

CINCINNATI HISTORY IS BLACK HISTORY (PRELUDE)

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Deqah: So, our story begins here in Cincinnati in 1820. And, our protagonist is a barber named John Hatfield.

Deqah: John was a black man from Pennsylvania who had come to Ohio looking for work in its growing steamboat industry.

Vanessa: A lot of people were moving to Cincinnati around that time. Cincinnati was the 6th most populous city in the U.S. in 1840.

Deqah: Exactly, John was one of those many people who came here looking for work at that time. And he did really well for himself — census records shows that by 1840, John, his wife and children, and nine of his employees lived with him in his barbershop in downtown Cincinnati.

Deqah: But what the Census didn't show was John's other life.

Vanessa: I figured there had to be more to the story!

Deqah: When John Hatfield would cut clients' hair, he'd get them relaxed and comfortable, and then, while he was snipping and shaving, shaving and snipping, he'd listen — gathering information.

Deqah: John, you see, was a covert agent for the Underground Railroad.

Vanessa: Sounds dangerous.

Deqah: Incredibly dangerous. And when the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850, the work became even more so. Slave catchers could now follow runaways to free states. Even free blacks could be captured and sold into slavery.

And so in 1853, word got to John Hatfield that 28 African American men and women had escaped from Kentucky and been stranded in Cincinnati. He knew he would have to act fast.

Vanessa: Right, 28 people across state borders sounds impossible! So how did he do it?

Deqah: Well, I recently went somewhere here in Cincinnati to find out.

Deqah: I'm Deqah

Kathy: I'm Kathy.

Deqah: Kathy, nice to meet you in person.

Deqah: I met historian Kathy Dahl at Wesleyan Cemetery, a big green cemetery in Northside, Cincinnati. A place that is usually pretty serene, quiet, contemplative.

LOUD SOUND OF LAWN MOWERS

Kathy: And obviously today is mowing day, which I didn't know

Kathy: Considering that they only mow like four times a year, we're happy when they do it.

Deqah: They don't come like every week?

Kathy: Nope.

Vanessa: If Kathy's right, there's literally a 1% chance in a year that you would show up on mowing day.

Deqah: Oh man, we were absolutely NOT lucky, but Kathy and I persevered. She told me that Wesleyan was founded in 1843, and is known for some pretty awesome things. One, it was pretty unique in that it was interracial — white and black folks could be buried here.

Deqah: And, secondly, it's known because of its role in the Escape of the 28. Like it was a big deal.

Vanessa: Yes! Let's get back to this escape! So who were the 28?

Deqah: These people were 28 enslaved men, women, and children who had hooked up with the abolitionist John Fairfield. They started out in Kentucky, where Fairfield posed as a rich poultry dealer to sneak them out of the state. Then they followed the banks of the Ohio River. At one point, they stole a little boat to help them cross the river into Indiana — but the boat actually sunk, and they ended up having to wade through the river, which not only got them completely off schedule, it left them cold, muddy, exhausted, and shoeless.

Deqah: And to make matters worse, they get wind that they're being pursued by bounty hunters. The situation is dire. So, ~~like~~ while they're hiding, John Fairfield goes into Cincinnati and looks up John Hatfield. And he's like, yo, I need your help. We need a plan to somehow get these folks out of here — in the middle of the day.

Vanessa: How do you do that in the middle of the day, like 28 people?

Deqah: It's pretty ingenious. They decide to throw a fake funeral, at Wesleyan.

Vanessa: A fake funeral?

Deqah: A fake funeral. They sent a bunch of buggies to the fugitives where they were hiding, and it took them up the road towards the cemetery. And Hatfield and his churchgoers went one step further, though.

Kathy Dahl: John Hatfield, it was his congregation and his family that helped surround this procession to make it look more legitimate, like a funeral procession. These were African-American people free African-Americans who stood the most to lose if they got caught. That's pretty...you know...I get goosebumps.

Vanessa: Oh man, I get goosebumps, too. Did they make it?

Deqah: Yes, after the funeral, they hid with some black families and then continued along the Underground Railroad until they made it to Canada.

Deqah: In the end, they walked about 600 miles — it was the largest documented, successful escape ploy in the Northwest Territory.

Vanessa: That's incredible. Is Hatfield buried in Wesleyan? Could you visit his grave when you were there?

