

Virginia Dyer

Slavery in Missouri

Missouri was a slave state like many other states in the United States of America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Missouri citizens could legally own a person of African heritage, just as they could own any other type of property, because the law considered slaves property, not humans. In 1820, the first General Assembly of Missouri enacted a slave code similar to Virginia's, which did not differentiate between property, such as cattle and household objects, and slaves.¹ The French and Spanish owned slaves west of the Mississippi for many years before the United States, under Thomas Jefferson, bought the Louisiana Purchase, and the territory that would become Missouri, from Napoleon and the French. Slaves had been in Missouri long before the Missouri Compromise of 1821 legally admitted Missouri into the union as a slave state. Missouri's unique situation, not only geographically but also demographically, caused the institution of slavery in Missouri to become important to the study of American history and social, economical and political conflict resolution.

When the French owned the Louisiana Territory, they enacted the Code Noir, or "Black Code," that defined slavery in that territory. This code outlined how the free whites and the enslaved peoples, both black and Native American, would co-exist.² When the Spanish owned the Louisiana Territory, they ended the practice of Native American slavery in 1769 in order to better relations with the Natives.

The first black slaves moved into the area that is now Missouri when the French discovered lead in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Philippe Renault, a banker and "director-

¹ (Christensen, Jones and Parrish. Missouri: The Heart of a Nation. St. Louis: Forum Press. 1980, 106)

² (Missouri State Library, Missouri State Historical Society and Missouri State Archives 2008)

general of the [Company of the Indies] mining operations”, brought these slaves to Missouri in 1720.³ The exact number of the first black slaves in Missouri is unknown, although it is estimated to have been around five hundred. The French brought these slaves to mine lead in the area that is present day Washington County. The mined lead was loaded onto boats and shipped down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, and from there, the French shipped the lead to Europe. Slave labor was used because it was cheaper than hiring Europeans to do the laborious work, and the Africans seemed to weather the environment better than the Europeans did.

When settlers moved into the territory from east of the Mississippi River, the majority of them after the War of 1812, they migrated from southern states where slavery was a legal, constitutional right.⁴ Since Missouri did not have the ideal land for creating large plantations, Little Dixie being the exception, many of the settlers moving into the Old West were small family farmers. These farmers could not afford many slaves because they were subsistence farmers, growing only enough to feed and clothe their families. According to the earliest known record of the number of slaves in the Missouri Territory from the year 1810, there were only 3,011 slaves in the entire territory compared to 17,227 whites.⁵ As the population of the Old West increased, so did the population of slaves. By the time Missouri gained statehood in 1821, slavery was an integral part of the social and economic lives of its citizens.

The Missouri Compromise was the controversial piece of legislation that brought Missouri into the United States as a slave state. There was an outcry by congressional representatives and U. S. citizens who did not want Missouri to enter the union as a slave state because then the slave states would outnumber the free states in Congress, thus giving a voting advantage in the U.S. Senate to the South and West. With the expansion of U.S. territory westward and the growing

³ (Christensen, Jones and Parrish 1980, 23)

⁴ (Christensen, Jones and Parrish 1980, 105)

⁵ (Negro Population in the United States 1790-1950 n.d.), 45 and 57.

settlement of the area, Congress grew increasingly agitated over the issue of slavery's expansion. When Missouri applied for statehood the Missouri Compromise allowed Missouri to become a slave state on the condition that Maine be admitted into the union as a free state, thus equalizing the power between the slave and free states in Congress. The Missouri Compromise also set the southern border of Missouri as the geographic line that separated the free states from the slave states. The slave holding state of Arkansas now bordered Missouri to the south, the free states Illinois, Iowa and Kansas bordered Missouri on the east, north, and west, and the Indian Territory bordered Missouri on the southwest. In the end, the Missouri Compromise did not solve the slavery expansion question, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act replaced the Missouri Compromise in 1854. Kansas-Nebraska declared that the people living in a territory that applied for statehood would decide the issue of whether or not that territory would be a slave or free state.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 caused major problems for the people of Missouri and Kansas. Raids by Missouri Bushwhackers against anti-slavery Kansans, and raids by Kansas Jayhawkers against pro-slavery Missourians caused bloodshed and animosity for the better part of the 1850s. This conflict between Missourians and Kansans over slavery is now referred to as "Bleeding Kansas".⁶ Bushwhackers and Jayhawkers would raid the farms, stores, and homes of citizens and neighbors who held an opposing view. During this time, many people lost their homes and even their lives, and men such as John Brown and William Quantrill became infamous for their exploits and the devastation they caused to those holding an opposing view to their own.

