



# MCHS News

Jan 2020

Opening Doors to Madison County History

Vol. 8 No. 1

**Historical Museum**  
715 N Main Street  
Edwardsville, IL 62025

**Hours:**  
The museum is currently closed for renovation.

**Archival Library**  
801 N Main Street  
**Hours:**  
Wed-Fri 9 am - 4 pm  
Sunday 1 pm - 4 pm

**Phone:**  
618-656-7569

**Web Address:**  
madcohstory.org

**E-mail:**  
info@madcohstory.org

**About Us:**  
The MCHS museum complex, consisting of a modern archival library, a museum in the 1836 Weir House and the Helms Collection Center, is owned by the nonprofit Madison County Historical Society and operated jointly with Madison County.

The Madison County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

## PIN OAK COLONY: The Gestation

by J. Eric Robinson

Just east of Edwardsville, Pin Oak Colony was one of the oldest communities of free blacks in Illinois. While other free black communities existed further south, near Carlyle, for example, Pin Oak Colony's uniqueness rested in its formation. It was founded in early statehood by Edward Coles, around 1819, and its first members were his inherited slaves brought from Albemarle County, Virginia, to Illinois by Coles with the stated intention to free them. The establishment of Pin Oak Colony owes much to Coles' anti-slavery convictions, which he expressed to Thomas Jefferson as a young man. These anti-slavery convictions fueled Coles' desire to establish a life away from America's "peculiar institution." Pin Oak Colony was established as an oasis violating federal statute and flaunting frontier customs.

Discussing Pin Oak Colony's formation and touching upon the pre-Civil War activities of its community illuminate contemporary understanding of attitudes towards slave and freeman among white American settlers of Illinois. Naturally, Edward Coles exists at the center of our discussion and of our understanding.

Like many within his class of Virginia tobacco planters, Coles had a conflicted view of slavery and of the human beings slavery had allowed his family to control. In his class' view, slavery may have been a birthright, an economic necessity, but ownership of human beings gravitated far from the principles of equality that led members of this class to argue so vehemently against English tyranny. Men like Coles felt ownership of human beings created tyrants, and sinful ones at that.

Virginia tobacco planters numbered among the most ardent revolutionaries. The very idea of declaring independence appeared before the Second Continental Congress thanks to Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia tobacco planter. Another planter, George Washington, led the Americans in

arms. For these men, adherence to revolutionary principles meant weaning themselves from the necessity to hold other human beings as property, even if that process required a lifetime. In Washington's case, for example, the weaning process meant regulating finances carefully so that his property—his slaves—needn't be sold to settle his estate's debts.

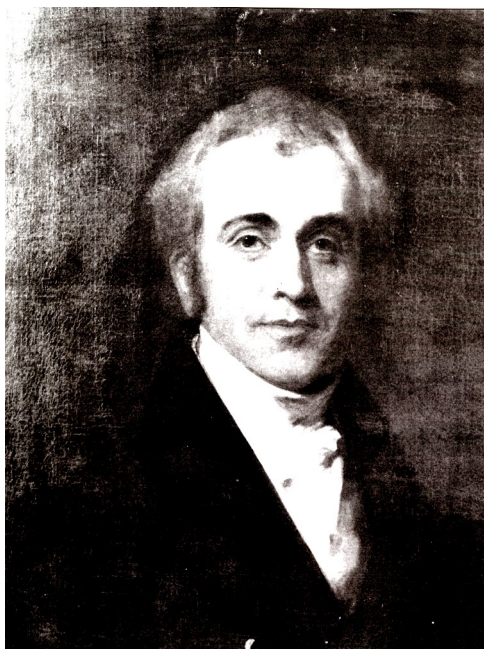
Washington freed those human beings he had inherited from his father under the terms of his will in 1799. These men and women could go wherever they wished.

American realities afforded the freed slave few options for settlement in 1799. At that time, state laws did not threaten the freed slave with enslavement, should they choose to remain near the property where they had been owned. While little information about their destinations survived, we can assume that Washington's slaves remained near Washington's estate, Mount Vernon. Most likely, their descendants live today in metropolitan Washington, D.C. a good part of which had been George Washington's landholdings.

By 1819, however, the option of staying "near the place," as it were, found itself removed. In states like Virginia, a free black without visible means of support could find himself assumed a "runaway," and sold into slavery, which met a real demand for labor after the growth of cotton production. Even if he did not

choose to stay in a home state "near the place," he could find himself kidnapped and sold into slavery, a reality all free blacks faced, whether emancipated by their owners or by birth.

