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The 1539 Project: Why Black Midwest and Iowa history matters

In 1539, an enslaved African set foot in what we today we call Nebraska as part of a Spanish expedition.

Christy Clark-Pujara, Ashley Howard and Erik S. McDuffie Guest columnists

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Key Points

Christy Clark-Pujara, Ashley Howard, and Erik S. McDuffie are producers of the forthcoming public television documentary "The African American Midwest: A 500 Year Fight for Freedom," being developed w

Nikole Hannah-Jones, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from Waterloo, gave a sort of homecoming address Nov. 4 on the Iowa State University campus in Ames, speaking about The New York Times' landmark 1619 Project.

The 1619 Project, conceived by Jones, has singlehandedly foregrounded southern plantation slavery as a fundamental — even *the* fundamental — dynamic of American history.

"The book is an argument for the centrality of slavery in the American story," said Hannah-Jones in her Ames talk.

1619's thesis, drawn from Ebony Magazine's peerless historian, Lerone Barrett Jr., is compelling and irrefutable. But like all histories, it had to exclude some stories.

For one: the history of slavery and freedom in the Midwest and Iowa.

In 1539, an enslaved African set foot in what we today call Nebraska as part of a Spanish expedition, some 80 years before the arrival of enslaved Africans in the Jamestown Colony. Two years later, Spanish explorer and enslaver Francisco Vazquez de Coronado brought enslaved persons — Indigenous Americans and Africans — to modern-day Kansas. For the next 250 years-plus, chattel race-based slavery was practiced in the Midwest by European colonizers as well as some Indigenous nations.

Following the American Revolution, the newly independent United States claimed the region east of the Mississippi from Britain under the 1783 Treaty of Paris. Then, in 1787, the Continental Congress enacted the Midwest territories law, known as the Northwest Ordinance. Article 6 of it stated: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory."

This law was the first federal slavery ban in United States history. However, the 1787 law did not emancipate enslaved Africans already in the Midwest. It also affirmatively protected slavery and "involuntary servitude ... in the punishment of crimes."

Then it went on to say that "any person escaping into the (Midwest), from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States ... may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid."

This was the first federal fugitive slave law, applied exclusively to the future Midwest. The Midwest fugitive slave provision so pleased Southerners at the Constitutional Convention, meeting in Philadelphia at the exact same time, that they insisted it be included in the federal charter and extended to the entire nation, a telling statement of the nation's priorities. Furthermore, military officers received an allowance from the federal government to employ a free or an enslaved person as a servant; the federal government paid enslavers a maintenance fee for those they held in perpetual race-based hereditary bondage. This practice resulted in enslaved people living and working at military forts through the Midwest well into the 1840s.

The early Midwest's slavery ban had a mixed record. Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had illegal and legal loopholes so big that thousands of African Americans were enslaved through the Civil War. Even technically speaking, Indiana didn't fully outlaw slavery and involuntary servitude until 1821; Illinois in 1848, Ohio in 1851.

Slavery was legal in Iowa during the colonial era, when the state was part of New France and the Louisiana Colony, as well as during Britain's control of the region after the French and Indian War. During that time, British speculator Julien Dubuque enslaved Africans in his mining operations in the city that now bears his name.

When Iowa became part of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase, the legal status of slavery in the region was unclear. Some believed the 1787 law applied to the region; others believed slavery to be legal. The 1840 census lists 17 enslaved African Americans living in Dubuque County, out of the county's 3,059 residents, free and enslaved. Even after Iowa's status as a free territory and state was definitely settled, some early settlers blatantly broke the law. One of Iowa's most infamous scofflaw enslavers: U.S. Sen. George Wallace Jones.

By 1860 in Iowa there were zero slaves, legal or illegal.

Iowa's anti-slavery history is also significant, making several important contributions to the national anti-slavery movement.

The Iowa Supreme Court's very first decision, *In the Matter of Ralph*, put an end to the legacy of Dubuque and Jones, declaring slavery illegal and African Americans in the state free. The 1840 census, the following year, was the last to list any enslaved African Americans in Iowa. The Iowa decision's "once free, always free" doctrine would in time so panic slaveholders that the southern-dominated U.S. Supreme Court was moved to declare the holding unconstitutional in the infamous Dred Scott case.

Despite Iowa's early commitment to ending slavery, Iowa's pre-Civil War record on race is not without blemish. Shamefully, the state's Black Laws barred *free* African Americans from entering the state.

Yet in the same era, some Iowans militantly opposed slavery and committed themselves to Black freedom in truly radical ways.

In the 1848 Salem Slavery Standoff, also known as the Daggs Farm Escape, the Quaker residents of Salem, Iowa, organized a citizens' regiment to protect nine African American freedom seekers fleeing Missouri slave catchers. The Salem/Daggs standoff was one of many Midwestern episodes that impelled Southerners to demand a nationwide law criminalizing providing freedom seekers with assistance, resulting in the infamous 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. The resulting law helped accelerate America's crisis over slavery, fanning the flames of a potential civil war.

Iowa Quakers in Tabor and Springdale went even further, providing radical abolitionist John Brown with support during his anti-slavery guerrilla campaigns during the violent confrontations known as "Bleeding Kansas." Tabor and Springfield Quakers also provided aid to the freedom flight of 11 enslaved Missourians, assisted by Brown, in their escape to Detroit and finally Canada.

Two Hawkeyes in Brown's band made the ultimate sacrifice to defeat slavery. Iowans Edwin and Barclay Coppoc joined Black Midwesterners John Copeland, Dangerfield Newby, Lewis Leary, and Osborne Perry Anderson, along with Brown's other Harpers Ferry Raiders, in the failed anti-slavery uprising in the Virginia town. Edwin was captured, convicted of treason, and hanged alongside Brown. Coppoc would later lose his life for the cause of emancipation fighting in the Civil War with Iowa troops.

Now, a public television documentary hopes to shine a light on this, and many other Midwestern histories.

"The African American Midwest: A 500 Year Fight for Freedom" is being developed by ourselves and other Black Midwestern scholars in association with the Oscar-winning Kartemquin Films. AfricanAmericanMidwest.com, the project's digital documentary companion, launched to great acclaim last February for Black History Month.

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"The African American Midwest" is being supported by Humanities Iowa, Humanities Kansas, and the Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana Humanities councils.

As the 1619 Project's corrective reframing on American history deepens, it is important for historians to expand the narrative beyond the East Coast and Gulf South, to show that the history of slavery and racism in the United States, tragically, has no regional bounds.

The producers of "The African American Midwest" hope to show that the Midwest is not only America's geographic heartland — it is the beating heart of African American history.

Christy Clark-Pujara, Ashley Howard, and Erik S. McDuffie are producers of the forthcoming public television documentary "The African American Midwest: A 500 Year Fight for Freedom," being developed with Kartemquin Films. Clark-Pujara is a professor of history in the Department of African American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. An Omaha native, she earned her Ph.D. in American History at the University of Iowa. Howard is assistant professor of History and African American Studies at University of Iowa, and is also a native Omahan. McDuffie is associate professor of African American studies and history at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He is a sixth-generation African American Midwesterner.