Slave owners justified their ownership of black men, women, and children in many ways. Many looked to Bible passages, such as Ephesians 6:5-8 and the book of Philemon, to justify and

⁶ (Phillips 2002, 60)

support their practice of slaveholding.^{7 8} Many of the churches in Missouri, as well as in the South, did not preach against slavery but rather believed slavery was biblical and that they were following God's law. Some Missouri churches, however, did preach against slavery as an institution. These churches used the Bible and Christian beliefs to argue against the institution of slavery. Obviously, these opposing views caused tension in Missouri. This blend of religious views in Missouri was unique. In the North, either the majority of churches spoke out against slavery or they were neutral. In the South, many of the churches held pro-slavery views. Many Christian denominations, such as the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, began dividing over the issue of slavery into Northern churches and Southern churches.⁹ In Missouri, pro-slave and anti-slave Missourians sometimes went to the same churches together so the North/South, pro-slave/anti-slave divisions were more difficult to maintain peacefully.

Others justified slavery by saying that the slaves were better off in the United States than they would have been in Africa. In a letter to the Editor of the *Far West* newspaper in the September 22, 1836 publication, one citizen wrote:

I am one of those who do not view the institution of negro slavery in that light, and do not consider it an evil. I am convinced that the condition of the African slave in the United States is much superior to, and happier than, the condition of the wild and savage African, roaming in idleness and vice beneath his tropical Sun, over his own burning Lands... In his native land he is subject to many cruel and barbarous customs, and bends beneath the despotism of some ignorant and tyrannical chief, who makes him more a slave than he is her, in this country. It is a matter about which the wisest and best men differ.¹⁰

⁷ (Ephesians 2005. Ephesians 6: 5-8 says "⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, ⁸because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.)

⁸ (Philemon 2005. In the book of Philemon, Paul sends Onesimus, a slave who had run away, back to his master.)

⁹ (Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America*, 1939)

¹⁰ (Unknown 1836)

Anti-slavery supporters argued that man is not a thing, and therefore could not be bought and sold. George Bourne, author of *A Condensed Anti-Slavery Bible Argument; By a Citizen of Virginia*, wrote:

MEN, bartered, leased, mortgaged, bequeathed, invoiced, shipped in cargoes, stored as goods, taken on executions, and knocked off at public outcry! Their *rights*, another's conveniences; their interests, wares on sale; their happiness, a household utensil; their personal inalienable ownership, a serviceable article or a plaything, as best suits the humor of the hour; their deathless nature, conscience, social affections, sympathies, hopes--marketable commodities!¹¹

Bourne also used the Bible and countered the pro-slavery supporters with many Bible verses such as Jeremiah 22:13, Leviticus 19:13 and Exodus 22:22-24.^{12 13 14}

Missouri's slave population was never as large as in the other slave states, such as Virginia, South Carolina and Mississippi. The average number of slaves per Missouri slaveholding family in 1850 was 4.6; there were 19,185 slaveholding families and 87,422 slaves.¹⁵ Compared to the averages of other slave states, Virginia 8.6, South Carolina 15.0, and Mississippi 13.4, Missouri had a relatively low ratio of slaves to slaveholding families.¹⁶

Little Dixie was an area in Missouri that held the largest slave population. Little Dixie encompassed most of the counties along the Missouri River from Lexington, Missouri to Jefferson City, Missouri. The Little Dixie counties were suitable for the creation of large, plantation style farms due to the layout of the land, the richness of their soil, and their proximity to the Missouri River. The Missouri River was the major mode of transportation for the people

¹¹ (Bourne 1845, 8)

¹² (Jeremiah 2005. Jeremiah 22:13 "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.")

¹³ (Leviticus 2005. Leviticus 19:13 "Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.")

¹⁴ (Exodus 2005. Exodus 22:22-24 "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.")

¹⁵ (Negro Population in the United States 1790-1950 n.d., 56)

¹⁶ (Negro Population in the United States 1790-1950 n.d., 56)

in this area of Missouri because the railroad had not been built that far west. By the 1860s, the city of Rolla was one of the farthest points west on a railroad. The farmers in Little Dixie transported their products via steamboats or barges on the Missouri River to the Mississippi River. This ready transportation caused the farmers in this area to be wealthier than farmers in other areas of the state. Wealth allowed the farmers to afford more slaves, thus, the counties around the Missouri River held the largest slave populations. According to the 1860 census, the Little Dixie counties of Platte, Clay, Jackson, Lafayette, Saline, Howard, Boone and Callaway had the largest slave populations in Missouri.¹⁷ The same census revealed that all of these counties had over 3,000 slaves each; the two counties with the largest slave populations were Howard County, which had 5,886 slaves, and Lafayette County, which had 6,374.¹⁸

The people who settled this area mainly migrated “from Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee”, all slave states.¹⁹ Crops grown by these settlers included corn, wheat, cotton, tobacco, hemp, and flax, all of which required a large labor force.²⁰ Hemp was the major cash crop for most of the Little Dixie farmers by the middle of the nineteenth century.²¹ The hemp rope that most southern cotton planters used to bind and transport their cotton came from Missouri; therefore, the success of the hemp farms in Little Dixie depended on the success of cotton in the Deep South and vice versa.²² Most slaveholders in Little Dixie, Missouri saw slavery as the only means for them to make a profitable living because the agricultural products they were farming, such as hemp and tobacco, were labor intensive.