In 1819, westward movement offered for the free black an option worth trying. Records exist of free blacks moving westward—beyond the Appalachian Mountains—to commune with various Native American tribes, with whom they intermarried. New York State, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Georgia are among the states that witnessed free blacks



Edward Coles as a young man. (MCHS)

*continued page 4*

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### VOLUNTEERS

There are abundant and varied opportunities for volunteers at either the Museum or the Archival Library. If interested, please call 618-656-7569.

### MEMBERSHIPS

Several membership levels are available to those interested in supporting the work of preserving Madison County history through an MCHS membership. Memberships run on the calendar year, Jan 1-Dec 31. Applications are available on our website, or at the Archival Library.

### PUBLICATIONS

#### MCHS NEWS

6 issues annually  
Cindy Reinhardt, Editor

## ARCHIVAL LIBRARY SPOTLIGHT

By Mary Westerhold

### PHOTO COLLECTION PROJECT

The Archival Library staff and volunteers are currently in the process of an extensive project with the photo collection. While the photos are cataloged via a card file, the purpose of this project is to add all of the photos to the electronic database with the hopes that many of them will be available for viewing online.

The photos have been donated over many years and not all of the information is complete. Record keeping in the early days was not as detailed as today. Everyone remembered who gave what photo and also the identity of every person and every place in the photo. Like many personal photo

collections, those who knew the information are gone and the information was never written down.

Part of the process is completing a data entry sheet with as much information as can be found. The photos are also scanned. Finally, the information and the scan are cataloged in the electronic database.

With hundreds (probably thousands) of photos in the collection, this is not a quick process. However, everyone involved is gaining a better understanding of the depth of the collection.

Stop in sometime and check out the collection!

## MUSEUM SPOTLIGHT

### NEW HISTORY EXHIBITS AT MADISON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Although the Madison County Historical Museum building is closed for renovation, the staff of the museum continues to create off-site and online exhibits to help area residents learn more about their history. These include two which were installed in November.

The first of these is a commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Legion. It includes a brief history of the organization's founding as a resource for World War I veterans. This exhibit also features American Legion artifacts, the story and artifacts from the "Last Man's Club," and a book of poetry by a local survivor of the Lost Battalion. The display can be found in the case below the portrait of Abraham Lincoln on the first floor of the Madison County Courthouse.

An exhibit in the east alcove features artifacts related to canning, including a funnel, a kraut cutter, an apple peeler, and an apron, all from different time periods during the heyday of home canning. This exhibit will bring back memories for those who remember a time when most "canned goods" came from

personal gardens, rather than from the grocery store.

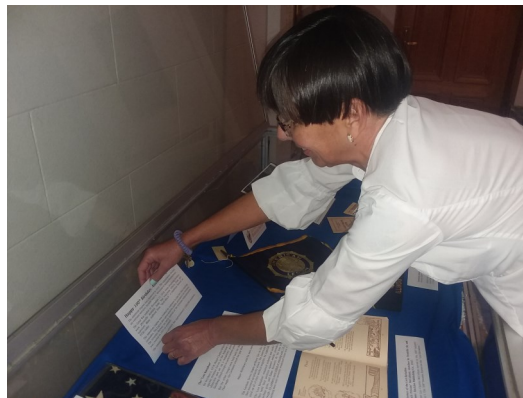
Exhibits installed earlier this fall include one that celebrates "Back to School" with a look back at some of the schools in Madison County. The large exhibit case and an adjacent flat display case on the south wall of the courthouse feature photographs, artifacts, and documents which portray the histori-

cal experience of schoolchildren in Madison County from kindergarten through high school.

In the County Administration Building is a display which explores the importance of Labor Day. The exhibition features artifacts from several trades active in Madison County in the early 20th century and labor union photographs. This exhibit also has a companion online exhibit that can be found at [https://](https://madcohistory.org/online-exhibits/laborers-in-madison-county-history/)

[madcohistory.org/online-exhibits/laborers-in-madison-county-history/](https://madcohistory.org/online-exhibits/laborers-in-madison-county-history/).

All of the above exhibits are currently on display in the Madison County Courthouse and Administration Building at 157 N. Main Street in Edwardsville. Hours are 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (same as regular business hours for the courthouse). Visitors are reminded to leave cell phones in their cars since they are not permitted in the courthouse.



Assistant Curator Mary Rose completes installation of a courthouse exhibit. (Photograph by Jon Parkin)

### MARY'S RESEARCH TIP: YES, WE ARE OPEN!

Yes, the Archival Library is OPEN! While construction is continuing on the museum building, the Archival Library has never closed. Right now the easiest way to access the Archival Library is to enter the parking lot behind the museum from Second Street. All of our resources – books, maps, photos, probate files, etc. - are ready and waiting for your visit.



## 2020 MCHS SPEAKER SERIES BEGINS FEBRUARY 9



Dr. Stephen Hansen

The 2020 MCHS Speaker Series will kick-off on Sunday, February 9 at 2 p.m. with a lecture by Stephen Hansen. His topic is "Elijah Lovejoy: Freedom's Champion or Religious Fanatic?"

