

Poweshiek County Residents and the Underground Railroad

The following list of biographies elaborates upon a list of names on the Iowa Freedom Trail Project available from the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. These individuals from Poweshiek County are all associated with the Underground Railroad in some form. The Iowa Freedom Trail Project provides the following definitions for the roles assigned to these individuals:

- *Abolitionist*: One who either demanded the immediate abolition of slavery or who showed ferocious hostility to the institution of slavery. Individuals who were both antislavery and abolitionist are listed only as abolitionist.
- *Anti-Abolitionist*: One who opposed the abolition of slavery—this could include slave owners, slave catchers, states' rights supporters, or anyone who simply opposed the views of abolitionists and other anti-slavery people.
- *Anti-Slavery*: One who disliked slavery but did not necessarily demand the immediate abolition of slavery. Individuals listed as anti-slavery were not known abolitionists.
- *Associated with John Brown*: One who assisted John Brown while he was conducting fugitive slaves out of Kansas and through Iowa during the 1850s. This could be direct help, financial assistance, or other networking.
- *Conductor*: One who worked as an Underground Railroad agent by moving fugitive slaves from one point to another.
- *Freedom Seekers*: A modern term to describe the same thing as the traditional term, fugitive slave.
- *Station Agent*: One who worked as an Underground Railroad agent by hiding fugitive slaves in their homes, barns, or elsewhere on their property. One could be both a conductor and a station agent but not necessarily both.

Bailey, James. F (Abolitionist, Associated with John Brown, Conductor/Station Agent)

(Aug. 21, 1815—Feb. 1, 1888)

James Bailey arrived to Poweshiek county in October of 1854 upon noticing J.B. Grinnell's New York Independent article on his proposed founding of a new colony in the west. Alongside his brother John, he supported the growing town of Grinnell by sawing lumber for the schoolhouse and early residences with a horsepower saw mill. He conducted a saw and grist mill for 8–10 years and was a prosperous farmer and stock-raiser. Like many residents of early Grinnell, Bailey was a Congregationalist who gave political allegiance to the republican party. He was a “strong abolitionist” according to his daughter, Jennie Bailey, who

recalled that he personally confronted a group of anti-abolitionists and talked them down after a local skirmish. Bailey's house was a station on the Underground Railroad. His team helped carry a number of John Brown's party to the next station of their journey across Iowa.

Bixby, Amos (Abolitionist, Associated with John Brown, Station Agent)

(Oct. 12, 1822—Jan. 2, 1894)

Amos Bixby was a practicing Searsport lawyer before settling in Grinnell in March 1854—about a month after the original settlers' arrival. He was accompanied by his wife, Augusta, and aunt and uncle, Sumner and Sarah H. Bixby. His family, like most New Englanders, were all radical reformers. He became Grinnell's first lawyer, and he and Augusta were community leaders who advocated for racial equality in education and social reform. They would also provide shelter for freedom seekers—notably, they took Frances Overton into their home, where Augusta Bixby instructed her in literacy. Encouraged by her eagerness to learn, Amos Bixby later enrolled her in public school.

Bixby, Sarah H. (Abolitionist, Station Agent)

(Apr. 4, 1801—Oct. 17, 1881)

When newly instituted rules prevented Black students from enrolling in the Grinnell public school in the aftermath of the 1860s anti-abolitionist riot, Sarah H. Bixby opened a separate school for Blacks in her home. The students who had been directly expelled by the new enrollment policy as well as additional freedom seekers attended her school. She was the aunt of lawyer and abolitionist Amos Bixby.

Bliss, Harvey (Anti-Slavery, Conductor)

(May 24, 1824—Apr. 20, 1903)

Harvey Bliss settled in Grinnell in January 1856 when he was 32. His family of New Englanders was involved in missionary work and business, and Bliss himself had a successful career including employment with the publishers of Webster's Dictionary. He had originally planned to move west in order to take part in the conflicts associated with "Bleeding Kansas." He was instead compelled to move to Poweshiek county when J. B. Grinnell personally invited him as one of the community's founding members. Bliss aided freedom seekers' passage into Canada by offering them rides to Iowa City in his wagon for goods.

