Mesquakie town. The French-Canadian trader Julien Dubuque had been permitted to mine lead there from 1788 until his death in 1810, after which the area was closed to outsiders. Adventurous newcomers extracted ore from the site as early as 1830, only to be twice driven out as illegal squatters by the army. Settlement resumed in 1833, swelling the town to some five hundred souls, many of them tough Irish immigrants or hardbitten veterans of the southern Missouri diggings. Such men, often drunk on corn liquor or cheap brandy, sometimes well-armed,



made early Dubuque a kind of prototype of the legendary mining camps of the American West.

In June 1834, Dubuquers organized a vigilante court and tried, sentenced, and ceremoniously hanged a quarrelsome Irishman, Pat O'Connor, for putting five slugs into the chest of his young partner. Three days later the town's Methodists sought to elevate the spiritual tone of the place, commencing erection of the town's—and the territory's—first church. At least six local blacks, some of them said to have been slaves, pledged modest sums to the Methodist building fund and had their names dutifully, if not always very suitably, inscribed on a circulating subscription paper: "Uncle Tom" (50¢), Caroline Brady (12½¢), Walton Baker (25¢), Sam Welsh (25¢), Nathaniel Morgan (50¢), and Tilda (25¢). A black woman, Charlotte Morgan, wife to Nathaniel, was one of the seven charter members of the congregation. Six years later Dubuque's blacks numbered seventy-two, probably about 5 percent of the town's population but enough to constitute the largest black aggregation in the territory.

In only two instances, both of them unusual, does history record the specific circumstances of blacks' coming to Dubuque. One case was that of Ralph, a Missouri slave. In 1834 Ralph entered into a written agreement with his owner, a Mr. Montgomery, promising that on December 31, 1838 he would pay Montgomery \$550 plus interest, in return for which the owner would grant Ralph his freedom. With Montgomery's permission, Ralph then set off to the Dubuque mines, intent on striking it rich. But by the spring of 1839 luck still eluded him and the note was overdue.

Ralph's contract with Montgomery was evidently no secret at the diggings. Two Virginians, viewing the slave's predicament as more than just a good joke, wrote to Montgomery, offering to return the defaulting black to Missouri for a hundred-dollar fee. Montgomery, by no means inclined to write Ralph off as a bad debt, agreed.

The Virginians swore out an affidavit that Ralph was a fugitive slave, then presented the document to a local justice of the peace, who obligingly ordered Ralph's arrest and extradition. Accompanied by the sheriff, the Virginians surprised Ralph at his mineral claim west of town, clapped him in handcuffs, and lifted him into a wagon. Thinking it best to avoid Dubuque, they took the road for Bellevue, where they delivered him to the captain of a riverboat for transport south. But a Dubuque grocer, Alexander Butterworth, had happened to witness Ralph's arrest while plowing a field on his suburban farm. His blood boiled at the sight of the hapless black in the grip of slave-catchers. Armed with a writ



19TH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATION OF UNIDENTIFIED SLAVE-CATCHER AND BLACK

of habeas corpus hastily obtained from District Judge T. S. Wilson, and accompanied by the reanimated sheriff, Butterworth galloped to the rescue. He and the officer reached dockside just in time and forced the captain to return Ralph to Dubuque for a hearing, whereupon Judge Wilson, recognizing the far-reaching implications of the case, urged its prompt transfer to the newly organized Iowa Supreme Court at Burlington, of which he himself—at a politically precocious twenty-four years of age—happened to be a member. All parties agreed.

*In re Ralph* (1839) became the second piece of litigation to come before the Iowa court. Representing the defendant was David Rorer, a Virginia-born former slaveowner from Arkansas, a short, barrel-chested individual who nine months earlier had put a fatal pistol ball through the body of a political enemy. Rorer also happened to be one of the brightest legal lights in the territory. Legal talent, however, proved in this instance to be less important than that the plaintiff had a very strong case, American jurisprudence offering ample precedent for the freedom of a slave whose master intended to make free territory the slave's place of residence either by carrying him there or permitting him to



locate there on his own. The supreme court of Missouri, in no less than a dozen cases, had been particularly zealous in applying this doctrine to freedom suits resulting from slave residence in Illinois. The facts of one such case, *Ralph v. Duncan* (1833), were similar to the Iowa case in more ways than just the name of the plaintiff, who had won his freedom on grounds that his Missouri master, in return for a promissory note, had allowed him to hire his own time at the Shawneetown salt works and Galena mines.

Rorer's most powerful argument involved reminding the court that the famous Missouri Compromise, wherein Congress had granted Missourians statehood in 1821, had also specified that in the lands of the Louisiana Purchase north and west of Missouri's boundaries "slavery and involuntary servitude, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes, . . . shall be, and is hereby, forever prohibited." The color of legality had been given Ralph's arrest by a supplementary clause providing that "any person escaping into the same [free territory], from whom labour or service is lawfully claimed, . . . may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labour or service as aforesaid." But by no stretch of the imagination, Rorer noted, had Ralph been a fugitive.

