

making SPACE

Part 1: Bound for Elgin by Chasity Gunn

Today, it's difficult to imagine Elgin without an African American community. The arts, government, and education are a few of the many sectors that have been enriched and cultivated by African Americans. Yet, there was a time when their presence was unwelcome and even unlawful.

When Illinois became a state in 1818, it was deemed a free state, even though it had nearly 1,000 enslaved people. It was the only state in the upper Mississippi Valley that allowed slavery, and it enacted some of the nation's worst Black Codes. These strict laws sent a message that African Americans were not welcome. If they were to enter the state, they could not remain for more than ten days.

One of Elgin's earliest residents opposed these anti-Black laws. The Rev. A.J. Joslyn was a delegate when Illinois drafted its state constitution. He voted against legislation prohibiting African Americans from immigrating into the state, holding office, and having the right to vote. Joslyn was an active member of the Anti-Slavery Liberty Party.

During the 1800s, various anti-slavery speakers visited Elgin. Frederick Douglass, a prominent abolitionist and formerly enslaved person, was one of them. In 1853 and 1855, during a seven-week tour of the Midwest, he spoke in Elgin. Douglass was optimistic about the lectures' effect on shifting the nation's opinion of African Americans and slavery. He felt audience members had "a better feeling toward the colored man, a higher esteem of his qualities and a deeper respect for his rights...."

Less than ten years after Douglass' visit, an officer, a chaplain and an officer played a pivotal role in bringing the first group of African Americans to Elgin, despite state legislation that made the act illegal.

John S. Wilcox was one of Elgin's earliest residents. In the 1850s, he was an officer in the Continentals, "an amateur military company that was a highly disciplined infantry unit." When the Civil War began, Wilcox was trained and ready to serve as a soldier.

In August of 1861, Wilcox became a captain of Company K 52nd Illinois Volunteer Infantry. He was eventually promoted to colonel brevet brigadier general. While fighting the Battle of Corinth in late September 1862, he came into contact with African Americans who were "contraband."

Throughout the Civil War, thousands of enslaved people fled plantations to find refuge in areas Union troops had occupied. The Union army did not emancipate them but considered them “contraband” of war. The army created contraband camps where enslaved people lived and worked. Corinth, Mississippi, was home to one of the largest contraband camps.

However, on September 18, 1862, Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war for the Union Army, authorized the transfer of the “contraband” to local communities. “The Illinois Central Railroad began carrying one to four carloads of [African Americans] per day across the Prairie State.”

Wilcox saw the refugees and was moved. Ten days later, he wrote a letter to his wife describing the condition of the refugees and wondered about their future. “What is to be their present fate, how are they going to live during the coming winter?”

Another Elginite also was moved by the condition of the refugees. The Rev. Benjamin Thomas was a chaplain of Wilcox’s unit. He, too, wrote a letter to another Elgin resident, Rev. Joslyn, who was serving in his place as the interim minister of First Baptist Church. In his letter, he asked Joslyn: “how many do you think can find homes at or near Elgin?... Now the time to prove our faith by our works has come....”

Wilcox, Joslyn, and Thomas answered the call to prove their Christian faith. Joslyn formed a committee that agreed to accept the refugees. “We are willing to do anything,” he wrote.

Meanwhile, leaders throughout Illinois vehemently opposed Stanton’s order and refused to welcome African Americans. But, before the order could be repealed, contrabands were on the train to Elgin.

This effort was not without local resistance. Thomas was “threatened with assault and arrest....” On October 15, 1862, he arrived in Elgin with two boxcars of African Americans, mostly from northwest Alabama. The group comprised of five men, 28 women, and 77 children. They were sent to the basement of the Kimball House, a local hotel, and eventually were placed with local families.

Unfortunately, the refugees had been exposed to smallpox, diphtheria, and scarlet fever. These diseases spread among the families who took them in. About a month later, 16 African American children died of smallpox, and about 16 White children died from scarlet fever.

This epidemic increased hostility toward African Americans. Wilcox’s brother was a primary opponent. He introduced a resolution to the Elgin City Council prohibiting African American children from attending public schools. It passed. However, Elijah Wilcox convinced the council to create a separate school for African American children, which opened in 1863. It educated 44 students during its first year and remained open until integration in 1872.