Clark, Capt. Nathaniel Winslow (Anti–Abolitionist)

(Mar. 4, 1806–Jan. 25, 1868)

Nathaniel Winslow Clark was a former sea captain who lived in Grinnell. He viewed Blacks as property and denounced what he termed as abolitionists’ “negro–stealing.” Alongside future mayor Samuel “Scotch” Cooper, Clark led the resistance against four male freedom seekers attending the Grinnell public school—he wouldn’t accept Black students’ enrollment in the same school as his four daughters. After tensions rose during a vicious annual school meeting, he led an angry, armed mob with Scotch Cooper in an attempt to forcefully remove the Black students from the public school. Following the riots, Clark wrote a series of letters to the Iowa State Journal criticizing the abolitionist community of Grinnell, which he signed anonymously as “Opposition” and “Justitia.” Clark also tipped off slave hunters and freedom seekers’ previous enslavers in order to impede freedom seekers’ passages to freedom.

Conaway, Dr. John (Abolitionist, Station Agent)

(Nov. 16, 1822–May 3, 1883)

Dr. John Conaway, a physician, brought his family to Poweshiek County in 1857 and lived in Brooklyn. In desperate need of a home after staying with another family for a month, Dr. Conaway traded his horses and wagons for the Brooklyn Hotel. According to the stories of early Brooklyn settlers, its basement was an overnight station for freedom seekers, and John Brown reportedly visited multiple times while Dr. Conaway owned the Hotel. He sold it in 1861, however, and then became fully devoted to practicing medicine.

Cooper, Samuel F. (Anti–Slavery, Associated with John Brown, Conductor/Station Agent)

(Dec. 19, 1826–Feb. 21, 1908)

Samuel F. Cooper hailed from radical Oberlin College and came to Grinnell in 1855. He taught one term at the public school, was a member of the state board of education, and was founder and first president of Merchants National Bank. He was the publisher and editor of a republican newspaper that would later become the Grinnell Herald. (Although S. F. Cooper was involved with many abolitionist figures in Grinnell, we are still searching for confirmation of his role in the Underground Railroad.)

Cooper, Samuel “Scotch” (Anti–Abolitionist)

(1822 –Apr. 1886)

Samuel “Scotch” Cooper (not to be confused with Samuel F. Cooper, as has previously occurred in historical documents) was a grocer farmer who would become Grinnell’s first mayor in 1865. He was one of the town’s primary anti–abolitionist figures and joined Capt. Nathaniel W. Clark in leading opposing the enrollment of Black students in public school during the 1860 race riot.

Craig, George (Freedom Seeker)

(~1840–Apr. 30, 1924)

George Craig was born into slavery in Missouri. As he later described to a Leavenworth Times reporter (GH 3/29/1895), Craig was repeatedly passed between traders and purchasers when he was 19 due to self–inflicted defects caused by rubbing tobacco juice in his eye. He was finally brought back to Missouri, but he escaped a year later and sought refuge in Leavenworth, Kansas. Slave hunters maintained such a diligent search for him that Craig remained in hiding for a full year, at times sheltering in an underground cellar, until he could safely travel to Lawrence. There he met John Brown’s party and traveled with them until he reached Grinnell. In 1862, he married Eliza Craig and lived near Oskaloosa before returning to Grinnell in the 1890s. His granddaughter, Edith Renfrow Smith, became the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College.