The court's Lincolnesque chief justice, Charles Mason, had a decade earlier graduated at the top of his class at West Point, just above the brilliant Robert E. Lee. He now rendered the court's decision that Ralph was neither fugitive nor slave. Once permitted by his owner to establish a residence on Iowa soil he had become free—automatically manumitted by the Missouri Enabling Act. That Ralph had not paid Montgomery a lawful debt was certainly true, but the courts couldn't reduce a man to slavery for that, at least not in Iowa. Having issued their verdict, the justices adjourned, appropriately enough, on Independence Day. Ralph went forth a free man.

One fine spring morning several seasons later, more or less on the anniversary of Ralph's arrest, Judge Wilson discovered the former slave at work in the garden behind Wilson's house. Asked to explain himself, Ralph obliged. It was his way of saying thanks, he said. "I ain't paying you for what you done for me," he added. That, both he and the judge knew, would have been improper. "But I want to work for you one day every spring," he said, "to show you that I never forget you." And he was as good as his word. As Judge Wilson recalled half a century later, Ralph "afterwards struck a big lode, but gambled it away, and died with the small-pox." Not, however, before gaining a modest immortality in the history of Iowa jurisprudence.

A far less pleasant fate awaited a second Dubuque black man a year after Ralph's case had been heard. Nathaniel Morgan and his wife Charlotte had come to the diggings from Galena, the Illinois mining town that was the immediate place of origin of many early Dubuquers. In 1833 a Dubuque boardinghouse owner offered them both employment. The Morgans accepted and, as already noted, played small roles in organizing and funding Dubuque's first church. By 1840 they were among the community's oldest residents. Nat was apparently in his early thirties, Charlotte a few years older. They shared their house with a boarder, a free black adult male. Nat now worked as cook and waiter in a local hotel, Charlotte as a laundress. Some said Nat occasionally pilfered cigars and other small items from hotel guests. Others later denied this, but by then it no longer mattered.

One day in early September 1840, Nat had just cooked dinner and was carrying it to the guests when a group of angry men burst into the hotel, seized him, and accused him of stealing a trunk full of clothes. Nat denied personal knowledge of the theft, but a mob gathered, growing in size as the excitement emptied the bars. Colonel Paul Cain, a thirty-five-year-old miner from New York, the commander of the local militia unit and a failed candidate for sheriff, took charge. He and the crowd rushed Nat down to the riverbank, where they secured him to a post, bared his back, and began to whip him to make him confess.

At first Nat screamed his innocence, then his guilt. He confessed, according to an eyewitness, several times, saying whatever his tormentors seemed to want him to say but thereby contradicting himself, which brought renewed applications of the rawhide. After some hundred lashes the upper part of Nat's body must have been literally flayed. But now Cain demanded that Nat lead them to the stolen trunk. Nat agreed, as he now agreed to everything, and they cut him down and dragged him to the confessed hiding place. No trunk was to be found. Thirty-nine more lashes fell upon Nat's lacerated back. Had he possibly hidden the trunk at his house? Nat cried yes. They dragged him there, where Charlotte's sobs no doubt accompanied the gruesome choreography of the mob. Once again the quest proved fruitless. Again the lash. Nat no longer cried out, but now, in a whisper, he named a place up on the bluff. He would show them the place, he said, if they would just let him rest a moment. This was denied.

Our eyewitness may have been Dr. Ambrose Crane, who warned that further punishment would kill the victim, only to be told by the mob to back off unless he wanted some of the same. In any event, the eyewitness





SHSI (IOWA CITY)

In this illustration off of a three-dollar bank note from the State Bank of Iowa (circa late 1850s), an African American participates in a husking bee. The black population in Iowa before the Civil War included both enslaved and freed people.

stayed behind as the mob half-led, half-dragged Nat Morgan into the woods. When they brought him home again he was dead, testified the eyewitness, "his back broken, and his ribs and sides all stove in!" The stolen trunk was never found.

The authorities charged Colonel Cain and several others with murder. The killers stood trial, but were acquitted on the grounds that their intent to commit so gross a crime had not been proved. They went free.

An attempt to reconcile the Dubuque that championed Ralph's freedom in 1839 with the Dubuque that in 1840 took Nat Morgan's life confronts a dilemma: which incident appears to provide the truer insight into the town's underlying racial attitudes?