Deqah: No, I absolutely asked, but I found out very quickly that Hatfield ended up moving to-and-passing-away-in Australia. But I did ask Kathy if she could take me to some notable African American graves from this time period within Wesleyan. She took me to the so-called Colored area, but, unfortunately, there wasn't much there.

Kathy: Finding earlier, what you're talking about, 1870 stones for African-Americans in this section are probably very far and few. And if they were, they may not even be an upright, upright is more expensive. It would be like this If this is not cleaned off regularly, because it's a flat stone, plants will grow on top. You know, that's...

Deqah: ..that's where you're like, you know, things could be under the grass. Wow.

Deqah: As evidenced by the lack of mowing days, Wesleyan is already a place in need of more love and care. But this part of the cemetery, which is right by the noisy highway, felt **even more** run-down than the other sections. The history is literally in danger of being buried here. Which kinda pissed me off to be honest.

Deqah: Especially because this is the colored area. It just seems like it would be very important to, for them to just

Kathy: Maintain

Deqah: A little bit more care. Right. They don't have to care a whole lot, just a little bit.

Deqah: When I got into the car, I started talking to my husband about how much history is here. History we never knew about — even though we'd literally driven by this place a million times before.

Deqah: The history is super interesting. What do you think

Hans: Drove by it like, uh, all the time and had no idea.

Deqah: Yeah, if you were to go here, look to your right, this is what you see, but you're passing on a highway so fast that you have no idea what exists, you know, around you. Yeah. There's something magical about that for me, when it comes to like talking about history

Deqah: These stories aren't always apparent or easy to find, but they're so important to unearth.

Vanessa: And finding these stories, stories in danger of being forgotten - that's exactly why we're doing this show.

Deqah: Welcome to Urban Roots, the podcast that takes a deep dive into little known stories from Urban history.

Vanessa: We're your hosts, I'm Vanessa Quirk

Deqah: And I'm Deqah Hussein-Wetzel. And we are so excited to kick off our first season, with an in-depth look of the rich African American history of my hometown, Cincinnati.

Vanessa: You can think of this episode as a kind of prelude of sorts. We'll go back, way back, to Cincinnati's beginnings, and explore how race and racism shaped the city from the start.

Deqah: And we'll see how, throughout the city's history, African American communities have always banded together to not only persevere, but thrive, despite the adversity.

Dr. Jackson: History is the key, as I tell folks, if you don't know where you came from, you definitely don't know where you are and you surely don't know where you're going.

Vanessa: That's Dr. Eric Jackson, an expert on the African American history that has shaped Cincinnati.

Dr. Jackson: I am Dr. Eric Jackson, professor of history at Northern Kentucky University and also director of the black studies program.

Deqah: For those unfamiliar with Cinci, the city is bounded by big hills to the north and the Ohio River to the south. Cross the river, and you're in Kentucky.

Vanessa: When Cincinnati was founded in 1788, Ohio was a free state. Kentucky was **not**. But that doesn't mean African Americans were welcomed to Ohio with open arms.

Dr. Jackson: Ohio never was an enslavement state, it was a so-called free state, but at the same time, it instituted segregation laws as early as 1804, with what are called the black codes

in 1805, the black codes, which claimed that enforced African-Americans who moved to Ohio, Cincinnati, specifically, to pay the state a security deposit of \$500 to ensure what was called good conduct.

Vanessa: When you said that \$500 security deposit, I was on mute, but I went BUH because like that, that must've been a huge amount of money in this time. Was that, was that a common way to kind of enforce, I guess essentially prevent African-Americans from, from coming to Ohio?

Dr. Jackson: That was the, that was the objective of the black codes, which didn't didn't stop them from coming because it was better than what they, um, experience other places that were defined as the South.

Vanessa: And as African Americans settled in Cincinnati, a network of freedom fighters grew.

Dr. Jackson: Cincinnati becomes, uh, again, one of the major routes of the underground railroad.

Dr. Jackson: Some historians argue that 60% of folks who escaped the South using the underground railroad came through Cincinnati. So some folks stay in Cincinnati. Once they came, you had, um, two basic communities in Cincinnati that starts to develop. One was called little Africa and one was called Bucktown. And those two places were a mixture of free African-Americans who had traveled to Cincinnati, fugitive African-Americans who decided to stay in Cincinnati, and folks who were already of African-Americans, who were born in Cincinnati, and free people of color. So those communities, uh, Bucktown and little Africa, they start to become a linchpin for, uh, other African-Americans to travel there, to get jobs there, to educate themselves there.