What kind of person was Elijah Lovejoy? Why did he persist in attacking slavery even after prominent citizens warned him to stop? Was Lovejoy an uncompromising defender of freedom, a religious fanatic, a revolutionary, or a madman? This program will explore the events leading up to the fateful day in November 1837 when Lovejoy was killed by a mob in

Alton. Hansen will also discuss Lovejoy's character and personality as well as the nature of Illinois society on the American frontier.

Stephen Hansen is Emeritus Dean and Professor of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). His scholarly works include three books and numerous articles, papers, and grants. He has held a number of administrative positions in higher education, including Dean of The Graduate School and Associate Provost for Research, Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Interim Chancellor. In his retirement, he remains active as a consultant for institutions of higher education, as well as involved in his own scholarly research on the Civil War in Illinois.

Speaker Series lectures are held in the fellowship hall of Immanuel United Methodist Church at 800 N. Main Street in Edwardsville, directly across the street from the Madison County Archival Library. Lectures are free and open to the public. No reservations are required and seating is available on a first come, first served basis.

## SAVE US A BUCK!

Did you know that late membership renewal notices cost the Society approximately a dollar each to mail out to members? In large part that's because they are not eligible for bulk mail rates. If you haven't renewed your membership for 2020 yet, please consider doing so as soon as possible so you can say, "I saved them a buck!"



## EVENTS AND PROGRAMMING VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Looking for something new to do in the new year? MCHS has greatly expanded their schedule of programming and events and are looking for, as they say, "a few good men (or women)." The Events Committee, chaired by Norma Asadorian, meets monthly to stay on top of all that's going on. Volunteers are needed to help with set-up or ushering at the Speaker Series, to assist with a Trivia Night next summer, to serve as a host at MCHS tables at various events held throughout the county (mostly in summer) or to help plan more events. Call 618-656-1294 if you'd like to join in the fun!

## 2020 NEW AND RENEWING MEMBERS

November– December ♦ Thank you for supporting MCHS!

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moving among the Native Americans, and with them, as the United States government moved the Native Americans beyond the Mississippi River.

In 1819, the policy of the United States government regarding removal of Native Americans to areas west of the Mississippi also complicated settlement of free blacks in the West. The laws of the United States, for example, stipulated that no one of African ancestry could live in the Ohio River Valley or in the Great Lakes Region. The Congress of the United States had designed these laws to prevent any white man from being tempted into bringing his slaves into what are now the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin and Illinois. The Congress wanted to kill slavery by making certain territories, in effect, “slave free.”

This was wishful thinking. By 1819, William Clark, for example, had domiciled his children by a slave in Cincinnati. He freed them there, and allowed their mother to join them as a free woman. As Indian agent in Saint Louis, and as a Kentucky planter himself, William Clark used his influence to protect them, from a distance, until his death.

While unlikely to have been common knowledge among his fellow slave owners, Clark’s example might not have been alone. As had been the case of George Washington, slave owners in 1819 enjoyed enough wealth that they were in a position to invest heavily in land in the Ohio River Valley and in the Great Lakes Region.

It seems that Edward Coles’ inheritances put him in a similar position.

The years before 1819 found Coles acting as President James Madison’s secretary, a position much like today’s presidential chief-of-staff, without the retinue of the West Wing, or even of the Executive Office of the President. As Madison’s secretary, Coles filled today’s roles of budget director, national security advisor, communications director, press secretary, assistant for congressional relations, and White House counsel, all in one swoop. Conceivably, Coles might have even arranged evacuation of the Executive Mansion ahead of the British who would burn it during the War of 1812.

Coles’ work as Madison’s secretary included arranging “wise men” to give the President advice. For Virginians like Madison and Coles, few “wise men” ranked as high as Thomas Jefferson.

Throughout his presidency, Jefferson continued a correspondence with Madison that dated to the



*This statue of President James Madison honoring Madison County’s namesake is located in the courthouse. Edward Coles was a personal friend and neighbor of Madison. He later became Madison’s secretary and a trusted advisor. (Reinhardt)*

Washington presidency. Jefferson also corresponded with Coles.