Lucius H. Langworthy, one of the brothers usually considered the founding fathers of Dubuque, once commented publicly on both the Ralph case and the lynching. Given Langworthy's membership in the town's business and professional elite and the deference due him as one of the community's oldest residents, and given also the fact that he spoke to a local audience, his words would appear to possess a special authority. In this prepared address of 1855, published many years later, Langworthy first discussed the Ralph incident, praising the black man's rescuers as "liberty-loving citizens" who did not allow "the fear of being called abolitionists" to deter them from their humane and historic task. Dubuquers are reminded to be proud of them. In the next breath Langworthy considered the lynching,

and his message here was that Nat Morgan's killers were not bad men—only misguided. Implying that the martyred Nat may in fact have been guilty of the theft, Langworthy proved extravagantly judicious in his censure of Cain *et al.*, whose savagery, he cautioned, was simply "a mistaken zeal, and with entire ignorance, perhaps, of the injury they were inflicting, or, with reason blinded by prejudice." "No doubt," he added, "the men who inflicted this wrong, regretted their rashness and folly when too late." His concluding moral was that there is simply no accounting for man's inhumanity to blacks, beasts, and females: "some men consider negroes, oxen, women and mules of like endurance and fit subjects for the cruel master's lash."

Langworthy, in short, tempts one to discount Ralph's rescue, insofar as it occurred at Dubuque, as something of a fluke, and to see Ralph's liberators as not only good men but, given the peculiarly virulent racism that must have infected the community by the late 1830s, men of absolutely reckless heroism. And two additional items of evidence from the year 1840 support this interpretation.

First, Iowa's territorial assembly passed an act incorporating Dubuque, thereby providing for its governmental reorganization. The customary clause setting the rules for the town's first election, however, did not specify voter eligibility in the language usual to such acts. Instead, presumably at the behest of Dubuquers themselves, the act asserted—much more stridently than



necessary—that only “free white” males would vote. A small case in point, but ominous. Second, only in and around Dubuque lived Iowans callous enough in 1840 to identify to the census marshals the servile status of their household blacks. Elsewhere, slaveholding Iowans at least had the grace to lie. Nothing daunted, Dubuquers nonchalantly called a slave a slave. Eleven Dubuquers headed households containing slaves, dividing among them the ownership—or at least the supervision—of sixteen slaves: six males, ten females.

Evidently the largest slaveholder in town was none other than the Honorable George Wallace Jones, one of Iowa Territory's two delegates to the United States Congress. Back in 1837, in eagerly assuring U.S. Senator John C. Calhoun that Iowans were not, as a rule, abolitionists, Jones had told the white South's most powerful advocate that in fact he himself owned ten or a dozen slaves. That may have been stretching it a bit for the benefit of the beetle-browed South Carolinian. Three and a half years later, at least, Jones's Dubuque household included three female slaves, one of them a child, as well as a free black adult male.

A second very prominent Dubuquer, the Virginia-born receiver of the local United States land office, Thomas McKnight, had a slave couple in residence, in addition to a free black male. The household of Jack Thompson, a prosperous Dubuque merchant, included a young male slave. And so on. Most appear to have been employed as domestic servants, as was probably also the case of the fifteen free blacks residing in white households, since they are distributed singly or in pairs suggestive of live-in help.

The ill-fated Nat Morgan and nine other free blacks headed Dubuque households of their own in the summer of 1840. Such household heads, their families, and their lodgers totaled forty-one, or nearly 60 percent of the local black population. The degree of cohesiveness within this black aggregation—free and slave—is of course difficult to judge. Of distinctly black institutions at this time, virtually nothing is known; although an African Baptist Society had formed by the late 1840s, Dubuque's first independent black church edifice would not be built until after the Civil War. Neither is there evidence of a black leadership structure. A case might be made that the relative value of contributions to the Methodist fund indicates some gradation of status and seniority among Dubuque blacks in 1834. That notion would, not implausibly, place Nat Morgan and “Uncle Tom” at the top of the black hierarchy—the one a cook whose services were in demand by local whites, the

other a presumably venerable figure about whom nothing else is known. If this were true, Morgan's lynching takes on another tragic dimension, since it deprived the black community of an important leader.

What is suggested by the absence of record is a black community beset by a degree of fragmentation and disarray, and on whom the frightful lynching must have had a profound impact. That infamous episode, or the general decline of lead mining in the early forties, or both, probably had some relationship to the dispersal of the black Dubuquers of 1840. Of the ten free black household heads in the census of that year, only two can be identified as still there in 1850: Aaron Baptiste, a Kentucky-born laborer, and Charlotte Morgan, Nat's widow, who at fifty years of age was the live-in housekeeper for two immigrant miners, a Briton and a Scot.

