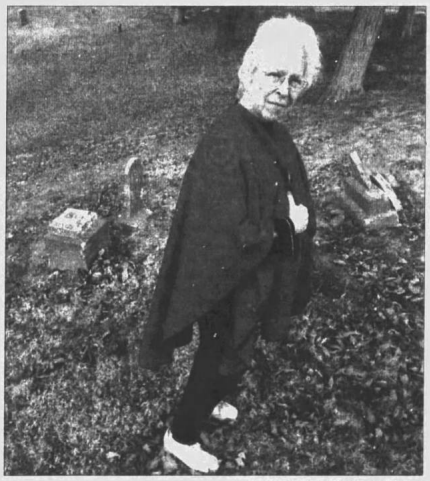
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Historians dig up lessons on slavery



MIKE RANSDELL/The Kansas City Star

Weston historian Carolyn Larsen is close to completing a book that will identify 320 slaves buried in that town's Laurel Hill Cemetery.

By DAVID KNOPF
Special to The Star

It's a Friday afternoon and William Jewell College students hurry to class under a cold, bright sky.

One student — an African-American — follows a sidewalk that runs beneath a cemetery that historians say contains the graves of slaveholders and their slaves. Few of the slaves' graves are marked.

Most with stones are worn by age and illegible.

Mount Memorial was Clay County's first public cemetery. Historians say its northern end served as a burial ground for African-Americans, many of whom had been bought and sold at the courthouse several blocks away.

"People came to settle this area, and of course they brought their slaves with them," said Cecilia Robinson, a professor at William Jewell College.

Robinson discussed local African-American history during a recent talk at Garrison School, a formerly all-black Liberty public school. Robinson's talk was the last in a series of history and preservation seminars sponsored by the city of Liberty and Historic Liberty Inc.

"There are so many people who don't know this history, who'll never know this history until someone writes it down," Robinson said.

Robinson wrote a 13-page chapter for *Liberty for All: Celebrating 175 Years*, a 2004 book marking Liberty's 175th birthday. Her information on African-American heritage was gleaned from written records and oral histories gathered over 17 years.

"Once you start working on it, it's like gold," Robinson said. "Sometimes we'd spend two days on one name."

Much of what she found has yet to reach the general population.

Phillip Millan, a Liberty eighth-grader, said slavery and local black history were discussed at school, but in the most general terms.

"We'll talk about it once in a while, very rarely," said Millan, an African-American who attended Robinson's talk.

Eric Langhorst, Millan's history teacher, said the required curriculum for the American history class he teaches is guided by state grade-level expectations. How teachers approach the requirements is largely their prerogative, he said.

"I'm trying to read as much as I can, but as an individual," said Langhorst, who recorded Robinson's talk for use on an Internet blog he makes available to students.

A good place to begin learning about local black history is the work of former Liberty resident Gary Fuenfhausen, an historian and preservationist.

In an article titled "A Short History of the Institution of Slavery in Clay County, Missouri," Fuenfhausen credits slaves with playing key roles in agriculture, the hemp industry and building.

In 1824, slaves accounted for 11 percent of Clay County's 2,035 people. By 1834, the figure had grown to 16.5 percent. Slave holdings peaked in the decade before the Civil War, Fuenfhausen said, with 34 percent of the 1850 population consisting of "captive African-American men, women and children."

Slave ownership was pervasive.

"In 1860, the average number of slave houses per Clay County owner was 1.2, with 4.3 slaves per house," Fuenfhausen wrote.

Slaves were sold on the court-

See GRAVES, Page 14

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Most of the graves in Laurel Hill Cemetery are unmarked.

GRAVES: Historians uncover stories of slaves

Continued from Page 3

house steps in Liberty and Platte City, and on Main Street in Weston and Parkville. On a single day — Jan. 1, 1859 — $20,000 exchanged hands in slave transactions in Liberty alone.

Although slaves often used only a first name — or took the last name of white owners they liked — they were listed for sale with descriptions such as "African man, 30 years old" or "Negro boy, 1."

Weston historian Carolyn Larsen is close to completing a book that will identify 320 slaves buried in that town's Laurel Hill Cemetery. Although some graves are marked, most are not, Larsen said. Her research of court records and other documents will help identify who's buried there.

"Before the Civil War, roughly a third to a half of Weston was black," said Larsen, who estimates that as many as 700 slaves were employed in hemp production, agriculture or the river trade.

"That (labor) was very intensive here and they needed all the slaves they could get," she said.

Not all African-Americans buried in Laurel Hill were local. Larsen found a number were transported to Weston from elsewhere in Platte County.

Platte County Historical Society researcher Laverne Taulbee said Carroll Township's 1850 population of 2,777 people included 384 slaves. Carroll Township included Platte City, the county seat.

Platte County volunteers are gathering African-Americans history, but little is organized — and almost nothing written.

Searching documents, Taulbee found a story attributed to Bill Dresser, a *Leavenworth Times* employee who went door-to-door selling newspaper subscriptions in the 1940s and 1950s.

Dresser told customers — including Taulbee's family — about a tavern whose basement once served as a "halfway house" between Platte City and Weston. Slave owners, Dresser said, would chain slaves, either newly purchased or about to be sold, in a basement area called "the cave." The idea was to keep them from escaping.

The story — and others passed on verbally — await more thorough historical study.

Taulbee, Larsen and Robinson agree that time is of the essence.

"I think it would be wonderful if our children could learn the history we're discussing, both the African-American children and white children," Robinson said.

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