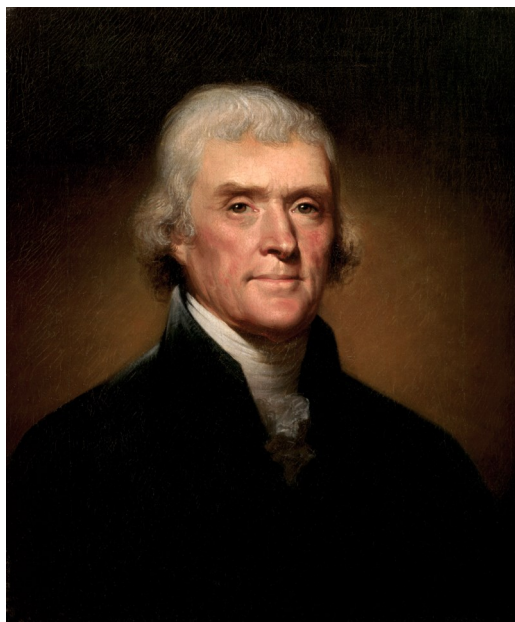
Jefferson seemed to take great pleasure in providing wisdom, particularly to younger men. He steeped his letters to Coles in philosophy, and, at times, in convoluted rhetoric. A well-trained lawyer, on top of being a crystalline prose writer, Jefferson knew how to evade when being pinned down through clarity would cost.

Within the papers of Thomas Jefferson, published in 2012 by Princeton University Press, the National Archives records 10 letters between Coles and Jefferson, coming between 1811 and 1814, within Coles’ tenure as Madison’s secretary. While most of the letters are commonplace, the last three - exchanged between late July and late September 1814 - express Coles’ plan to emancipate his inherited slaves in Illinois. For example, in the letter dated July 31, 1814, Coles urges Jefferson to articulate a plan for the gradual emancipation of slaves in Virginia, at the time the largest slave population in any North American state. Coles argues that gradual emancipation represented the next logical step in human rights, which Jefferson had begun with the Declaration of Independence in

1776. Pressing further with his argument, Coles calls the Founding Fathers’ failure to address gradual emancipation an omission, leading to the existence of an “unfortunate evil” that sullied the Revolution.

One must view this letter in context. Previous correspondence between the two appear as transactional, almost mundane. This letter is personal. A much younger, still idealistic man, Coles reaches into personality to drive his arguments to Jefferson. When the last paragraph states Coles’ repugnance for slavery, and his desire to leave his home state because of it, the paragraph appears as the climax of emotion. The sentiment serves as the ultimate plea.

Dated August 25, 1814 (this is long before the “Pony Express”), Jefferson’s reply twists and squirms in comparison. Perhaps the former president’s own discomfort at his former self acquiescing to the advice and urgings of his fellows, in the Second Continental Congress, to delete denunciations of British encouragement of the transatlantic slave trade from the Declaration of Independence allowed Coles’ pleas to cut to the quick. The response conveys Jefferson’s discomfort at Coles’ letter. For Virginia planters such as themselves, American slavery commanded the responsibility to care for the African slave. In its tone, Jefferson’s letter seems incapable of acknowledging



*Edward Coles was also a friend of Thomas Jefferson. Some of their fascinating correspondence can be found online at the Library of Congress.*



## AN EARLY COMMUNITY OF FREE AFRICAN-AMERICANS

that Virginia planters have fallen short of this fiduciary responsibility.

The August 25 reply serves as Jefferson's only rebuttal to Coles' sentiments. It is an involved letter; aside from restating his support for gradual emancipation as an old, established position, Jefferson refuses to let himself be pinned down. Nevertheless, he encourages Coles to pursue the conscience Jefferson's generation had ignored. Jefferson remains paternal, though, and distant.

"I must be permitted again to trouble you, dear sir," begins Coles' last letter to Jefferson, composed on September 26, 1814. The sentence seems to express exasperation. Coles chose to take Jefferson's evasions as general encouragement. Perhaps we can fault age for that. Youth encourages the cub to embrace the old lion's cuff as applause. Perhaps we could blame Coles' relative youth for his willingness to tip his hand further, and to announce in this letter, to the former president, his intention to take his slaves beyond the Ohio River and to free them there. Directly, Coles states "I have long since determined, and should...have removed (myself from Virginia), carrying along with me those who had been my [s]laves, to the Country North West of the river Ohio."