Not only had the number of Dubuque blacks declined by well over half in the 1840s, but the twenty-nine survivors showed little evidence of a collective well-being. A fourth of them lived in white households. The “nuclear” household—that is, father and mother and children (if any)—predominated over the “augmented” household—a nuclear family plus lodgers. But this is best interpreted as evidence not of socioeconomic health, but simply of an out-migration of blacks that had considerably eased the pressures on available housing. No black child had attended school in the 1849–50

*Evidently the largest slaveholder in town was none other than the Honorable George Wallace Jones, one of Iowa Territory's two delegates to the United States Congress.*

academic year. All eight of the black adult males claimed occupations; one was a carpenter, one a miner, one a barber, in addition to two servants and three laborers. But only three of them owned real property. Thomas C. Brown, the black barber, claimed \$1,100 worth of land; a laborer, Anthony Arthur, claimed \$1,000 worth; and Aaron Baptiste, \$600 worth.

That the climate of race relations in Dubuque had improved much since the lynching is questionable. On election day in August of 1856 a respectable Dubuque businessman made so bold as to remark publicly that he considered a black person to be as good as himself, “or as an Irishman, if he [the Irishman] behaved himself.” Infuriated onlookers knocked him to the sidewalk,



seriously injuring him, and would doubtless have killed him, it is said, had not the unfortunate man been rescued by the police.

**I**n 1840, 42 percent of all black Iowans lived in Dubuque. Ten years later that percentage had dropped to 9. The new capital of Afro-American Iowa in 1850 was Muscatine, a Mississippi River settlement some eighty miles to the south.

Originally a small trading post at a site convenient for landing water-borne supplies for the Sauk and Mesquakie of the interior, Muscatine had been platted as a townsite in 1836 and early became an important stopping place for general steamboat traffic. In the 1840s it became, like Dubuque, a leading lumber-milling center fed by the vast pineries of northwest Wisconsin. Young Samuel Clemens, who apparently worked there for a few months in his brother's newspaper office, remembered Muscatine for its fabulous summer sunsets.

In 1840 the census taker counted only twenty-five blacks in Muscatine, a figure amounting to perhaps 5 percent of the total village population. All lived in households headed by whites. Fifteen of them, in fact, lived in the house of David Warfield, a young sawmill owner, the males probably being employed at the mill. The town's other blacks appear mainly to have been house servants living in the homes of leading business and professional men.

In the following decade Muscatine's blacks doubled in number at the same time their proportion of the town's total population shrank to 2.5 percent. They also had been relatively successful, meanwhile, in establishing residential independence from local whites. In 1850, with the exception of two hotel boarders and a mulatto child evidently living with her white kinfolk, only one of the town's sixty-two blacks lived with a Caucasian family. This, it may be imagined, was indispensable to the development of a true black community possessing its own institutions and structure of leadership. Unlike the Dubuque blacks of the 1840s, Muscatine's Afro-Americans made this transition, and an important event of 1849 reflected their social maturation. In October of that year they met to organize an African Methodist Episcopal church. Accepting the deed to a lot on Seventh Street, where the A.M.E. edifice would rise, the congregation's leaders evidently embraced the town's most prominent blacks.

Three important figures within the congregation represented a ten-member kinship group that had migrated from Maryland to Iowa in the late 1830s and had probably helped swell David Warfield's household in