¹⁷ (Kennedy 1864, 280-284)

¹⁸ (Kennedy 1864, 280-284)

¹⁹ (Hurt 1992), 6.

²⁰ (Hurt 1992), 5.

²¹ (Hurt 1992), 108.

²² (Hurt 1992), 108.

The life of a common Missouri slave was busy with work and family. Marriages among slaves were different from marriages among free whites because Missouri law did not consider marriages among slaves legally binding.²³ In some instances, slave owners would officiate their slaves' marriages. Peter Corn, former Missouri slave, recalled how his master would marry slaves by picking up "any old kind of paper and call it lawfully married. An almanac or anything would do."²⁴ Many of the "marriages" among slaves were unique because a slave may or may not live with their spouse. For instance, a family in St. Genevieve County owned Peter Corn's mother and siblings while a Mr. Aubershon in Coffman owned his father. The family of a slave was always haunted by the fact that one never knew when a father, mother, brother, sister, husband, or wife would be sold to another slave owner or hired out to someone else.

The hiring out of slaves was a common practice in Missouri. Slaves could be hired out, which means they were sent to work for someone other than their owner, and their owner would receive payment for their work. Former Missouri slave Jane Baker recalled how her mother said, "dat de worse side ob slavery wuz when de slabs war farmed out. A master or slabe owner wud loan or sub-let slabs ta a man fur so many months at so much money."²⁵ Another former Missouri slave, Mary A. Bell, recalled being hired out by her owners at the age of seven to a Presbyterian minister.²⁶ "I nursed in dat family one year. Den Miss Diggs [Kitty Diggs, her owner] hired me out to a baker named Henry Tillman to nurse three children. I nursed there two years."²⁷

The discipline of slaves in Missouri was similar to the discipline of slaves throughout the United States during this time. Former slave James Monroe Abbot, from Cape Girardeau,

²³ (Duffner 1975), 134.

²⁴ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 86)

²⁵ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 24)

²⁶ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 25-26)

²⁷ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 25-26)

recalled witnessing a fellow slave receive a whipping with a cat-o-nine tails.²⁸ Another former slave, Parson Allen, recalled that neither he nor his fellow slaves ever received whippings, only “a little boxing.”²⁹ However, Mary A. Bell remembered the unjust beatings her father received from his overseer.³⁰ Because by law slaves were property, a slave owner could do almost anything to his slaves for punishment with no repercussions except maybe a warning from the local sheriff.

Religion among slaves in Missouri was the same as it was for their white counterparts. Many Missouri slaves went to church with their masters, normally sitting either in the balconies or in the segregated sections of churches. Parson Allen, a former slave, remembered that in church as a boy the white preacher always read a “special text to the darkies, and it was this, ‘Servants, obey your master.’”³¹ The content of such religious teachings was meant to reinforce the idea that slavery was biblically correct, and it was a sin for slaves to disobey their masters.

By law, if slaves wanted to have a meeting of their own, a white person had to be present to oversee the meeting.³² Camp meetings among slaves would happen occasionally in which “those attending were caught up in an emotional experience which helped to sustain them through their difficulties for another year.”³³ In some instances, slaves even underwent training to become pastors and ministers.³⁴ This ministry training, however, most often did not involve teaching the prospective preachers to read or write because it was illegal to teach slaves, free blacks, or mulattoes to read or write in Missouri.³⁵ Peter Corn recalled, “If my master or mistress would see me readin’ a paper dey would come up and say, ‘What you know about reading a paper?’

²⁸ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 3)

²⁹ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938,18)

³⁰ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 27)

³¹ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 18)

³² (Christensen, Jones and Parrish 1980, 114)

³³ (Christensen, Jones and Parrish 1980, 114)

³⁴ (Duffner 1975), 132.