Deqah: But as Cincinnati's industry grew, and the city's population expanded, white and black racial tensions heightened.

Dr. Jackson: So the perception was African-Americans were traveling, migrating to Cincinnati and taking jobs away from whites, particularly poor whites. And so the system had navigated and manipulated poor whites

Dr. Jackson: Into believing that folks of African descent were coming into the city, stealing their jobs. And so a riot occurred again, again the first one in 1829. There's another one in the 1830s. There's another one in the 1840s.

Dr. Jackson: and it's like every decade up until the start of the civil war, there's an urban riot in Cincinnati.

Deqah: The 1841 riot was particularly vicious. Apparently a drought and a heat wave combined, it dried up the river, slowed down all work, and stirred up a lot of anger.

Vanessa: A band of White Kentuckians crossed the river and started to attack any African Americans in their path. A mob of Cincinnatians soon joined in, shooting cannons, while Black men tried to defend themselves and their families with muskets and rifles.

Deqah: Local officials took over 300 African American men to jail “for their own protection,” but that left women, children, and homes vulnerable.

Vanessa: People were beaten. Homes and stores were destroyed. After the riots, some African Americans decided to get out of downtown, and small pockets of Black communities moved to the more rural villages surrounding the city.

Deqah: But others, people like John Hatfield, the one who helped the 28 escape, stayed in the city and responded to the riots by joining groups and forming institutions designed to **protect** African Americans. Institutions like the Zion Baptist Church located downtown at that time, which was one of the unofficial headquarters of the Underground Railroad.

Vanessa: Hatfield also joined something called the Cincinnati Vigilance Committee. Ostensibly, the Vigilance Committee was formed to keep Cincinnati neighborhoods safe and help newly arrived African Americans find jobs and housing. Covertly, however, the Committee was actively involved in helping Black freedom-seekers escape the South.

Deqah: Most of these institutions were, again, located in Bucktown and Little Africa, where most of Cincinnati’s African Americans lived at the time.

Vanessa: That was, that is, until the city of Cincinnati decided it was time to develop downtown.

Dr. Jackson And so city leaders want to figure out a way to start developing downtown Cincinnati, but only for certain group of people. And the certain group of people are people who look like them, and they’re not talking about poor whites and they’re not talking about African-Americans.

Vanessa: At the time, most of the city’s poor Irish and German labourers were working in the West End neighborhood, where the meatpacking industry was located. It was a poor, densely packed place.

Dr. Jackson And so they develop a plan on how to develop the city and how to force migrate African-Americans to the West end, by not giving them the opportunity to buy land in other parts of the city that was growing.

Deqah: As African Americans were forced into the West End, its White population diminished and moved on to other parts of Cincinnati. And over time, the black community starts to make the West End their own.

Dr. Jackson They start to develop black churches. They start to develop, um, their own types of educational system. They start to develop their own civic clubs and societies. So they take the way they’re driven into the West end and they create their own institutions to take care of themselves and they prosper. I mean, they prosper mightily. They create their own businesses, their own stores, their own entertainment. Um, people want to talk about the cotton club in New York. There’s a cotton club in Cincinnati.

Archival Audio - Remembering Cincinnati’s Cotton Club (1981) from the Cincinnati Museum Center Archives: “...it was the center of the black culture. You know, all of your, uh,

your, uh, sororities and fraternities gave their dances out all of your private clubs gave their dances there through the week, mostly Wednesdays, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday night, you know? And, uh, that was the hub of everything.”

There's multiple theaters and, um, performances in the West end. I mean, it's a vibrant community. It's a vibrant part of the city for African-Americans.

When people migrate to Cincinnati during the great migration in the early 19 hundreds, they end up in the West End. Not because it's. It's um, as a happenstance, they hear that the West end is the place to go because everything they need is in the West end.

*** MUSIC ENDS ***

Vanessa: For decades, the West End was synonymous with Black Cincinnati. But then, *another* city plan was developed. The 1948 Urban Development plan..

Archival Audio - Avondale (1967) from the Cincinnati Museum Center Archives: *“During the late 1940s, the Cincinnati announced its urban renewal plans for the West End. Rapidly deteriorating housing , overcrowded living conditions, and a number of other ills were cited as the reasons behind the urban renewal plan.”*

Deqah: And, at around the same time, the Federal Highway Act was passed, which called for an interstate highway that would cut through Cincinnati. And the chosen location?

