

May 1818: Quaker abolitionists consider move to Illinois frontier

by Dr. James Paul, in the words of Thomas R. Durham (1784-1854)

Author's note: Illinois entered the union as the 21st state on Dec. 3, 1818. The following account is my interpretation of what frontiersman and Quaker abolitionist Thomas R. Durham might have written in a letter of May, 1818. Sixteen years later in 1834, Durham would camp in Bourbonnais Grove at Twin Oaks on his way to Chicago.

He fell in love with Twin Oaks and purchased a farmstead there which is today known as Perry Farm Park. The Bourbonnais Township Park District has proclaimed May as Durham-Perry Farmstead History Month.

Dr. Paul will portray Thomas Durham at the farmstead's open house at the Bourbonnais Township Park District Perry Farm house and barns on Saturday May 5, 2018 at 11:45 a.m. after Dr. George Godfrey's presentation of the Potawatomi perspective at 11 a.m. The open house is from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and includes nineteenth-century farm life demonstrations and tours. The open house is free and open to the public.

Dr. Paul acknowledged local historian Vic Johnson and Durham family member, Robert Durham, for their research and documentation that inspired the following account. For more information about Thomas Durham, visit btpd.org/Aboutus/ParkHistory/PerryFarm.

Dear friends, now in May, 1818, my brothers Daniel, William and my sisters, Sarah, Mary, Jane, Ruth and I, along with our families, are settled north of the Ohio River in south central Indiana at Lick Creek. When I was 22 years old in 1806, we all left our home state of Virginia for eastern Tennessee. Ten years later, our whole family traveled north of the Ohio River to Waynesville, OH, then Wayne County, IN, and Lick Creek, IN where Quakers from North Carolina in 1813 had established a community.

Some of us are considering a move further west into the Illinois frontier, but first we and our free Negro family members have to wait to hear news about what the Illinois Territory government in Kaskaskia will decide about the issue of slavery. Those legislators plan to draft an Illinois state constitution during this coming summer of 1818—a constitution that will reveal the proposed new state's laws about slavery.

I was born in Brunswick County, southern Virginia, the eighth of nine children. Two of my siblings died in infancy. My father, Thomas Daniel Madkins Durham (c. 1740-94), was born in James City County, VA. He purchased land in Lunenburg County, VA on June 10, 1764. Two years before, he married my mother, Arabella (Marrow) Madkins Durham (1745-1808).

I was born on Oct. 1, 1784, just three years after the commander of the British Army, Lord Cornwallis, surrendered to General George Washington

at Yorktown on Oct. 20, 1781. That decisive battle was only a day's ride north from our farm home where I was born. My paternal grandfather's surname was Durham, but when he died, my paternal grandmother married a Madkins. When my brothers, Daniel, William and I married, we used only the Durham surname.

My father became a Quaker in 1782 at the Blackwater monthly meeting, and my mother joined at the same meeting in 1784, the year of my birth. The first Quakers (or Religious Society of Friends) began around 1650 in England, breaking away from the established Church of England. My Quaker tradition emphasized a close relationship with Jesus, reading and studying the Bible, and equality of all people. We emphasize refusal to participate in war, swear oaths, drink alcohol, and enslave others. Therefore, we Quakers supported abolition of slavery, prison reform, social justice and philanthropic efforts. This was the religious and family environment that I was born into.

In 1782, the year of his Quaker conversion, my father freed our family's slaves. He wrote "I Thomas Durham Madkins being fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind... [freed] Negroes whom I have held" (from Vic Johnson and Robert Durham's research). With this

proclamation, my father freed Hannah, age 36, and her children Charles, 17; Dick, 16; Bett, 14; Beck, 13; Peg, 11; Jacob, 6; Ben, 4; and Ann, 3. He reserved the prerogative of acting as guardian over them until the males reached age 21 and the females reached age 18. Father also purchased and freed on Nov. 3, 1792 two near relatives of Hannah, Maria, age 13 and Squire Durham, 23. Many of these newly freed individuals took the family name of Durham.

