

Dave Bakke: Illinois database adds to history of freed slaves



Dave Bakke

By **DAVE BAKKE** (dave.bakke@sj-r.com)

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The advent of the Internet has revolutionized genealogy. Records by the millions are available with the twitch of a finger. But, often, when African-Americans research their genealogy, they run into a huge obstacle. It's called slavery.

The state of Illinois has compiled a little-known database that can help.

Archivists working under the auspices of the secretary of state's office maintain the Servitude and Emancipation Record Database (www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/servfrm.html) that contains historical records, many of them documenting freed slaves who settled in Illinois.

Karl Moore, an archivist who has worked on the database for years, explains that a freed slave was required to carry a certificate to prove he or she was free and not a runaway. Those certificates, called "free Negro bonds," had to be submitted to the county and, today, provide some of the information for the database.

The information has been added gradually over the past decade as more Illinois counties contributed. There are about 20 counties participating now, all in southern Illinois. The casual browser may just select a county in the database search menu to see all documents from that county.

To show how difficult tracing this history can be, there is this from the database website: "In many of these early records, slaves, servants and even free blacks are identified only by a Christian name or sometimes by no name at all. The name of a master or other party to the transaction may be the only evidence of the identity of such poorly identified individuals."

There is renewed interest in Illinois' Servitude and Emancipation Record Database because of Lea VanderVelde, a law professor at the University of Iowa. She and a research assistant have been working with Moore to correct errors and update information.

"I offered to read through all of the handwritten documents to see if the database online was accurate," she says. Errors are being corrected.

The professor has been studying this area of American history for a long time. Her books include "Slaves on the Frontier: The Background Story of the Dred Scott Case" and "Redemption Songs: How Slaves Sued for Freedom in St. Louis Courts." Her next book is under way.

"I'm writing a book on slaves in the Land of Lincoln," VanderVelde says. "There will be people who will say there was never a slave in Illinois. Whether you call them 'indentured' or whatever, one of the more amazing discoveries is that virtually every one of the early Illinois governors and most lawyers had what you would consider slaves, what I would consider slaves, whether they called them that or 'indentured servants for 99 years.'"

It is sometimes disturbing to read these documents, most of which date from the mid- to early 19th century. One concerns a female slave known only as "Dice." Her children are to work as slaves until her son is 21 and his sister 18, "at which time they are to be free from all bondage whatever."

Their owner agreed to this with the condition that Dice teach the children "common family and husbandry and furnish them with common clothing, boarding, washing and lodging during the time of their apprenticeship."

Another document shows that one Edward Black in St. Clair County was owned by Caldwell Cairnes. “Because of the 85 pounds (English money) Caldwell Cairnes had paid for him,” the document reads, “Black indentures himself.”

Only a handful of states have similar information posted online, says VanderVelde. “Missouri has a good one,” she says. “Indiana has one, but it’s not as good as (Illinois).”

Even though much of this information is well over 150 years old, it can still be emotional for a family to discover. That probably is one reason why the information is hard to come by.

“As far as I know,” says Illinois archivist Moore, “we’re the only one that has a database exactly like this that deals in county records. It’s gotten a lot of use for genealogical purposes.”

VanderVelde has read about a third of the Illinois county histories, which typically were done when there is a significant anniversary such as the 100th or 150th year after the county was created. Very few of them, she says, document local African-Americans. Part of the reason, she says, could be the difficulty in finding information, or it could be a desire to omit painful episodes.

“I want people to understand, especially the next generation to understand,” she says, “that many of the frontier histories have been whitewashed, creating an ‘amnesia’ about the slaves and indentured servants in free states.”

Illinois, she says, is to be commended for the work that’s been done to get its records online.

“I would like to give a shoutout to Karl Moore,” she says. “He’s been laboring in these fields for a long time. It’s extraordinarily helpful. It’s under-appreciated. I would like to see further expansion.”

She specifically mentions Jo Daviess County in extreme northwest Illinois. She says freed slaves were brought there to work as miners. Census records show there were settlements of freed slaves also around Davenport and Rock Island, but not much information about them is available.

History is not always pretty, but it’s still history.

Everybody has a story. The problem is that some of them are boring. If yours is not, contact Dave Bakke at 788-1541 or dave.bakke@sj-r.com. His column appears Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. To read more, visit www.sj-r.com/bakke.

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