³⁵ (Missouri 1847)

Throw dat down.' Dis was done to keep us from learnin' to read anything."³⁶ Slave-owners retained the right to govern the subject of the sermons given by black preachers in order to prevent them from preaching against slavery, or inciting insurrection amongst the slaves.³⁷

The Dred Scott case is an excellent example of the awkward judicial situation that Missouri citizens and slaves had to deal with before the Civil War. The issue of whether a slave was free or not if they traveled into or through a free state was a question some slaves and their owners asked the Missouri courts to answer. Some slaves in Missouri attempted to sue for their freedom on the basis that they had traveled to free states, but a Missouri Law passed on December 30, 1824 made it nearly impossible for a Missouri slave to gain their freedom.³⁸ Dred Scott was the slave of Missourian and Army surgeon Dr. John Emerson. When the doctor transferred to Illinois and later Wisconsin Territory, Dred Scott went with him. On the basis that Dred Scott and his wife had traveled to free territory, Scott filed for his freedom with the St. Louis Circuit Court. The Supreme Court of Missouri ruled on March 7, 1857 that because Scott was black, and therefore not a citizen, he could not sue in federal courts.³⁹ This decision by the Missouri Supreme Court led to a reviewing before the Supreme Court.

The emancipation movement in Missouri began during the 1820s and 1830s.⁴⁰ Although this movement was very small and was not at all popular at first, by the 1850s, the movement had grown to an influential minority. Most arguments on behalf of emancipation did not argue the humanitarian issues of slavery, but rather argued on behalf of labor.⁴¹ Some abolitionists saw the enslaved black as a detriment to the workforce in Missouri because they believed these slaves

³⁶ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 86)

³⁷ (Bruce 1895), 72.

³⁸ (Missouri State Library, Missouri State Historical Society and Missouri State Archives 2008)

³⁹ (Christensen, Jones and Parrish 1980), 144-145.

⁴⁰ (Bellamy 1971), 101.

⁴¹ (Bellamy 1971), 104.

were taking jobs away from white men.⁴² Many abolitionists in Missouri argued that they were doing poor white men a service by pushing for the freedom of slaves. Slave owners and anti-abolitionists argued the other side of that point; the freedom of the slaves would result in a drastic decline in the availability of jobs for white men.⁴³

During the Civil War, there was no distinct line between those Missourians who chose to fight for the North and those who chose to fight for the South. In the South, the majority of white people either supported the institution of slavery or were ambivalent about it. In the North, the majority supported the continuation of the Union and the emancipation of the slaves. In Missouri, however, this was not the case. The choice of whether or not to fight for the North or the South often differed from town to town or even farm to farm, family to family. Not all Missourians who owned slaves supported the Confederacy. For example, the Ray family, a rural farming family that lived on the Wire Road near Wilson's Creek, owned slaves but were pro-Union. Many Missourians remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War while maintaining their pro-slavery views.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation did not free slaves in Missouri; the proclamation only freed slaves in the Confederacy. "That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free..."⁴⁴ Emancipation of Missouri slaves took place on January 11, 1865 by an act of the state convention in St. Louis.

⁴² (Bellamy 1971), 104.

⁴³ (Bellamy 1971)

⁴⁴ (The Emancipation Proclamation 1862)

After their emancipation, some Missouri slaves stayed with their former owners, while others went somewhere else to begin their free lives on their own. Hannah Allen stayed with her former masters after being freed. “I was paid nothin’ after slavery but just stayed with de boss and dey gave me things like a calf, clothes, and I got to go to church with dem and to camp meetings and picnics.”⁴⁵ Parson Allen went to the University of Louisville as a theological student. “I’s one of de preachers of de church here and am a deacon too. I studied at de University of Louisville, where I was a theological student, and was one of de main orators in de school.”⁴⁶ William Black left after his master gave him some clothes and five dollars. “When we was freed our master didn’t give us nothing, but some clothes and five dollars. He told us we could stay if we wanted to, but we was so glad to be free dat we all left him.”⁴⁷ Whether or not a slave decided to stay with their former masters depended on many things, including their former treatment as slaves.

Whether former slaves stayed with their former owners or went out on their own to begin a new life for themselves, their stories will never be forgotten. Many of these men and women struggled after the Civil War to gain acceptance and equality in a society that resented them. In the 1930s and 1940s, the U.S. government sent interviewers to Florida, Texas, Missouri, Louisiana and other former slave states to interview former slaves and record their remembrances. By the time the Worker’s Progress Administration set out to record these accounts, many former slaves had died. Most of the interviewees had been slaves as young children or teenagers so their recollections and memoirs as slaves reflect the troubled years from the 1850s through the end of the Civil War.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 10)

⁴⁶ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 19)

⁴⁷ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938, 33)

⁴⁸ (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project Administration, Missouri 1936-1938)

Slavery in Missouri was an important social, economical and political issue that helped shape issues and opinions of Missourians throughout history. Because slavery had such a different effect on Midwestern states than slavery in the South had on Southern states, it is an issue well worth study and reflection. By studying the ways in which the pro-slavery and anti-slavery supporters interacted with each other and studying the evolution of Missouri slavery and its emancipation, Americans can gain insight into how to deal with present-day social, economical and political issues.

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