

September of 1818: Durham family upset with first Illinois Constitution

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

(Author's note: Illinois entered the union as 21st state on Dec. 3, 1818. As Illinois celebrates its bicentennial anniversary this year, it is good to ponder how one local frontier family viewed impending Illinois statehood. The following account is an interpretation of what pioneer and Quaker abolitionist Thomas R. Durham might have written in a letter to friends in September of 1818. In 1834, Durham would become the first non-Native American to begin a farmstead on land that today is known as Perry Farm Park.)

My dear friends, I hope this letter finds thee enjoying a nice September 1818 day. I will begin my correspondence with our blessed family news. Just a few weeks ago on Aug. 19, 1818, my wife Peggy gave birth to our third living child, Artemacy, in the eastern mountains of Blount County, TN. I was so happy, and could not wait to bring them to our new Durham family home in the integrated settlement of Lick Creek, IN where my extended family now resides. Many former slaves also live here. Peggy, the baby, and our other two children—6-year-old James and 2-year-old Barbara—are now with us in Lick Creek.

I would like to relate to you now the news about the "Illinois question"—will it be a free or slave state? I was eating dinner with my immediate family and my brothers' and sisters' families when the news from Kaskaskia, capital of the Illinois Territory, arrived.

After dinner, I said, "Can thee believe it? The 33 Illinois constitutional assembly legislators met for only 21 days from Aug. 3 to 24 and did not abolish slavery in their proposed new state! How can we possibly consider a move into a future state of Illinois while such an

attitude toward human rights exists? It does not seem that we Quaker abolitionists are destined to move further west.

That evening my family discussed the Illinois slavery issue until bedtime. We questioned how the Illinois territorial legislators could permit slavery when the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade it. I mentioned that the ordinance did allow the French colonials of Ste. Genevieve, Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and other French settlements to retain their slaves in a type of "grandfathering" clause.

There persisted an impression that the French slaves had more rights than British colonial or southern U.S. slaves. But "Slavery was slavery!" I exclaimed, and "Morally speaking, how can a questionable French 'gentile' slavery be any better than British or U.S. abusive slavery?"

Furthermore, the new August, 1818 Illinois Constitution affirmed the practice of long term indentured servitude in which an unfree laborer was bound by contract to work for an employer for a fixed time. Freedom would only come after the contract expired. This meant that the African Americans already living in Illinois Territory could be put under long term indentures. Indentured servants were considered marketable property.

The new constitution claimed to forbid the future introduction of slavery—except at the salt springs in Shawneetown until 1825 (it took 100 gallons of water to produce one bushel of salt).

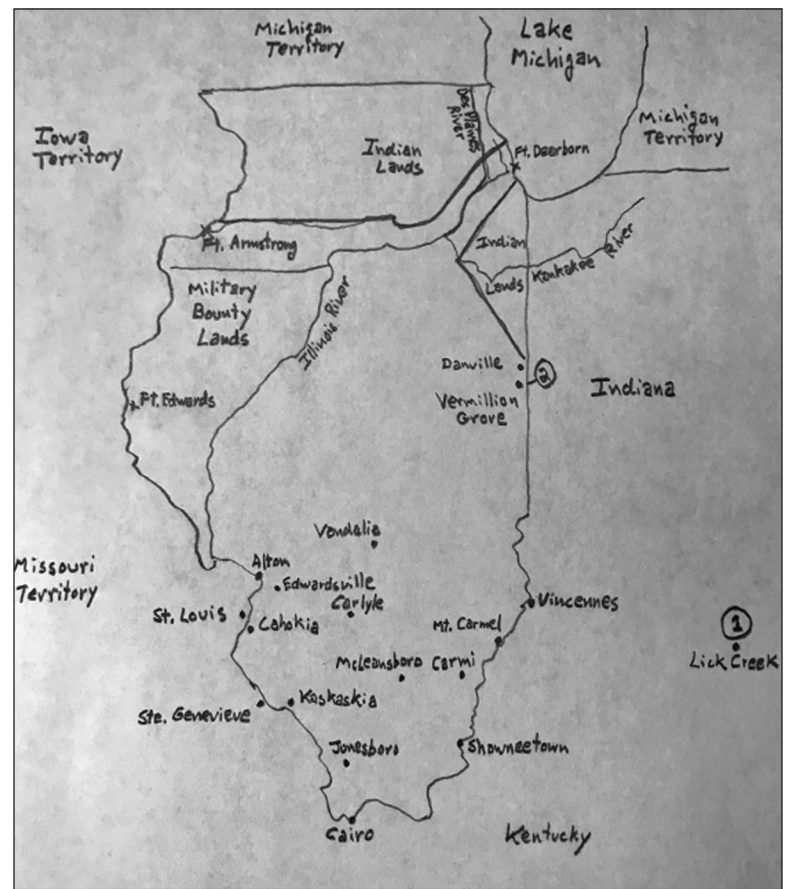
But how reliable is this claim when so many former and present slave owners live in Illinois? The territory is scheduled to hold elections on Sept. 17-19 for governor, lieutenant governor, general assembly, U.S. representative and two U.S. senators. Former slave owner Shadrach Bond is favored to win the governor's

