

George Craig: Freedom Seeker¹

1840 - Apr. 30, 1924

Narrative for Grinnell Historical Museum

Hazelwood Cemetery Walk

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¹ The term "Freedom Seeker" is used by the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program as it illustrates the African American decision to take control of his or her destiny from the enslaver to one of their own choosing by leaving the site of enslavement. I believe this term also applies to the entirety of the life of George Craig, as his later life also includes actions that indicate a desire to take control of his destiny and work towards greater freedoms for his family and descendants.

George Craig is not buried in Grinnell, but his presence here is an essential part of our story.

He was born about 1840 on a plantation in Kentucky. When he was around five years old, he was taken to Missouri², with several other family members from what we can tell.³

As he grew into his teens his size and strength made him a more valuable asset to his owner⁴. And when he was about 18, they tried to sell him down south. Young George realized that a southern owner would mean a harder life. And the further south he was the harder escaping would be⁵. So he drank swamp water and rubbed tobacco juice in his eyes to make himself unsellable⁶. He was always looking to escape. His chance finally came one day when he was handcuffed to another slave on a riverboat. He slipped out of the cuffs, jumped into the river and got away⁷, making his way to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was helped by a group of abolitionists.

We have two accounts of George Craig's journey to freedom. Both are from interviews he gave after he had moved to Grinnell later in his life.

The first is from 1895. He returned to Leavenworth, where he had started his journey to freedom 36 years earlier and where his mother was then living. He was interviewed by the local paper and told them how he had been helped by abolitionists who hid him there for close to a year⁸. Then he said

² "[Old Slave Days](#)", *Grinnell Herald*, Aug. 18, 1922, p.3 – "At the age of five he was taken to Missouri, and lived for a time in Platte Co."

³ In the transcript of the full interview conducted by Jackie Stolze for the Grinnell Magazine in 2007, Edith states that when her grandfather was sold as a teenager it was the first time he had been away from his mother. Her understanding of his age at the time of this event is different from what George Craig stated in the later interviews. She includes several details of his enslavement, especially locations, that also differ. This quote is taken from the full interview transcript that was used for the article "A woman worth knowing" that was published in the Summer 2007 edition of the Grinnell Magazine.

"She said that my grandfather was 14 years old when he was sold to New Orleans... At 14 and that's the first time he had been away from his mother and he was sold to a plantation in Algiers. And he was so unhappy and so upset because you know he was the last boy and they [inaudible] and he was just a baby and he just couldn't get... So in order to make himself sick, he ate fat meat, drank swamp water, and put tobacco juice in his eyes."

⁴ "[Old Slave Days](#)", *Grinnell Herald*, Aug. 18, 1922, p. 3 – "He was sold twice on the block, bringing \$1450 of a rich Louisiana planter, the same price being paid for each of two other husky slaves."

⁵ "[Slavery History: Some of Goerge Craig's Experiences](#)," *Grinnell Herald*, Mar. 29, 1895, p.1 – "Craig realized that a southern owner meant perpetual enslavement; he had hopes of escape in the north."

⁶ Stuart Yeager interview with Edith Renfrow Smith – February 25, 1982, p. 35

"Well, when my grandfather ran away -- my grandfather was a slave - he had been sold in New Orleans to a slave master who was very mean. Well, he was very young. He hadn't been away from home before, and so he was very unhappy on that plantation. And he put tobacco juice in his eyes, drank swamp water which was green and ate fatback. So it made him sick. Well, an ill slave was no good so they sold him back to New Orleans. And then he was sold over in Mississippi ."

⁷ "[Slavery History: Some of Goerge Craig's Experiences](#)," *Grinnell Herald*, Mar. 29, 1895, p.1 - "Afterwards Wise came up to St. Joe and bought Craig again and started with him to St. Louis. He was handcuffed to another slave, but he found he could slip his hand out of the handcuffs. When the boat was at a point about five miles north of Leavenworth, Craig slipped his hands out, took a run to the stern of the boat, and jumped into the river. He escaped to the shore on the Missouri side."

⁸ "[Slavery History: Some of Goerge Craig's Experiences](#)," *Grinnell Herald*, Mar. 29, 1895, p.1 "Craig was kept in that cellar for three weeks, and then off and on for a whole year... The slave men maintained such a vigilant

around April 1859 he made his way into Iowa and with [quote] “some twenty odd others started east in charge of John Brown”. He also says he was dropped off near Grinnell. That article from the Leavenworth Times was reprinted in the Grinnell paper.