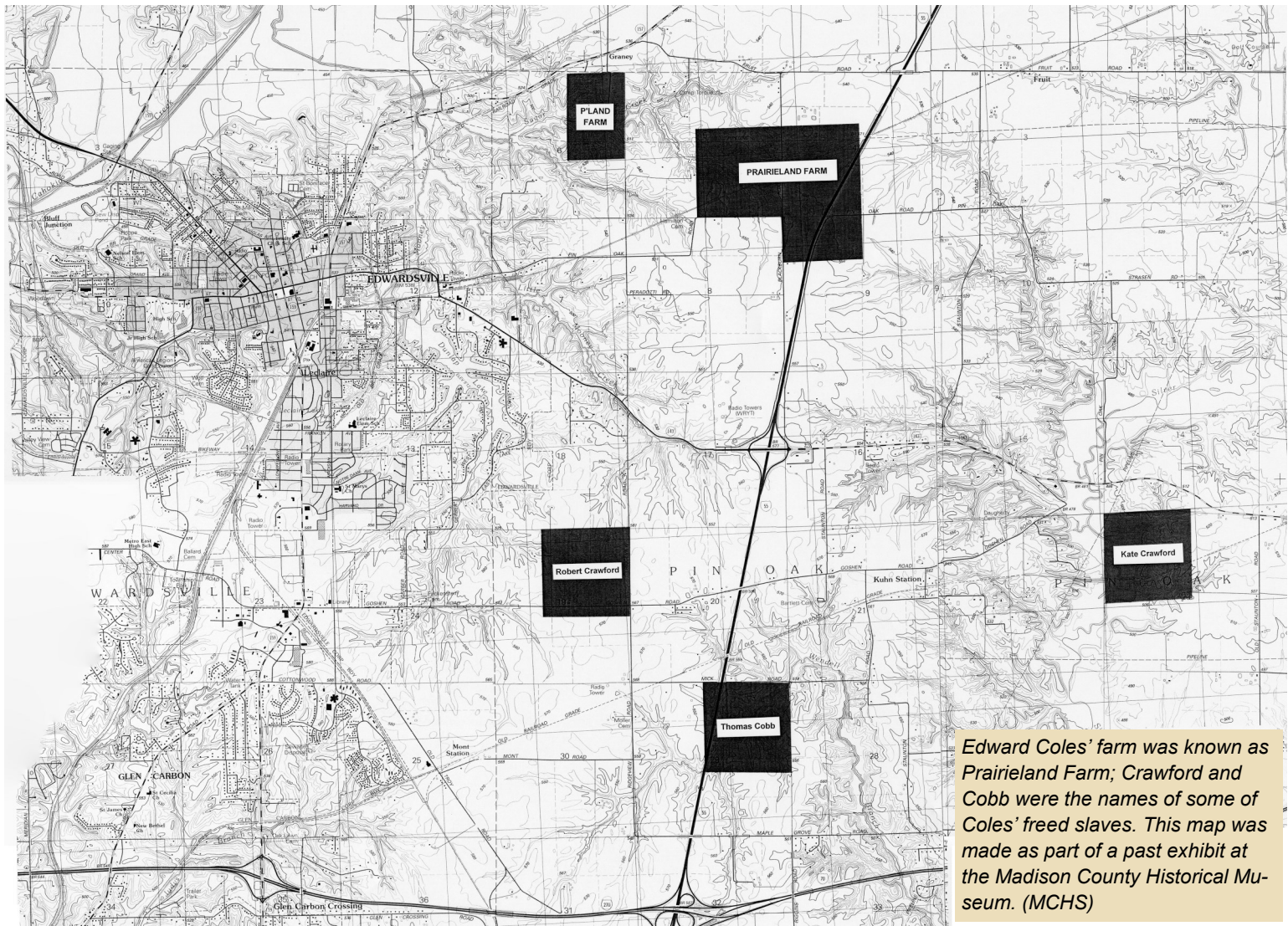
More experience would have chastened him to refrain from this explication. The Northwest Ordinance forbade the activity Coles proposed.

We may catch our breath imagining the Master of Monticello contemplating Coles' words. Divulge a plan to flaunt a federal law, and with slaves? How dare he! Sir, Virginians exhibit greater circumspection than that!

But, in truth, Jefferson says nothing. Although this letter appears among his correspondence, Jefferson failed to reply. He declined to do so. His correspondence with Edward Coles ends.

The correspondence's subsequent silence underscores Thomas Jefferson's umbrage at Coles' forthright statement of intent, but the extant record indicates that others had flaunted the Northwest Ordinance just as boldly. For example, Madison County registries list 12 men and women owning 17 individuals in 1814, the same year as the last of the Jefferson-Coles correspondence. In 1820, Benjamin Stephenson, who would become a rival to Coles, as a representative of pro-slavery settlers, owned eight individuals in Madison County. Between 1815 and 1819, Stephenson had built his assets by acquiring, and "liquidating," 12 human beings between the ages of 42 days and 19 years, as provided in Helen Cox Tregillis' *River Roads to Freedom: Fugitive Slave Notices and Sheriff Notices Found in Illinois Sources* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1988). And, the son of a Jeffersonian collaborator in the Revolution, Ninian Edwards, owned three slaves, possibly his

*continued page 6*



Edward Coles' farm was known as Prairieland Farm; Crawford and Cobb were the names of some of Coles' freed slaves. This map was made as part of a past exhibit at the Madison County Historical Museum. (MCHS)



inheritance, as listed in the Madison County registries. The Northwest Ordinance had been designed to deny both Edwards and Stephenson the privilege of owning other people within Illinois Country. Seemingly, the Thomas Jeffersons lacked the words for this lawbreaking, as well.