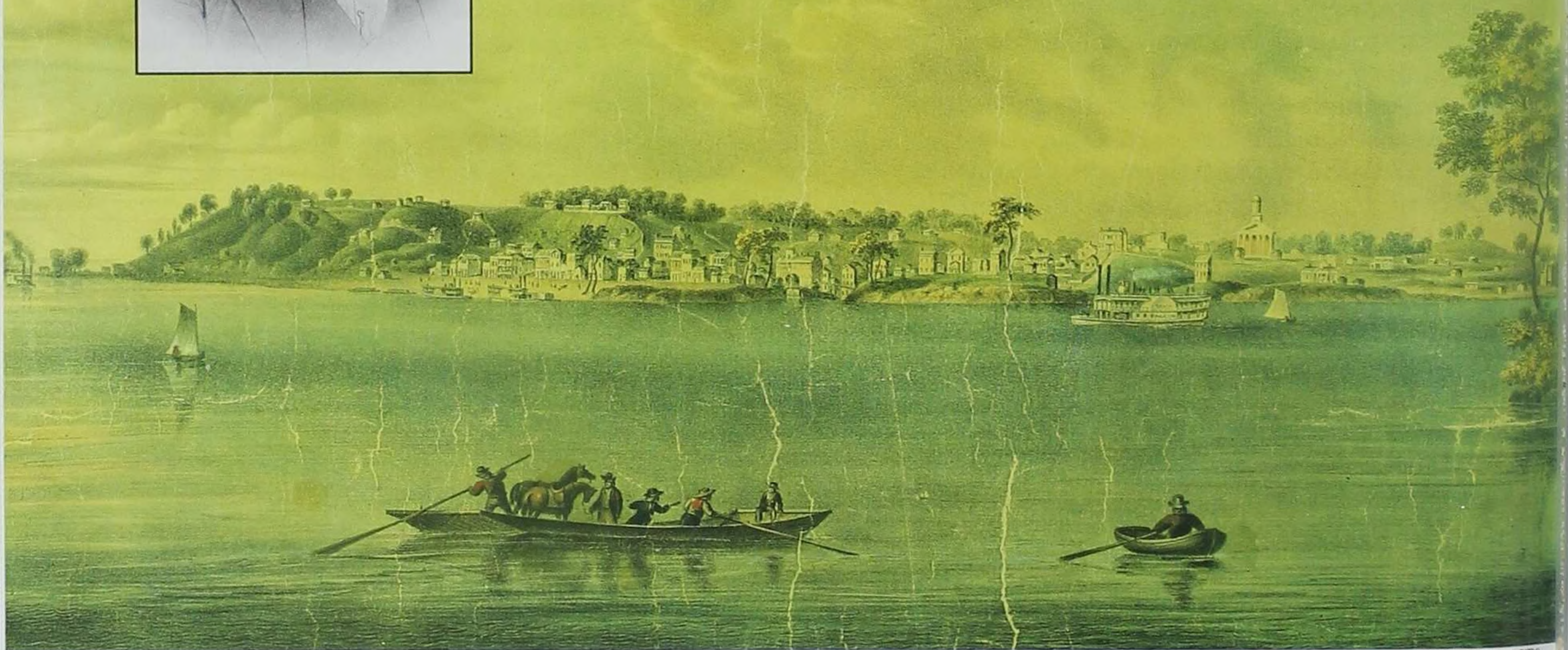
1840. Ten years later the Mathews clan occupied three separate cottages. Its matriarch, Ellen ("Aunt Nellie") Anderson, lived alone with her second husband, Daniel Anderson, a whitewasher by trade who served as the new congregation's first steward, class-reader, and local preacher. Aunt Nellie's forty-year-old son, "Uncle Ben" Mathews, a teamster, and Edmund Mathews, possibly her brother, were both charter members of the A.M.E. board of trustees.

Another charter trustee, a Maryland-born barber, Thomas C. Motts, arrived in Muscatine at about the same time as the Mathewses. Late in 1846 he began to advertise his barbershop—"on Second Street, two doors south of the Drug Emporium of Fenimore & Peterson"—in the local newspaper. As an apparently lucrative sideline, he also sold and delivered coal. By 1850, at age forty-six, he was the town's wealthiest black, owning real estate worth six thousand dollars. He was also a new father, his second wife, Mahala, a light-skinned native of Delaware, having just given birth to their son Job. Little Jo Ann Motts, probably a daughter by his deceased first wife, lived next door, and two unmarried women, possibly T. C. Motts's sisters, lived in a separate cottage nearby.

Another prominent individual, Alexander Clark, served the new church as recording steward and Sunday-school superintendent. Clark had been born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1826, the son of an emancipated slave couple. He was also, thanks to an Irish grandfather, at least one-quarter white. At age thirteen he sought his fortune in Cincinnati and briefly attended grammar school while living with an uncle who taught him the barbering trade. Two years later he served a brief stretch on the Ohio as a riverboat bartender. Then, one spring day in 1842, the sixteen-year-old Alex Clark stepped off the boat at Muscatine and stayed the rest of his life. Resuming work as a barber, he also invested in real estate. One purchase, a tract of timberland, led to profitable contracts for supplying firewood to various steamboat lines. By his mid-twenties he had married a light-skinned, Virginia-born Iowa City girl, had fathered a daughter, and with twelve hundred dollars' worth of property was the second most prosperous black in town.

A youthful member of the Mathews clan, ten-year-old Charles, boarded with the Clarks, suggesting the hospitality by which the overflow from one black household might be accommodated by another. That Muscatine's black families remained cramped for space is suggested by this sharing of homes. Of the fifteen dwellings inhabited by black folk in 1850, ten enclosed at least one person whose surname differed from that





BOTH: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

**By 1850, Muscatine had replaced Dubuque as the Iowa town with the highest black population. Inset: Alexander Clark arrived in Muscatine when he was sixteen. Through barbering, real estate, and selling firewood to steamboats, he became its second most prosperous black resident.**

of the household head. Yet the average number of occupants per dwelling was only four—an indication of the small size of housing available to families of relatively modest income, one would suppose. The so-called augmented household, emblematic of a black community experiencing population growth, predominated. No house contained more than one married couple, however, and no inter-generational “extended” households were in evidence. Even within the Mathews family, each couple, as already noted, maintained a household of its own.

