

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Juneteenth commemorates the end of enslavement

How did slavery and its abolition affect Ripon?

Editor’s Note: This Now & Then article was written by Ripon College Professor Travis Nygard.

This week marks the third anniversary of Juneteenth, the federal holiday commemorating the ending of slavery in America. After Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, slavery continued for the next two years in some communities in Texas.

It was on June 19, 1865, that Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger ordered the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, thus freeing the last enslaved people in

illegal after 1787, enslavement continued.

To create a veneer of respectability, according to the historian Mary Elise Antoine, slaves in what became Wisconsin were sometimes classified as “indentured servants”—with a term of indenture of 99 years. Antoine’s book, “Enslaved, Indentured, Free,” explores this history.

Although people in the Ripon community knew few enslaved people, in the years before the Civil War, many residents believed that slavery should end and that Black residents of Wisconsin were entitled to fair treatment under the law.

At one time in America, a network of secret routes and safe houses existed to move enslaved people to states in the north or to the country of Canada, where slavery was illegal. According to family histories, this “Underground Railroad” ran through Ripon. Contrary to what the name suggests, it did not involve trains. The descendants of Ripon residents Myron Morse

submitted photo



STEPHEN NICHOLS (1840-1901) wears a medal for his membership in the Grand Army of the Republic fraternity for Civil War Veterans. Nichols enlisted in Ripon and served under General William Sherman during the Civil War.

Slavery was the most divisive national issue in America at the time that Ripon and its sibling town Ceresco were founded — and the community’s leadership was divided. One founder, Warren Chase (1813-1891), was adamantly opposed to slavery. Another, David Mapes (1798-1890), supported it. That disagreement is likely one of several reasons why the issue of slavery became so important in Ripon’s early history.

Many people think of slavery as a southern phenomenon. Still, there were enslaved people in the area that became Wisconsin. Due to a thin historical record, we do not know if any enslaved people lived near Ripon, but if so, there were probably few, simply because the region was so scantily populated by non-Native people before 1844.

Slavery was practiced legally in what is Wisconsin today until the Northwest Ordinance passed in 1787. The oldest communities of our state, such as Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, certainly had enslaved people in them, although only few biographical details are known. While

(1816-1904) and Carrie Allen Stone (1854-1930) claimed that their families ran stops on the Underground Railroad. Morse’s son also noted in a letter to the paper in 1929 that “at one time a venerable man came to us who had been in the south assisting slaves to escape, both of whose hands were branded on the palms ‘S.S.’—Slave Stealer ... He did not remain long as U.S. officers were on his track.”

Because helping runaway slaves to seek freedom was illegal, direct documentation of the Underground Railroad’s activity did not survive in Ripon. Since 1998, the Network to Freedom program of the National Park Service has documented the Underground Railroad. As of 2024, the project never has evaluated the appropriateness of including sites in Ripon, but in Wisconsin



STEPHEN NICHOLS, WHO was of African-Narraganset heritage, sits in the middle of the front row, likely at a Wisconsin First Calvary Co. D reunion. Ripon Historical Society photo

they have mapped sites in Lydon, Milton, Milwaukee and Green Bay, the best-documented of which is the Milton House.

Other events in Ripon’s history also relate to the abolition or condemnation of enslavement.

When Riponites founded the Republican Party in 1854, its platform focused on preventing the spread of slavery. Soon after that, in 1856, the First Congregational Church, 220 Ransom St., passed a resolution that “It will not fellowship slaveholders, nor admit them to our communion.” The church still shares that stance with the public today on its website.

By 1861, the issue of slavery had divided the nation so severely that the Civil War broke out.

Several units formed locally, the most significant being the First Wisconsin Cavalry, based on the Ripon College campus before deployment. The college’s abolitionist professor of geology, Edward Daniels (1828-1916), and later Ripon’s Oscar La Grange (1837-1915), led the unit.

There were several newspapers in Ripon’s early years, and they disagreed on the issue of slavery. A pro-slavery newspaper—*The Ripon Star*—was edited by Timothy Mapes (1828-1904), the son of one of Ripon’s founders. Needless to say, the paper was controversial. Boldly, in 1861, before being deployed, the men of the First Cavalry destroyed its printing press and threw the newspaper’s cases of type outside into the snow. Slavery was the underlying issue, with the resulting bad blood between Timothy Mapes and Daniels also playing a role.

A few years later, in 1864, the newspaper that continues today—*The Ripon Commonwealth*—was founded. Its first issue proclaimed that the paper was “anti-slavery,” led by the editor A.T. Glaze



THE RIPON COMMONWEALTH’S first editor, A.T. Glaze, was remembered as adamantly anti-slavery on the front page of the 75th-anniversary edition of the paper on Jan. 20, 1939.

(1829-1913). This man was later remembered as “Anti-Slavery to the Hilt.”

Indeed, in that first issue, Glaze supported “the overthrow of slavery as a national political power.” He described newly-freed slaves as “our grateful allies” against the Confederacy’s “heaven-defying cause” in the Jan. 22, 1864 and Jan. 20, 1939 issues.

At least 13 soldiers who enlisted in the Union Army in Ripon to fight in the Civil War were people of color. Although some were undoubtedly from surrounding communities (Ripon was a regional recruitment center), the presence of such people of color indicates a critical mass of Black people willing to fight for the national cause.

One of the men who enlisted in Ripon, Stephen Nichols (1840-1901), was an African-Narraganset who became a national hero as Gen. William T. Sherman’s favorite scout.

Another one of Ripon’s Civil War heroes, George Carter (1839-1920), was a white man who worked in the town as an attorney and an advocate for Black people. For example, he befriended and employed John Battise (c.1842-

unknown) before the war. In 1863, Battise was a civilian, and he actually carried a wounded Carter from the battlefield at the Siege of Port Hudson.

Battise later enlisted in Ripon in 1864, and Carter served as Battise’s advocate for gaining a military pension. The history of Black Civil War soldiers from Ripon and other areas of Wisconsin may be found in the book, “Make Way for Liberty: African Americans in the Civil War” by Jeffrey Kannel. Battise’s life was recently explored by Kannel at the Fairwater Historical Society.

As individuals look back at the many people and stories tied to early African-American history during the era of slavery and reconstruction in Ripon, it is striking how many historical connections there are. While people in Wisconsin sometimes imagine slavery as a southern phenomenon, it affected the entire nation.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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