For the record, Jefferson's fellow Southerners endured comparable silence when they accused his documents - both the Declaration of Independence and the later Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, which fueled the French Revolution in 1789 - with inciting slave revolts, the bloody Haitian Revolution in particular. The Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, a slave revolt planned in Charleston, South Carolina, which seemed to look to Haiti for inspiration, met Jefferson's silence, as well. Perhaps, for Thomas Jefferson's class, discretion meant valor. Seemingly, that lesson had been lost on Edward Coles' generation.

And so, Edward Coles lit for Illinois Country, inheritance in hand. They were almost two dozen individuals, generally young or in their prime; another couple, of advanced age, remained in Virginia, according to tradition. If we can glean from James Madison's discussions with Coles as an indication, Coles seemed to have felt that advanced age discouraged successful travel, whether slave or free. According to tradition, Coles provided for their care in Virginia until their deaths.

Collectively, the name given to Coles' inheritance was "Coles' Slaves." They served as Pin Oak's primary community.

Apparently, they arrived in Saint Louis by riverboat, coming down the Ohio River, then made their way to Edwardsville. At the time, the Panic of 1819 had plummeted land prices in the west to \$1.25 per acre. Land so cheap beckoned a man of Coles' means to purchase plenty. Coles purchased over 500 acres, east of Edwardsville, and portioned just under a hundred

*Letter from Edward Coles to James Madison:*

Edwardsville, State of Illinois—8 miles East of the mouth of the Missouri river

July 20. 1819.

*My Dear Sir*

*As you and Mrs. M. were so kind as to say, at the moment of parting, that you would be gratified in hearing from me, of my safe arrival in this Country, and how I was employing myself in it, I take up my pen to comply with a request not less flattering to me than kind in you both.*

*As I expected, when I left you, I overtook my people the day before they reached Brownsville in Pennsylvania, at which place I purchased two large flat Boats, or Ohio arks, on board of which I put our horses, waggon and selves, and having chained the Boats together, I pushed off and commenced floating down the river, taking myself the stations of Pilot and Captain, or rather I should say of Commodore of my Boats. A son of Gen: Green of Culpepper, on his first visit to the West, was the only person with me on board, except my Negroes, who being, as you know, mountaineers were at first excessively awkward in the use of oars. We floated day and night, except when compelled to go ashore by high and head winds. There being a full tide in the river, the weather fine, and laying in from time to time a good store of provisions, we had quite an agreeable voyage down to Louisville, where we arrived the 9th day from Pittsburg; but having been detained about 24 hours by winds, and in visiting Gen. Taylor and other friends on the way, we were in fact but 8 days floating. This is considered a quick voyage in those great unwieldy family Boats. At Louisville we got rid of our Boats, and commenced our journey by land to this place. Being extremely anxious to comply with the promise I had given the Govt. to be here by a given time, I hurried on ahead and left my Negroes to make the best of their way after me. Owing to the very wet spring, a great portion of this flat Country was under water, and most of the little streams were overflowing their banks, and could only be crossed by swimming or ferrying. This rendered this part of the journey very disagreeable, even to me who was on horseback, but to those in the waggon or on foot it was inconceivably bad. A few days after my arrival here I purchased an excellent tract of land, situated about three miles from this,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of which Prairie, the rest timber land, on which there was a few acres enclosed, and a deserted log cabin. On the 17 of May, the day after the arrival of my Negroes, I commenced ploughing up the Prairie, and splitting rails to fence it; and continued breaking prairie, and planting corn, until the first week in July. The consequence was that the corn was in some places 5 feet high, while in others it was not yet up. I have planted between 12 and 15 acres in corn for each horse I have worked. This I am sure you will consider good work, when you reflect how late I commenced, and that my horses were exhausted by a long and fatiguing journey; and that the Prairie was so tough & hard that it required my whole team to pull one plough. I am now employed in mowing hay from the prairie, and fallowing it to seed wheat this autumn. I live in town, where I attend to the duties of my office in the morning, & almost every evening go out to superintend my farm. I employ no white person, but leave the whole to my Negroes, who I am gratified in saying behave themselves remarkably well since I have liberated them. I hire and employ on my farm about one half of them, the others hire themselves in this place and its neighbourhood. As a reward for their past services, and a stimulus to their future exertions, I have given to each one, male and female, who has reached the age of three or four and twenty, one hundred and sixty acres of Land. And to the young ones I have given Books, promised to pay for teaching them, and premiums to those that learn to read and write.*