Grinnell, Josiah B. (Abolitionist, Associated with John Brown, Conductor/Station Agent)

(Dec. 22, 1821–Mar. 31, 1891)

In 1850, minister Josiah B. Grinnell started First Congregational Church in Washington D. C., where he delivered the first anti–slavery sermon ever heard in the city. Grinnell was radically opposed to slavery, drinking, and discrimination of Native Americans, and his position was so unpopular that Grinnell was forced out of Washington. Grinnell’s voice eventually became overworked and he was unable to continue preaching, at which point he reportedly received the famous advice from Horace Greeley to “go west.” In 1854, Grinnell purchased land in Poweshiek County with a vision to create a progressive, abolitionist community. He sought out founding members with similar values, and the town of Grinnell grew to take on an anti–slavery reputation. J. B. Grinnell harbored freedom seekers in his large wool barn and corresponded with other station agents—it was claimed that his operations cost slave owners \$37,000. On Feb. 20, 1859, John Brown stopped in the town of

Grinnell along his journey across Iowa. Grinnell welcomed him into his home and offered his home for the party to stay in, the Black men in his own barn and the women in a nearby hotel. He arranged for the freedom seekers in Brown's party to be transported to Chicago in a stock car, along with donations of food and clothing. Grinnell's relationship with John Brown inspired great controversy. While many members of the town praised Grinnell's hospitality, he also earned many critics in addition to a new nickname, "John Brown Grinnell."

The marker for the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom stands next to the Grinnell tombstone at Hazelwood Cemetery in Grinnell, Iowa.

Hamlin, Rev. Homer (Abolitionist, Associated with John Brown, Station Agent)

(Aug. 15, 1813–Dec. 22, 1868)

Rev. Homer Hamlin was one of four founders who joined J. B. Grinnell in founding the town. According to Prof. Leonard F. Parker he was a "somewhat radical abolitionist," and it was a frequent occurrence for Blacks to appear briefly in the Hamlin home along their passage to freedom. He also opened his home to one of the four young freedom seekers involved in the 1860 riot.

Harris family (Station Agent)

The Harris family, after several unsatisfactory stops in a westward move, heard of J. B. Grinnell's community and set out Grinnell in 1855. Daughter and first female Grinnell graduate Joanna Harris Haines attended the first public school. In her "Recollections of Seventy Years in Iowa", Harris Haines vividly details how John Brown spoke with Prof. Parker and met with all the young students in front of the schoolhouse. The family operated a station, and Joanna also recalled returning home at night to find a Black woman by the fire holding her baby—and how they were gone the next morning.

Newkirk, Shipman (Abolitionist, Station Agent)

(? –1889)

Pioneer farmer Shipman Newkirk was an early settler of Brooklyn, where he purchased a physician's shop from Dr. Edward Barton in 1856. Newkirk added a second story and converted the building into a stagecoach inn. Newkirk reportedly assisted J. B. Grinnell and, in one instance, John Brown, by sheltering freedom seekers in the inn.

Overton, Frances (Freedom Seeker)

In 1858, Frances Overton escaped from her enslaver at the age of sixteen and stayed in the Bixby household in Grinnell. She helped with household chores while taking lessons in literacy from Augusta Bixby. She demonstrated such quickness and eagerness to learn that Amos Bixby decided to enroll her in the Grinnell public school, where she remained for some time until the outcome of the 1860 race riot prevented the reenrollment of any Black students. Nathaniel W. Clark tipped her location to slave hunters, leading to Harvey Bliss temporarily guarding her while she stayed in the attic. Finally, the Bixbys asked Leonard F. Parker to escort her to a Quaker settlement roughly thirty miles away where she remained for safety.

Parker, Prof. Leonard Fletcher (Abolitionist, Associated with John Brown, Conductor/Station Agent)

(Aug. 3, 1825—Dec. 11, 1911)

Prof. Leonard F. Parker settled in Grinnell in 1856 thanks to his connection to fellow Oberlin graduate and Grinnell resident Samuel F. Cooper. He taught at the public school and became county superintendent of schools shortly after his arrival. Joanna Harris Haines, one of his students, recalled that he was a revolutionary and inspiring professor at Grinnell College (referred to at the time as Iowa College). He authored some of the most essential texts recording the early history of Poweshiek county. During the 1860 anti-abolitionist riot, he firmly advocated for the enrollment of Black students in the public school. He personally confronted the angry mob that arrived to the school when tensions mounted to the point of physical violence.