

IOWA HISTORY: IT'S NOT JUST FOR FOURTH GRADERS ANYMORE!

by

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Four times during the school year I conduct interactive sessions on the underground railroad in Iowa over the Iowa Communications Network. Most of the students who come on our “virtual field trip” to four of Iowa’s best-known underground railroad “stations” are fourth- or fifth-graders, but every now and then a class of middle school or high school students shows up, too. Judging by the looks on their faces, they’re not quite sure they belong with us.

But of course they do, because like politics, all history is at some point local history. Before it becomes part of one of the major “themes” or “strands” in a standard textbook, every historical event first took place in a specific locality. But too often it must seem to our students that, if an event was “important,” it couldn’t have happened here! Well, why not here, in Iowa?

Take the underground railroad as a case in point. Betsy Ross is the only woman in American history with greater name recognition by our students than Harriet Tubman, who made the journey from slavery to freedom no fewer than nineteen times with freedom seekers from the eastern shore of Maryland. Unfortunately, she never made it to Iowa, but is her story necessarily more dramatic than that of Charlotta Pyles who, with her husband Henry and eleven of their twelve children, made her way from Kentucky by way of St. Louis to Keokuk? In order to earn money to buy the freedom of two sons-in-laws left behind in Kentucky, Charlotta went east, where she met Frederick Douglass and joined the antislavery speakers on the lecture circuit. Her granddaughter wrote that Charlotta’s home became one of the first underground railroad “stations” that freedom seekers encountered in Iowa, and some of her descendants still live here today.¹

Or how about Josiah Henson? You can visit his home today near Dresden, Ontario. It’s likely that Harriet Beecher Stowe patterned her famous “Uncle Tom” after him. He didn’t make it to Iowa, either, but John and Archie did, to the home of J.H.B. Armstrong near Cincinnati, in southern Appanoose county, just over the state line from Missouri. They were sent on to John Shepherd’s where they were given supper: “My good God, John!” Archie

is reported to have said, "Who'd have thought we'd set down to a meal like this?" They too made it to Canada, and Archie is said to have written to say that they were working there for a dollar a day and adding: "I hope the good Lord will bless you for your kindness toward us and I hope the day will soon come when we will be a [free] people."²

John Brown did make it to Iowa, not just once but perhaps half a dozen times, on his way to and from "Bleeding Kansas." He wrote a letter to his wife from a camp in Scott county in the fall of 1855,³ but we know more about his sojourn near Springdale in Cedar country during the winter of 1857-8 and his trip across Iowa a year later with twelve freedom seekers liberated by force from three farms in the Osage district of western Missouri. Many people know John Brown only for the bloodshed on Pottawatamie Creek in Kansas or the ill-fated raid at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. If they also knew him as Iowans did, as the stern, Bible-quoting abolitionist who "wherever he lived... aided in the work of guiding fugitive slaves to freedom under the North Star,"⁴ they might not be so quick to dismiss this complex and charismatic leader as simply a deluded fanatic and madman.

Of course there's more to Iowa's story than its too-little-known role in the underground railroad. For many years as a high school history teacher I used the story of the Amana colonies to illustrate the differences between religious and secular utopias in early nineteenth-century America. The Supreme Court cases involving the Granger laws originated in Illinois, but we had more local granges than any other state, and the rails of the four "Granger roads" crossed Iowa, too. William Boyd Allison of Dubuque was one of the three or four most powerful senators in America in the late nineteenth century, and Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver of Fort Dodge, who is reported to have predicted that "Hell would go Methodist before Iowa went Democratic"⁵ was considered to be the ablest orator in the U.S. Senate in the early 1900s.

I could go on, but I think you see my point. With a little imagination, high school history teachers can illustrate many national themes with illustrations drawn from Iowa's experience. We shouldn't leave our students thinking that if an event was important, it couldn't have happened in Iowa. It could have, and often it did.

A number of years ago, I got involved in a program in a neighboring state that was its equivalent of History Day in Iowa. It's a great program, but not enough students get a chance to participate in it, especially at the high school level. I gave my students a choice: they could do a traditional research paper, or they could do a local or family history research project for

History Day. Some of them weren't so sure that would help them get a good score on the Advanced Placement examination, and I warned them that the History Day project would be more work—but also more fun. Those who chose to do History Day were seldom disappointed, and they often found that, for the first time, history came to life for them. They were excited when they found out that history wasn't just something that happened to others; it happened to people who were connected to them. I wish I'd discovered this powerful motivator much earlier in my teaching career.

I left Iowa to teach in Illinois, but lately Iowa-trained teachers who can't find a job here have found one in Texas. Iowa and Texas entered the Union at about the same time, but Texas has always been bigger, and lately it's been growing much faster, too. I wonder if those Iowa-born Texans ever try to learn about their adopted home by stopping to read the historical markers along the highway. If they do, it might take them the rest of their lives to finish; they're everywhere! Unlike Iowans, Texans seem to think that an event wasn't historically important unless it happened in Texas! Perhaps we Iowans don't have to go quite that far, but a lot of interesting things did happen here, too, and more than a few of them relate to events of national importance. If we can help our students to see that, perhaps it will reinforce their pride in having been born and raised right here in Iowa.

References

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