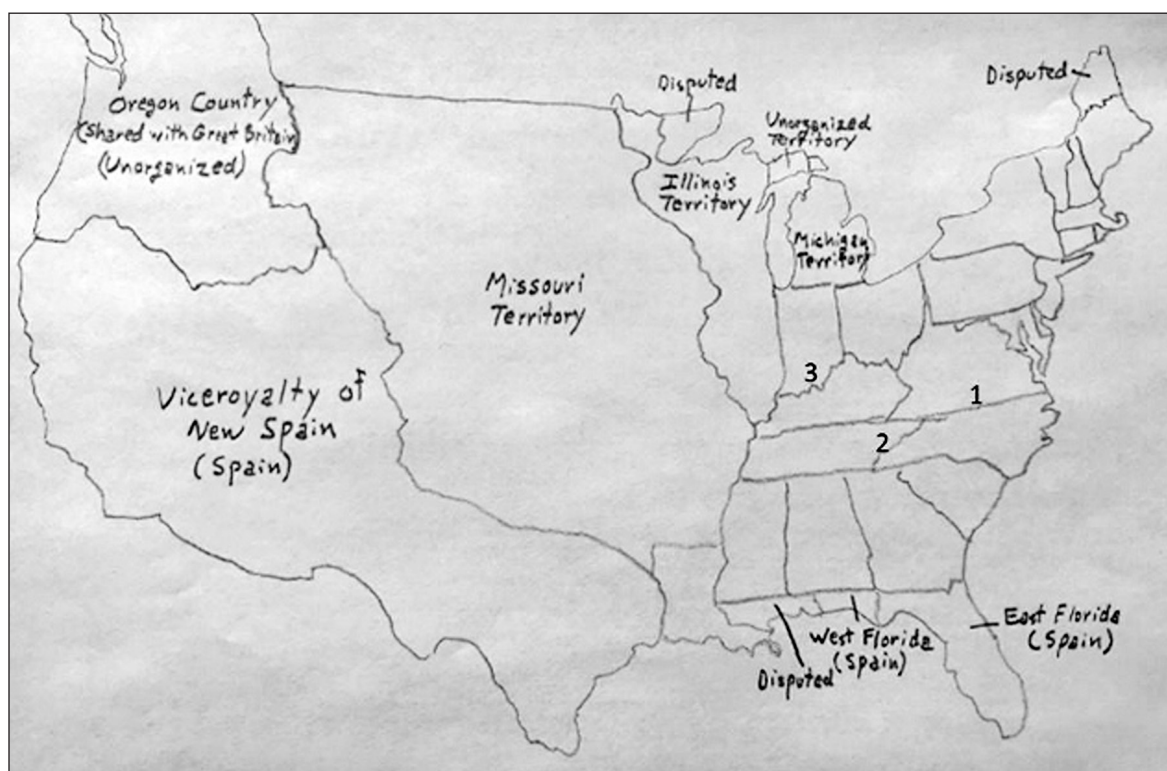
My father died on Jan. 6, 1794 when I was only 9 years old.

In 1806, our whole Durham family and some of our now free Negro family members migrated across the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Great Smoky Mountains of Blount County in eastern Tennessee where there was subsistence agriculture and few slave owners. We joined the Quaker Newberry monthly meeting in Friendsville, TN. Mother died there on March 2, 1808.

A short while later I fell in love with 15-year-old Peggy "Margaret" Wyly. We married on Oct. 17, 1811. James W. was our first born in 1812, followed by Thomas who died in 1816 at age 2. Our daughter Barbara was born in 1816. Peggy is currently pregnant with our fourth child.

Our family was encouraged to travel north by the sermon of the Quaker Zachariah Dix which he delivered in 1803 at the Bush River monthly meeting in Newberry, NC.

He stated: "O Bush River! Purge thyself. Young men, young women, to you I appeal.



This map shows the Illinois frontier in May 1818. The numbers represent 1. Brunswick County, VA; 2. Blount County, TN and 3. Lick Creek, IN. The map was drawn by James Paul ©2018.

The great northwest territory lies over the mountains beyond the Ohio River. It is a wild forest. It is a wilderness. From the wigwams of the savage the smoke still ascends through the boughs of the trees, but it is a fertile land. It is a land forever dedicated to human freedom. There you can make productive fields. There you can make friends with the Red Man. To you I appeal, flee to that land. Shake the dust of human bondage from your feet for your own sake and for the sake of your children's children. This system of human slavery will fall. The cup of its iniquity is well-nigh filled. Go to the Northwest Territory! Look not

behind you into this Sodom of human slavery, for the fires of Heaven shall descend upon it and the wrath of the Almighty shall consume it" (springboro-history.org/Quaker migrations/anti-slavery sentiments).

Heeding this command, our family is now in the newly born 1816 state of Indiana. Our Lick Creek community includes a free Negro settlement. This Indiana community is rich in hardwood forest, but some of us keep thinking about a move west of the Wabash River. If the Illinois Territory constitutional assembly abolishes slavery, many of us would like to settle on its fertile prairie. Good day to thee! —Thomas R. Durham

The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting local history.

Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month March to December. Museum hours are 1 to 4 p.m. first and third Sundays of each month, March to December or by appointment. Visit bourbonnais-history.org or facebook.com/bourbonnaisgrove or call 1-815-933-6452

Donations sought after home fire



Submitted photo

Donations are being sought for Vicki Lynn and her two school aged children who lost everything in a house fire on Friday, April 27, 2018 in the Turnberry Subdivision in Bourbonnais. Their house, belongings and their dog were all lost in the fire. A generous amount of clothing has been donated. The family is still in need of toiletries, hair care and accessories, alarm clock, fan, bedding, pillows, blankets, book bags, a few meals and gift cards for groceries, storage containers, hangers, board games, arts and crafts supplies and shoes size 9 in men's, 9 in women's and 3.5 in girl's. Donations can be dropped off at 1553 Stefanie Lane, Bourbonnais.