*The situation of Register of the Land office of this place, which the President has lately thought fit to confer upon me, has not since I entered on the duties of it more than paid for feeding my horse. Next month there is to be a public sale of Lands here, when it is thought the profits of the Office will be considerable. If it should not become soon much more valuable than it is at present, I shall certainly resign it this fall. But whether I do or not, you may expect to see me in January next; as I am determined to make a visit to the Eastward, and to spend a great part of the winter with my friends in Virginia. I am already looking forward with impatience to the time of my departure, and to the pleasures I shall enjoy in their Society—among whom, you know, you and Mrs. M. stand among the first. Present my affectionate regards to Mrs. M. and tell her I shall expect her to comply with her promise, long since made, to assist me in getting a wife; for that I am more than ever convinced that it will not do to live in this solitary Country without a help mate. Present me also to Payne, to whom I would write but for his having so often neglected my letters, and violated his promises to write me. Wishing you health, happiness, and long life, and every blessing here and hereafter, I am most truly, sincerely and affectionately your friend*

Edward Coles

## The closing of Edward Coles' 1814 letter to Thomas Jefferson regarding slavery:

*I will only add, as an excuse for the liberty I take in addressing you on this subject, which is so particularly interesting to me; that from the time I was capable of reflecting on the nature of political society, and of the rights appertaining to Man, I have not only been principled against Slavery, but have had feelings so repugnant to it, as to decide me not to hold them; which decision has forced me to leave my native state, and with it all my relations and friends. This I hope will be deemed by you some excuse for the liberty of this intrusion, of which I gladly avail myself to assure you of the very great respect and esteem with which I am, my dear Sir, your very sincere and devoted friend.*

*Edward Coles*

acres to his former property, while keeping 474 acres for himself. These properties were known as Pin Oak Colony, collectively.

A map featured in Kurt Leichtle's and Bruce Carveth's *Crusade against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011) argues that a number of the parcels existed within an easy walk to Coles' own farm, Prairieland. These men offer no argument justifying this proximity. We modern folk should note, however, that proximity to a beneficent white man afforded freed people the opportunity to live unmolested, as slave traders—including in Saint Louis—were known to utilize slave catchers who would trick and sell into slavery free blacks. Moreover, Coles had stature in Edwardsville, in Illinois, and nationally. "Joe Blow, farmer" might not have provided an adequate defense supporting a free black's protestations, but "former secretary to President James Madison" would, should a free black find himself claimed by a slave catcher. A maternal ancestor of this author, David Fair, enjoyed no such help, in 1860 Pin Oak Colony, and bushwhackers spirited him away, never to be seen nor heard from again.

Previous research by this author, for an article published in *Illinois History Teacher* (1999), uncovered that the families of Coles' Slaves lived at Pin Oak Colony until the turn of the 20th century, when the last descendants migrated to Decatur for work. Nonetheless, Pin Oak Colony had thrived. The 20th century institutions of Edwardsville's black community—Lincoln School, Mount Joy Missionary Baptist Church, and Wesley Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church—had precursors in 19th century Pin Oak Colony. According to *Centennial History of Madison County, Illinois, and Its People* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1912), Pin Oak Colony featured 300 residents, at its height, around the Civil War.

The outside world, however, demonstrated ignorance of Pin Oak Colony. For example, the 1850 federal census lacks any reference to even a single Negro (either dark-skinned ["black"] or lighter-skinned ["mulatto"]) living within central Madison County, where Pin Oak Colony was situated. For perspective, that same census listed Negroes in Alton's Hunterstown neighborhood (sixty-seven male, seventy-two female), and in Upper Alton, which was a separate community (23 male, 17 female), as well as 244 Negroes (133 male, 111 female) within "American Bottom, District Number 1" in Saint Clair County, the town of Lovejoy, Illinois, but none for Edwardsville or for Pin Oak Colony. Each of these communities appear in the 1840 and 1860 federal census.

Why this omission? For many addressing free black communities, 19th century census enumerators posed many problems, the most daunting being that free black communities existed in either private or hard-to-reach areas that discouraged visiting strangers. As the proximity to Prairieland afforded Coles the opportunity to scare away anyone looking too closely at "Coles' Slaves," it is possible that succeeding whites in Pin Oak Township chased away census enumerators. These enumerators may have been viewed as "slave catchers" by these

whites, who could use physical violence to drive home a point. Sudden ignorance, dementia, or simple amnesia - when asked about neighbors, or communities of settlers - would have served the same purpose.

By all accounts, Pin Oak Colony functioned as a vibrant community that existed within context of the greater Edwardsville community. For example, in their book, Kurt Leichtle and Bruce Carveth attribute the Baptist church organized within Pin Oak Colony as the genesis of the Wood River Baptist District Association, the first organization of black Baptists in Illinois. This is a dubious attribution: both Alton's Union Baptist Church and Jacksonville's African Baptist Church, organized in 1837 by John Livingston, a free Negro who served as a newspaper pressman for Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, at the urgings of John Mason Peck, the driving force behind Shurtleff College of Alton, vie publicly for that distinction. Nevertheless, a member of Pin Oak Colony's Baptist community, Robert Crawford, was remembered in Madison County's *Centennial History* as a respected preacher. Significantly, "Uncle Bobby," as white people called him, was one of Pin Oak Colony's original settlers, having been emancipated by Edward Coles as a young man.