In 1850 the black community included eighteen children of school age (that is, five through fifteen), of whom a third had attended classes the previous winter. Black parents may well have sponsored a private grammar school, inasmuch as twenty-two-year-old Sarah Davidson, a Kentucky-born black, identified herself as a teacher. Muscatine’s black adult males constituted a work force not dissimilar to Dubuque’s. It included a

blacksmith, three cooks, four barbers, two teamsters, a painter, and a laborer. A relatively higher proportion (eight of twenty) reported no occupations, however, something usually taken to imply unemployment. Any plausible comparison of property holdings among the blacks of the two towns seems precluded by T. C. Mott’s relatively enormous realty valuation. Indeed, any very specific economic or demographic comparisons between Muscatine and Dubuque blacks—or between either group and its associated white community—would be naive; the numbers involved are simply too small for sophisticated use. But it can probably be said that in terms of general socioeconomic configuration the blacks of Dubuque and Muscatine did not differ appreciably from urban Afro-Americans elsewhere in the antebellum North.

In the winter before local blacks organized their church, a Muscatine version of the Ralph case served to



emphasize the relatively benign racial ambiance of the town. Dr. Samuel H. Merry was a St. Louis physician who in 1833 had helped his good friend and colleague, Dr. John Emerson, obtain an army appointment. Fifteen years later, at sixty years of age, Merry followed Emerson's example and moved to Iowa, locating in rural Muscatine County. Perhaps thinking to avoid the kind of trouble the late Dr. Emerson's heirs were now having with the Dred Scott litigation, Merry left his own young slave, Jim White, behind in St. Louis, entrusting Jim to his daughter, Mrs. Thomas Hughes. Mrs. Hughes hired Jim out as a worker on a steamboat. But soon word came to Dr. Merry that Jim had suffered a severe head injury in a brawl with the boat's steward. Under the circumstances, it seemed best that Mrs. Hughes send him north to Dr. Merry for a medically supervised convalescence in the fresh country air.

As it turned out, however, Jim White had worked away from home just long enough to gain a strong sense of independence. Now he proved so impudent a patient that the exasperated Merry ordered him off the premises. Jim readily obliged. He trudged the dozen miles to Muscatine, where he asked for and received a job at a local hotel, the American House.

Though Dr. Merry seems to have washed his hands of the obstreperous Jim White, Mrs. Hughes and her husband insisted that Jim return to St. Louis and slavery. Jim refused. In October 1848 the Hugheses dispatched a St. Louis detective named (ironically enough) Horace Freeman to bring Jim home. Freeman stepped ashore at Muscatine, located young White at the hotel, and promptly detained him at gunpoint preparatory to calling in the law. But the burly hotel proprietor laid hands on Freeman and roughly divested him of his pistols while Jim took to his heels. Jim sought refuge at the house of Alex Clark, the barber, who had Freeman arrested for kidnapping. The detective countered by having Jim arrested as a fugitive slave. The arresting officer brought Jim White before D. C. Cloud, a local justice of the peace, a self-educated lawyer shortly to become Iowa's first attorney general. Cloud ruled in Jim's favor on the grounds that, as in the Ralph case nine years earlier, the black man's owner had permitted him to come north, whereupon he became no more a slave than he was a fugitive.

The angry detective refused to give up. He seems to have concocted a scheme to have Jim kidnapped by stealth, only to be outwitted by Alex Clark. He then tried another tack. He obtained a precept for Jim's arrest from J. J. Dyer, the federal judge for the District of Iowa, then resident at Dubuque, intending that the subsequent hearing be held in an atmosphere much less protective

toward blacks. But Freeman's new plan leaked out, and no sooner was Jim rearrested than his supporters—both black and white—filed for a writ of habeas corpus, preventing removal of the prisoner to Dubuque. Judge S. Clinton Hastings of Muscatine, acting chief justice of the state supreme court, granted the writ, obliging Freeman to appear before him to justify Jim's arrest. After learned counsel had argued the pros and cons, Hastings ruled that the arrest had been improper, since Judge Dyer's court was a court of concurrent jurisdiction, under the United States Code, with that of Justice Cloud. Dyer's court could not, therefore, entertain the case once it had been disposed of by Cloud. Judge Hastings also refused to force Cloud to grant an appeal, and thereby quashed further litigation in the matter.

Later, on the front steps of the American House, Judge Hastings dramatically placed his hand on Jim White's arm. "Gentlemen," he announced to the knot of interested onlookers, "here is a free man."

**I**n mid-century yet another numerically important black community assembled on the frontier northwest of Dubuque. In central Fayette County, fifty miles from the Minnesota line, a rural enclave known as "the colored settlement" constituted, in 1854, the largest aggregation of blacks in the state.