The 1859 journey of abolitionist John Brown through Iowa has been studied quite extensively. It is widely thought that there were 12 freedom seekers with the group of Brown and his men, so the account of traveling with “20 odd others” is consistent⁹. The group is known to have stopped in Grinnell on February 20, 1859. According to the record, they were fortunate to have mild weather during their journey. So this could account for George Craig remembering the month as April.

The group stayed in Grinnell for two nights. The Black men stayed in the barn of town founder J.B. Grinnell.¹⁰ The women were put up in one of the hotels¹¹. John Brown was a well known entity and at this point had a price on his head for a raid to free slaves in Missouri a few months earlier. In Grinnell, there were some who did not support him, but the group was generally well received and Brown even gave a couple of public speeches that were well attended. When the group left here they were sent with provisions of food and clothing for their journey¹².

The names of the 12 Black people who traveled with John Brown are not recorded anywhere. As far as we know this George Craig account is the only one where a Freedom Seeker identifies as having been on this journey.¹³

The second account given by Mr. Craig was published in 1922 in the Grinnell Herald. I'll save you from doing the math - this was 27 years after the first article and more than 60 years after the actual journey. He was 82 years old when he was interviewed. He said he escaped via the Underground

search for Craig, and so closely patrolled the road to Lawrence, that it was the spring of 1859 before he could be smuggled out.”

⁹ [“Slavery History: Some of Goerge Craig’s Experiences,”](#) *Grinnell Herald*, Mar. 29, 1895, p.1 - “He was taken over there in April, with some twenty odd others, and started east in charge of John Brown. Craig was dropped off near where Grinnell, Iowa, now stands.”

¹⁰ [“How Grinnell’s Liberty Room got its name”](#) *Des Moines Register*, March 13, 1927 - “Yet there is evidence to support the statement that Grinnell himself took charge of the black men and hid them in the wool loft of his own barn.”

¹¹ [“How Grinnell’s Liberty Room got its name”](#) *Des Moines Register*, March 13, 1927 - “The women were cared for at the hotel, being confined in a back and upper room. Bedding and food were supplied them and after they had been cautioned to be quiet, with the alternate penalty of a return to slavery, boxes and old furniture were piled in fronts of the door, blocking the passage, and they were left to themselves for the night.”

¹² [“How Grinnell’s Liberty Room got its name”](#) *Des Moines Register*, March 13, 1927 - “Brown’s appreciation of the cordial reception at Grinnell was summarized in a letter received by Mr. Grinnell, while his party was resting in comparative security at Springdale: 1. Whole party and teams kept for two days free of cost. 2. Sundry articles of clothing given to the captives. 3. Bread, meal, cakes, pies, etc., prepared for our journey. 4. Full houses for two nights in succession, at which meetings Brown and Kagi spoke and were loudly cheered and fully endorsed”

¹³ [The Iowa Freedom Trail Project](#) from the State Historical Society of Iowa documents participants on the Underground Railroad and provides a detailed account of the 1859 journey of John Brown. George Craig is listed as a known Freedom Seeker but is not documented as associated with the 1859 John Brown journey.

Railroad and came through Grinnell¹⁴. The year is reported as 1860 and there's no mention of John Brown. So some differences, understandable given the span of years.

The first public record we have of George Craig is from 1864. He married Eliza Jane Gilbal¹⁵ of Springdale, Iowa. Springdale was a large community of Quakers and, I think it's worth noting, had hosted the John Brown party in 1859 for nearly two weeks¹⁶.

George and Eliza's first child, Theodora, was born a year later. A second daughter, Anna, was born in 1868. By that time they had moved to Oskaloosa. George was working as a barber and even got involved a bit in politics.¹⁷

In 1875 they welcomed their last child, Eva Pearl. School was always important to the family and they wanted their children to get as much education as possible. Eva Pearl, their youngest, especially loved school and pursuit of education would become a family legacy.

The Craigs moved to Grinnell in 1887. Eva Pearl was 12 at the time. Dora and Anna had both married and were living here.