Nevertheless, members of Pin Oak Colony's black Baptist community participated in discussing issues important to Illinois' free community. John Jones, a Chicago businessman who had lived as a freedman in Alton in the 1830s, led efforts to repeal the state's restrictions upon Negroes, especially the pre-Civil War Black Codes and prohibition against Negroes attending schools. He organized Illinois' free blacks to discuss means for repeal. A meeting was held, under the aegis of the Wood River Baptist District, at Alton's Union Baptist Church, in November 1856. Delegates from Pin Oak Colony's Baptist Church attended and spoke at the meeting. This meeting and its participants represented a violation of the Black Codes, as the codes expressively forbade Negroes from meeting for any purposes other than religious worship.

Perhaps these political activities, and the threats against them provided by law, led to the community's reticence to inform the outside world of its existence. It may have been possible that the same whites who enjoyed, say, "Uncle Bobby" Crawford's sermons realized his precarious position and helped to conceal him and his community of descendants from harm. If so, one should remember that comparable laws excluded Negroes from the Illinois frontier during early statehood. Hiding Pin Oak Colony from census enumerators served as a natural extension.



*Author J. Eric Robinson is a graduate of Howard University and of the University of Missouri-Columbia. He serves as an assistant professor of history at the Saint Louis College of Pharmacy. He is a former president of the Elijah P. Lovejoy Memorial of Alton. Since 1995, his Alton tours of the Underground Railroad have brought guests from almost every state and from four continents. He is also an award-winning essayist.*



# Madison County Historical Society

*Opening Doors to Madison County History*

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Edwardsville, IL 62025

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## SAVE THE DATES! MCHS 2020 SPEAKER SERIES!

In addition to the first event in this series (see page 3), the following programs have been scheduled for the 2020 MCHS Speaker Series. All are held at Immanuel United Methodist Church in Edwardsville and are free and open to the public.

**Sunday, April 19 - 2 p.m.**

**The Lynching of Robert Praeger:**

**A World War I Hate Crime for Uncle Sam**

Peter Stehman will discuss his book, "Patriotic Murder," a fascinating look at the anti-German frenzy, fueled by government propaganda, that led to the lynching of Robert Praeger at Collinsville, Illinois on April 5, 1918. Stehman discusses how civil liberties were hijacked in the name of patriotism during World War I. There are lessons for today in this story of a crime where intolerance and hate against immigrants led to a suspension of civility. There were two crimes against Robert Praeger. Not only was he an innocent man murdered for his nationality, but the leaders of the mob who committed the crime were exonerated.

**Sunday, June 14 - 2 p.m.**

**Archaeology at the Gehring Site**

Julie Zimmermann, Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville will

discuss what has been found at the Gehring site which is located on the SIUE campus between Cahokia Creek and the bluff, eight miles north of Cahokia Mounds. The SIUE archaeology field school investigations show the site was used from late PaleoIndian through historic periods, but most intensively during the Middle Woodland (ca. 2000 years ago) and Mississippian periods (ca. 1000 years ago). Zimmermann will discuss what items have been found and what those items tell us about these early residents of our area.

**Sunday, August 9 - 2 p.m.**

**Italian Immigration to Madison County**

Italians brought their language, food and music with them from the old country and these are reflected in our culture today. Joann Condellone, the great-granddaughter of Italian immigrants to Madison County, will look at the lives and contributions of numerous Italian individuals and families who made an impact in Madison County, including the Lumaghi family who owned coal mines, miners Giovanni and Peter Berutti, labor organizer Peter Condellone, social activist Katie DeRorre and several contemporary immigrants.

**Sunday, October 11 - 2 p.m.**

**Pin Oak Colony: A Free African American Community**

Historian J. Eric Robinson returns to the MCHS Speaker Series with the story of a community of free blacks in Pin Oak Township that was established by the freed slaves of Edward Coles. In addition, Robinson will explore the issues contemporary researchers face when examining pre-Civil War free black communities. Robinson, a graduate of Howard University and the University of Missouri-Columbia, is an assistant professor of history at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy.

## MCHS CALENDAR

**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2 P.M.**

**ABOLITIONIST ELIJAH P. LOVEJOY**

**Presenter: Stephen Hansen**

**Immanuel United Methodist Church  
800 N. Main Street, Edwardsville**

**BEST WISHES FOR A HAPPY NEW YEAR!**