A light-skinned people of mixed ancestry, they were understood never to have been slaves. Their original patriarch, Sion Bass the elder, had been born in Virginia in the early 1780s. He and his wife Sarah crossed into the freer social environment of North Carolina in the 1790s—either as fugitives or, more likely, as manumitted slaves induced to leave a commonwealth increasingly hostile to free blacks. Sion Bass the younger was thus of North Carolina birth, as was Sion the younger's son, T. R. Bass. In the 1820s two households of Basses came north, probably under the auspices of a Quaker program for resettlement of North Carolina freedmen, spending the 1830s in Indiana before crossing into Illinois in the mid-forties. Here, in the countryside south of Kankakee, they comprised a community of some eighty free persons of color.

During the Indiana sojourn one of the Bass girls, Melinda, married Joel J. Epps, a recent migrant (or fugitive) from Georgia. The Epps thereafter joined the Basses in serving as the community's nucleus. By 1850, six of the colony's twelve cottages contained household members surnamed Bass or Epps. Dwellings averaged seven residents each, rather more crowded than among Muscatine's blacks that same year, although as in Muscatine the multi-generational household had been



successfully resisted. Sion Bass the elder, for instance, maintained a separate dwelling, as did Sion the younger and T. R. Bass. The augmented household predominated, as in Muscatine. Seven of the settlement's dwellings contained occupants whose surnames were not that of the household head. Only two houses appear to have sheltered more than one married couple each.

Although precise family relationships are difficult to tease from the 1850 census manuscripts, it is likely that family size was the most important demographic difference between the blacks of the Illinois colony and those of Muscatine. We do know that Melinda Bass, for example, married at age twenty-one, gave birth a year later, and averaged a child every 2.6 years through the first thirty-seven years of her marriage to Joel. And herein lay probably the colony's most important problem. In 1850 fourteen of the settlement's children were of the ten-to-nineteen age bracket. As potential candidates for matrimony within a culture that apparently cherished the independent family farm as an ideal, they would soon need to be provided land in a manner that, if possible, would not force them to sever their ties with the community's kin network. In fact, a lack of sufficient farmland already troubled the colony. Twenty male members called themselves farmers or farm laborers in 1850; only six of them owned land. Those who reported real estate valuations to the Illinois census enumerator averaged thirty-eight years of age, while nonowners were substantially younger, averaging twenty-seven. A potentially dangerous socioeconomic fissure had appeared that could only get worse as a rising generation of young persons married within the group. The best solution would be for the colony, or at least a substantial portion of it, to move to a region in which farmland was cheap and abundant.

A frontier preacher, David Watrous, a middle-aged New Englander of the United Brethren faith, provided the catalyst. Although a Caucasian, Father Watrous had once ministered to the Illinois colony and knew of its pressing need. In Iowa he glimpsed the magnificent prairie uplands stretching northwestward from the heavily timbered left bank of the Volga River, and he wrote immediately to his former flock about the local availability of high-quality government land. He urged them to come to Fayette County and see for themselves. In response, Sion Bass the younger, his son T. R. Bass, and a third member of the community, Ben Anderson, traveled west in 1852 to view the possibilities. They liked what they saw and each staked out a claim before returning home. The follow-

ing spring Joel Epps and a young friend, Seymour Wilson, toured Fayette County. Epps at once entered a claim, and both men, as the county's historian puts it, "wrote back for all to come along as soon as possible."

At seventy years of age, Sion Bass the elder evidently felt himself too old to migrate once again, but he gave his blessing to the new exodus. Nearly half the Illinois colony moved west to Iowa. Except for T. R. Bass, none of the migrating adult males had owned property in Illinois. Within three years Fayette County's black settlement sheltered fifty-nine souls, most of them having come directly from the Illinois colony but with a sprinkling from Indiana and other parts of Illinois. All but one of the men were farmers, as in the Illinois colony, the only nonfarmer among them being Sion Bass, the new settlement's blacksmith. In their household arrangements, only one married couple per dwelling was now the norm as well as the ideal. The nuclear house-

*Fayette County's black settlement sheltered fifty-nine souls. . . . All but one of the men were farmers.*

hold now predominated; only three of the settlement's dwellings contained occupants with surnames different from those of the household heads.

Fayette County's black settlers made up a small minority—less than 4 percent—of Westfield Township's population in 1856. Nevertheless, they soon encountered race prejudice. Strongly antislavery their white neighbors might be; they would, in fact, cast nearly 75 percent of their ballots for the Republican party's first presidential candidate in November 1856. But, testifies the local historian, "the coming among them of these colored people was not looked upon with favor, and there were, at times, various consultations among the [white] settlers to see what had best be done about it." When Seymour Wilson died in a well cave-in, his body was not welcomed at any Westfield Township cemetery. His mourners laid him to rest on his own premises. Thereafter, a wooded knoll on Joel Epps's property became Pleasant Hill Cemetery, the settlement's burying ground, in a self-segregating initiative that helped defuse local racism.