seat. The first lieutenant governor is likely to be Montreal-born Pierre Menard. He was chosen to balance the ticket by attracting Illinois French-speaking voters.

Before retiring for the evening, Peggy and I made a decision: we will not move to Illinois until the abolition of slavery in the state is a certainty.

Thy faithful servant, Thomas R. Durham

End note: In September of 1824, a referendum in the Illinois general election for a constitutional convention to draft an amendment to legalize slavery was defeated by a vote of 6,640 to 4,972 (Robert P. Howard, Illinois: A History of the Prairie State, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972, page 137). The next year, 1825, the Thomas Durham family moved into Illinois to the Quaker settlement of Vermillion Grove south of Danville.



Sketch by James Paul

In this sketch of Illinois in 1818, note the town/city population centers in the south and sparsely populated areas in the north. In 1818, the Thomas Durham family lived in Lick Creek, Indiana (number 1). In 1825, the family moved to Vermillion Grove (number 2). The first settlement in Vermillion County, where Danville and Vermillion Grove are located, was in 1819 around a salt spring.

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 through December.

Museum hours are 1 to 4 p.m. on the first and third Sundays of each month, March through December or by appointment.

Do you have a topic or story related to local or French Canadian history? Contact the BGHS via the website at <http://bourbonnaishistory.org>, on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/bourbonnais-grove> or by calling 1-815-933-6452.

Cemetery walk

The Iroquois County Genealogical Society posted three cemeteries on its Facebook page and asked visitors to vote for the cemetery they would most like to be the host site of the sixth annual Cemetery Walk. Voters overwhelmingly chose the Sheldon Cemetery. The Cemetery Walk will take place at 2 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 9, 2018 beginning at the mausoleum, located on the west side of the cemetery.

Sheldon Cemetery is located south of town, take Rt. 24 to Sheldon, turn south onto Fourth St. and follow the road through town. There is ample parking along the roadside and entry tables will be set up on the west and north sides of the cemetery. This year's walk will have

eight to nine presenters relating the stories of some of those buried in Sheldon Cemetery. Some of this year's tales will be about the Spanish flu epidemic which almost wiped out an entire family, a Civil War veteran who was essential in the building of the Old Courthouse, pioneers and first settlers of Sheldon and more.

The ICGS is a non-profit agency and there will be a small admission fee to help offset the costs of the walk. Water will be provided but participants are welcome to bring their own drinks. Participants can also bring umbrellas as there is little shade and a lawn chair.

For more information, email iroqgene@gmail.com.

Top Cops recognized



Photo courtesy of Bradley police department

The Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM) works to keep drunk and drug-impaired drivers off the roads. Each year, AAIM recognizes individuals and groups for their efforts toward AAIM's mission. AAIM recently recognized Bradley police department officers for their life saving efforts in keeping drunk drivers off the roads. Bradley police department chief Michael Johnston (left) and Sgt. Phil Trudeau (right) congratulated the top DUI enforcement officers who received a certificate of appreciation Sgt. Rittmanic and officers Gresham and LeBeau and K9 officer Palaggi and officer Kline (not present).