Dora married a man named John Brown Lucas whose family had a big farm near Ewart, just south of town. That farm had been purchased by John's father, a man named Henry Lucas, in 1859. It was the first farm owned by a Black family in Poweshiek County¹⁸. Henry Lucas is another notable story. He had a remarkable life. It included purchasing his freedom and that of his wife and children after finding gold in California. It was his gold mining partner, a man from Montezuma, who encouraged him to settle here. By the 1870s the Lucas family owned over 320 acres - 160 acres of that land is still owned by his great-great grandson.

So when the Craig's daughter, Dora, married John Brown Lucas, these two impressive families were linked through marriage.

¹⁴ "[Old Slave Days](#)", Grinnell Herald, Aug. 18, 1922, p.3 "Craig at last made his final get away and started for freedom, passing through Grinnell in August 1860, following the line of the underground railway to Springdale, Iowa. Captain Stewart was in charge of the party on this trip and saw the escaping slaves safely thro. Craig lived in Springdale for four years. He was married to his present wife in 1864. She came to Springdale from Ohio with Quakers." This article indicates that he may have stayed in Springdale once he reached that point on his escape via the Underground Railroad.

¹⁵ "Iowa, County Marriages, 1838-1934," database, FamilySearch, 004309820 > image 580 of 635; county courthouses, Iowa.

¹⁶ "[John Brown Freedom Trail 1859](#)" from the Iowa Freedom Trail Project, State Historical Society of Iowa. <https://history.iowa.gov/history/research/collections/featured-topics/underground-railroad-iowa>

¹⁷ "Grant and Wilson," *Weekly Oskaloosa Herald*, Aug. 15, 1872. Reports that George Craig served as Secretary of the Oskaloosa Colored Grant and Wilson Club, a Republican party group formed to support the re-election of President Grant.

¹⁸ "[John B. Lucas writes a History of the Lucas Family](#)", Grinnell Herald, May 20, 1932.

The Craig's middle daughter, Anna, married a Grinnell barber named Edward Goode. Notably, she opened the first beauty shop in town, a business that she ran for over 25 years¹⁹. Edward died when their son was just a baby, so Anna raised him mostly as a single parent. Later in life she married a man named Solomon Brown, who was a cook at the college for many years.

John and Dora lived on the farm for a while but soon decided to move into town. In 1895 they added triplets to their growing family. We believe these were the first triplets born in the state of Iowa.²⁰ Grandma Eliza and Aunt Eva Pearl²¹ would often help Dora care for the babies.

By many accounts Grinnell was a good place to live, but it wasn't a perfect place. Many people were kind and supportive, but there were always some who were not. There were businesses who would not serve them.²² And there were people and parts of town that they knew to avoid. This leads us into some of the more complicated parts of George Craig's story.

There are many tidbits scattered among the pages of the early Grinnell papers. How you interpret them will be influenced by the assumptions you carry with you into the story. So I invite you to pause a moment and consider what you believe of this man based on what you've heard thus far. Consider the experiences of his childhood, of his early years of marriage, and consider the times in which he lived.

I mentioned earlier the 1895 interview that was published in the Grinnell paper. This was the same year that the triplets were born, an event that also got a lot of attention. Anna had the only beauty shop in town and George was a barber. So they were known to many. There were only a few Black families in town. And they were now even more visible than before.

A year later, in 1896, George Craig was arrested for bootlegging and put in jail for 3 months²³.

A couple of years after that, in 1900, he ran for state office.²⁴ There is a notice in the Grinnell Herald saying Craig "failed to secure a position in the legislature", but he wanted to thank the citizens of

¹⁹ Obituary. Grinnell Herald Register, Jan. 24, 1946. <https://www.grinnell.lib.ia.us/Obit/46/BrownAnna.pdf>

²⁰ Photograph from Edith Renfrow Smith of the Lucas triplets.
<https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/grinnell%3A12142>

²¹ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Laura Weiman, June 2, 1982, p. 2 - "Mother came here to take care of their triplets."

²² Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Laura Weiman, June 2, 1982, p. 32 - "We couldn't go into Candyland. We weren't allowed in there. They wouldn't give us a drink of water."

²³ A series of small entries in the Grinnell Herald from December 1896 through December 1897 report on the indictment for bootlegging (Dec. 8, 1896), trial (Sept. 21, 1897) and release from jail (Dec. 24, 1897). The reporting of his release contains language that is curious, as well. "George Craig has returned from his ninety days recreation at the palatial residence of L. M. Bennett (sheriff) of the county seat." This language is notably snarky, for last of a better word. Is it sarcastic and dismissive of the jail time being enforced on George Craig, or is it poking fun at Craig for having been jailed?