The high value placed by the settlement's adults on the education of their young also helped lessen racial tension. Back in Illinois less than half the colony's adults could read and write, and only four of their twenty-four children of school age had attended classes in 1849–50.



Now Westfield Township's School No. 4, a stone structure standing just down the road from Pleasant Hill Cemetery, was built, apparently designed by a kind of tacit public consent for the exclusive use of the settlement. It thereafter functioned as its school, its church, and the center of its social life.

In the meantime Dred Scott's case finally came before the United States Supreme Court. In March 1857—some twenty years since Dr. Emerson's Sam had sojourned on the brushy flats opposite Rock Island—the justices announced their decision: Dred Scott was still a slave. And since the Founding Fathers had not intended that blacks qualify for American citizenship, Dred had never been entitled to sue for his freedom in the first place. But Dred Scott's fate was of little import in and of itself; the Court's bombshell was its opinion that the Founding Fathers had never granted the United States Congress the right to prohibit slavery in Wisconsin Territory or any other portion of the federal domain. In the words of the elderly Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, the only power conferred on Congress in the matter of slavery in the territories was "the power coupled with the duty of guarding and protecting the owner in his rights."

As the reverberations spread across the nation, most Democratic party spokesmen lauded this "solution" to the divisive issue of slavery in the West. Republicans reviled it as simply another paragraph, by no means the most profound, in a political testament by which the South, in urging the legitimacy of its peculiar institution, condemned itself. "Have you [seen] the decision of the Supreme Court of the U.S. in the Dred Scott case?" inquired Iowa's Samuel J. Kirkwood of another Republican loyalist, state senator Aaron Brown. "It is infamous," Kirkwood added, his pen furiously underscoring the words. He himself took comfort only in a kind of grim conviction that he passed along to Senator Brown: "Well thank God there is a better day coming."

Had Kirkwood been clairvoyant, he might have phrased the thought differently while still holding to the truth of it. Within five years he himself, as governor, would lead Iowans through the appalling first years of the Civil War. His correspondent, Aaron Brown, would be the third man from his county to offer himself to the Union army, and he would rise to command the gallant 3rd Iowa Infantry Regiment in time to lead it into the heart of his native state, Mississippi, until falling—his thigh torn by a gunshot wound from which he never fully recovered—in the great sacrificial charge of Pugh's Brigade into the massed rebel guns defending

Jackson. But Aaron Brown's rendezvous with destiny, like Kirkwood's, lay ahead of him. For the moment, a southern-born, Ohio-bred physician-turned-realtor approaching middle age, he dwelt peaceably with his wife and three children in the village of Fayette, within two miles, as the crow flies, of Westfield Township's black settlement. Among the neighbors Colonel Brown would ride south to represent in the struggle to reform the Union were—fittingly enough—the descendants of Sion Bass.

The citizenship of black Americans, what the high court had denied in the Dred Scott case and what all too many white Americans collectively denied again and again, the individual conscience could not always, even when it tried, deny. In a township just west of Fayette County there lived one Andrew Felt, a local justice of the peace and militant Democrat. Time in the prisoner-of-war pen at Andersonville would ultimately bring a change in him, and dramatically so, but in the late 1850s he remained an outspoken southern apologist who strongly defended the Dred Scott decision, frequently quoting Chief Justice Taney's opinion in the case that blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

It seems that a black man living in the village of Bradford had his watch stolen by a white neighbor, and he therefore commenced a suit of replevin before Judge Felt to recover the watch. It was a clear-cut case, but counsel for the defense, a lawyer named David Babcock, cleverly moved for a dismissal on grounds that the plaintiff was black and the Supreme Court had ruled that blacks had no rights a white man was bound to respect.

Judge Felt thought that over for a moment or two, then turned to Babcock. "Look here, Dave, that may be good politics," he said, "but Dred Scott decision or *no* Dred Scott decision, this nigger's going to have his watch." ♦

*This article first appeared in the May/June 1982 Palimpsest and served as the basis of the first chapter of author Robert R. Dykstra's Bright Radical Star: Black Iowans and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier (Harvard University Press, 1993). The author is Professor of History Emeritus at the State University of New York-Albany.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on data collected from federal and state censuses, county histories and historical atlases, and local newspapers of the period. Other sources consulted include Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in Law and Politics* (New York, 1978); Ruth A. Gallaher, "Slavery in Iowa," *The Palimpsest* 28 (May 1947); and William J. A. Bradford, ed., *Reports of the Decisions of the Supreme Court of Iowa* (Galena, Illinois, 1840). For annotations, see chapter 1 of Robert R. Dykstra's *Bright Radical Star: Black Iowans and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).