Vanessa: Say it with me now.

Deqah & Vanessa: The west end.

Dr. Jackson: So the interstate cuts the West End in half and demolishes about half of the economic development that African-Americans have, have created for decades. The same thing happens in Detroit at the same time that the interstate in Detroit, when it's built at the same time, cuts through the black community in Detroit. The same thing happens....Charlotte, North Carolina, the same thing happened there. So Cincinnati is not the only city that goes to this same pattern of when there's an interstate that needs to be created, the land that's acquired by federal government tends to come from the black community. So when a highway comes in and breaks down the vibrancy of, of the West end, um, African-Americans have to figure out a different community to migrate to.

Vanessa: In our next episodes we will pick up where Dr. Jackson left off and explore three neighborhoods where African Americans settled: Avondale, Evanston, and South Cumminsville.

Deqah: But we felt it was important to start here, with this early history, because these themes repeat again and again.

Vanessa: Exactly. This themes of of top down planning vs. bottom-up resistance or resilience — that's a consistent theme throughout the whole season.

Deqah: Yeah, I agree. And, another thing that's important to note, is that because of these different struggles with development plans or highways or street widenings in the past, that's literally why all of Cincinnati's 52 neighborhoods each feel so divided today -- they all feel so disconnected.

Vanessa: But, one of the things I do really love about the Wesleyan cemetery story though, that like you, you brought to us, Deqah, is, like I think it, I think it gets to something else that, again, we're going to see in Cincinnati history is this idea of like, there's like this real sense of like creating these support networks through like these churches, these organizations, um, and like connecting people to help each other. I think there's also like a really powerful thing that is also inherent from the start of Cincinnati's history too.

Deqah: Can't agree more and I would just add that, you know, it's these stories that I find probably most fascinating and might have the most trouble finding information on in general. You know, they're like the hidden stories that's, the ones that we're trying to pull out from the, um, you know, the archives and stuff and piecing things together. It's uh, it's, you know, I want, I want to look at the records for Zion Baptist church, and I want to know more about that because, you know, it's just. Incredible that that church was able to play a role in the underground railroad movement. And, but then what do we know about it? Who knows about that? Right. Let's take a poll. You know,

Vanessa: [LAUGHS] A huge part of this project has been reaching out to people in the communities now and asking them what they remember and asking what their elders taught them, that their elders remembered because so much of this history has been just lost to time. A lot of it isn't in archives.

Deqah: living in Cincinnati, uh, you know, I know that. I did not know half of these stories until I started working on this project. And I knew this was going to be very, very important to do, but I had no idea how impactful it would be just to me.

Vanessa: Yeah. And hopefully it gives people like a sense of pride in their city too, you know, like, I just never really thought about the fact that the geography of the, of it being on that border of the North and South., like I just never really sat and thought about how, how incredible, uh, Cincinnati is in the place it holds in American history.

Deqah: Yeah, and as a Cincinnati, I get annoyed sometimes, because Cincinnati is always portrayed as like, mediocre, precisely because it's so, you know, in the middle of things. But I don't think people appreciate how special this city is BECAUSE we're in the middle, it's a hodgepodge of people. Like, we are at this nexus point of so many cultures and histories, and there's so much more diversity here than people realize. It's been inspiring to have witnessed this first hand through this project.

Vanessa: All right. Well, um, so this is just, again, this is a prelude to our Cincinnati series. So stay tuned. We're hoping to start airing these episodes on Juneteenth (June 19th). Um, if you

liked what you heard, please share it. Please spread the word. Um, and subscribe today to urban roots and again, on Juneteenth, the Cincinnati series will hopefully drop into your lovely feeds.

Deqah: I have to really, really thank uh, you know, all the community members that have been a part of this, but I also would like to thank everybody who's donated to our Fundly fundraising campaign. Um, and particularly someone who has donated a good amount of money asks us to give a shout out to the ACLU for all the hard work that they do. And, you know, I, I just have to say, you know, thank you as well to Artswave and Invest in Neighborhoods because they've just been so integral in getting these audio documentaries out.

Vanessa: Thank you guys so much. And a huge thanks to our editor Connor Lynch and our mixer Tim Soarce .

Deqah: Should we do our tagline?

Vanessa: Oh yeah, go for it.

Deqah: Urban roots looking back so we can move forward.