²⁴ *Grinnell Herald*, Jan. 19, 1900. "George Craig failed to secure a position in the legislature, but desires to express his gratitude to the Grinnell citizens for their efforts on his behalf."

Grinnell for their support. Isn't it interesting that he would decide to run for office at this time. What does that tell us about him and about his life in Grinnell?

Over the next 20 years, he was arrested several more times for gambling and alcohol related crimes. We know that many men were charged with such things. But is it possible Mr. Craig may have been arrested more than others because of the color of his skin²⁵?

A few cases got more coverage than others and they may offer some insight. In one a man swore on the stand that Craig had sold him liquor at least three times. But the jury found George Craig NOT guilty²⁶. So while there is evidence of multiple charges, we do not yet know how many times he was convicted.

In 1915 George Craig retired from barbering. He was 75 years old and probably looking forward to some restful years. But he wasn't so lucky.

In November of that year the paper reported a puzzling incident: Mr. Craig swore a declaration against a man for larceny of 10 window shades from the Craig's house. When the case came up for hearing it was found that eight of the shades were back in place, so the case was dismissed."²⁷

What are we to make of this? Why would someone steal his window shades? Could he have made it up? But if so, why window shades? A prank at the expense of an old man? Was it one prank too many and he decided to press charges? We will never know the answer.

And then, two years later, he was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. A month after this, his wife signed papers declaring him of "unsound mind."²⁸ The court appointed a guardian to handle

²⁵ Phone conversation with Edith Renfrow Smith on June 28, 2023: When asked about her grandfather, George Craig, she talked about how litigious he was, "always suing someone". When asked if she'd ever heard about him being arrested for bootlegging, she laughed and said she had never heard that and was surprised because Grandma (Eliza Jane Craig) was a Quaker.

²⁶ *Grinnell Herald*, Sept. 23, 1904 coverage of the trial of George Craig, found not guilty of selling whiskey to William Sparks. "What the jury thought of Sparks' word even under oath can be told from the verdict."

²⁷ *Grinnell Herald*, Nov. 2, 1915 - "George Craig swore out an information Friday against Joe Chambers, charging Chambers with the larceny of 10 window shades from Craig's house on Third Avenue. When the case came up for hearing Friday evening before Justice Noll it developed that eight of the shades supposed to be missing were in their places. It appearing that the main cause of contention had disappeared, the case was dismissed."

²⁸ Poweshiek County Courthouse records include a Petition for Appointment of Guardian, Eliza Craig vs. George Craig, dated Feb. 19, 1917.

"That is said George Craig is now a person of unsound mind and is not capable of caring for himself and his property, that said George Craig is the owner of a house and lot in Grinnell, Iowa where the family home has been maintained for many years. That he also has equity in another house and lot in Grinnell, Iowa, and the owner of a small storeroom or shop on leased ground, and in addition to this some money the exact amount of which is unknown to the practitioner. That it is necessary for some person to be appointed to look after the said George Craig and see that he is properly cared for and that his property is preserved."

their finances. Could he have had dementia? Possibly. But two years later the court determined that he had “recovered his mind.”²⁹ So probably not dementia.

And it was AFTER all of this, in 1922, that the Grinnell Herald interviewed him for the second article about his early life. He was 82. I wonder what prompted the paper to run that story?

His granddaughter, Edith Renfrow Smith, was 10 when he died two years later. She remembers both of her grandparents being in poor health and her mother and aunts caring for them. It was a strain on the families and, with limited options, George Craig was sent to the State Asylum in Mount Pleasant. Seventeen days later he was dead³⁰. The family didn’t have money to bring his body back to Grinnell so he was buried in an unmarked grave in the hospital cemetery.

His wife Eliza died less than two months later.

The life of George Craig is intertwined with Grinnell in complicated ways. It may not be as straightforward as some people would like to think.

Celebrating Grinnell as a stop on the Underground Railroad doesn’t mean it was an easy place for African Americans to live. We honor their memories and their contributions. And we are certainly a better place for their presence here.

The End

²⁹ Poweshiek County Courthouse records include a request to discharge the Guardianship of George Craig dated March 1919 (term) because “he has recovered his mind and is now competent to handle his business affairs.”

³⁰ Death certificate and information available on Find a Grave at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/242652375/george-russel-craig>