

**George Craig: Freedom Seeker<sup>1</sup>**  
**1840 - Apr. 30, 1924**

**Hazelwood Cemetery Walk**  
**Updated May 2024**



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*5/31/24*

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<sup>1</sup> 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's body is not buried in Grinnell. But his story is an essential part of our story and his spirit is surely here with his family.

He was born about 1840 on a plantation in Kentucky. Enslaved, when he was around five years old, he was taken to Missouri<sup>2</sup>. From what we can tell there were other family members with him, at minimum we believe he was with his mother.<sup>3</sup>

As he grew into his teens his size and strength made him a more valuable asset to his owner<sup>4</sup>. And when he was a teenager they tried to sell him down south. Young George realized that a southern owner would mean a harder life. He knew that the further south he went the harder escaping would be<sup>5</sup>. So he drank swamp water and rubbed tobacco juice in his eyes to make himself less valuable<sup>6</sup>. He was always looking to escape and 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 away<sup>7</sup>. He made his way to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was helped by a group of abolitionists.

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<sup>2</sup> "[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."

<sup>3</sup> 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."

<sup>4</sup> "[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."

<sup>5</sup> "[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."

<sup>6</sup> 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."

<sup>7</sup> "[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."

We know these things because of two accounts that George Craig gave that were printed in the Grinnell papers after he moved here later in his life.

The first article is from 1895. At that time he had returned to Leavenworth where his mother was then living and he was interviewed by the Leavenworth paper. He told them how he had been helped by abolitionists who hid him for close to a year<sup>8</sup>. He said that in the spring of 1859 he made his way into Iowa [and I quote here] “with some twenty odd others started east in charge of John Brown”. He also said he was dropped off near Grinnell. That article from the Leavenworth Times was picked up and 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 consistent<sup>9</sup>. 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 it as spring.

It is known that the group stayed in Grinnell for two nights. The men in the barn of town founder J.B. Grinnell,<sup>10</sup> the women in one of the hotels<sup>11</sup>. Now John Brown was a well known entity and a bit notorious at this point. He had led a raid in Missouri where white men had been killed so he had a price on his head. When he arrived in Grinnell, there were some who were not happy about it and sent word to the authorities. But the majority of townspeople were abolitionists. JB Grinnell welcomed him into his home. Brown even gave a couple of public speeches that were well attended. And when they departed Grinnell they were sent with provisions of food and clothing for their journey<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> [“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 search for Craig, and so closely patrolled the road to Lawrence, that it was the spring of 1859 before he could be smuggled out.”

<sup>9</sup> [“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.”

<sup>10</sup> [“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.”

<sup>11</sup> [“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.”

<sup>12</sup> [“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

The names of the 12 Freedom Seekers who traveled with John Brown are not recorded anywhere. As far as we know, this account from George Craig is the only one where a Freedom Seeker identifies as having been on this specific journey.<sup>13</sup>

There is a second account we have from Mr. Craig. It 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. We know that he struggled with dementia in his later years. But even despite some differences to the earlier account, he still speaks of finding his way to freedom via the Underground Railroad and traveling through Grinnell<sup>14</sup>.

So I feel confident in saying that George Craig was a Freedom Seeker who traveled through Grinnell in 1859. He did not settle in Grinnell at that point, but that was his first contact with this community. Based on the records of the John Brown journey, we believe he traveled to freedom in Canada and stayed there until after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

But we know something called him back to Iowa. The first public record we have of him is from five years later, in 1864 when he married Eliza Jane Gilbal<sup>15</sup> of Springdale, Iowa. Springdale was a large community of Quakers near Iowa City. And, it's worth noting, they had hosted the John Brown party in 1859 for nearly two weeks<sup>16</sup>, perhaps providing an opportunity for the two young people to meet.

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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"

<sup>13</sup> [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.

<sup>14</sup> "[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.

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

<sup>16</sup> "[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>

So George and Eliza were married in 1864 and their first child, Theodora, was born a year later. A second daughter, Anna, was born in 1868. By then they had moved to Oskaloosa. George was working as a barber and we found reference in early newspapers that he even got involved a bit in politics.<sup>17</sup> Then, in 1875, they welcomed their youngest daughter, Eva Pearl.

School was always important to the family and they wanted their children to get as much education as possible. Their youngest, Eva Pearl, especially loved school and pursuit of education would become a family legacy. You'll learn more about her in your next stop.

In 1887 George and Eliza moved to Grinnell. By then their two oldest daughters had both married men from Grinnell and were living here. Their youngest, Eva Pearl, was 12 at the time they moved.

Dora, their oldest, married a man named John Brown Lucas. His family had a big farm near Ewart, just south of town. That farm was purchased by his father, a man named Henry Lucas. This was the first farm owned by a Black man in Poweshiek County<sup>18</sup>.

Now Henry's story is also noteworthy, and we have a full account of it available in the library archives. He was born enslaved. He was eventually able to purchase his freedom and he travelled to California during the gold rush. He made enough money that he returned to his former owner and purchased the freedom of his wife and children. Fleeing the laws in Arkansas that would have re-enslaved them, he moved his family to Iowa. He came here after encouragement from his former gold mining partner, a man from Montezuma. He arrived in late 1859 and purchased his first land within weeks. Ten years later he owned over 320 acres - 160 acres of which is still owned by his great-great grandson, Marcus Benning.

It was this same farm that was often visited by Edith Renfrow Smith years later. Her cousin, Alma Kiner, was one of Henry's grandchildren. She lived on the property and ran the farm with her husband, Booker.

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<sup>17</sup> "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.

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

So now back to our main story: When the Craig's oldest daughter married Henry's, son these two important and impressive families were linked through marriage. John and Dora had a big and growing family. In 1895, they had triplets. From what we can find, we believe this is the first recorded birth of triplets in Iowa, adding to the list of notable things about this family.<sup>19</sup>

Anna, the middle daughter of George and Eliza, had married a man named Edward Goode, who was a barber here. Anna was a successful businesswomen in her own right. She opened the first beauty shop in Grinnell, a business that she ran for over 25 years<sup>20</sup>. Her husband 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. So her gravesite (reference location nearby) reads "Anna Craig Brown" (Craig is misspelled).

Now by many accounts Grinnell was a good place to live for the Craig's, but of course 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.<sup>21</sup> And there were people and parts of town that they knew to avoid.

Our search of the local papers show many tidbits that mention the Craig's and their children. It is impossible to get an accurate sense of any life through such scattered pieces, especially when they were written by white men telling the story they wanted to tell. But before I share more about George Craig, 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.

By 1895 the Craigs had lived in town for several years. This is the year the first interview discussing George Craig's escape to freedom was published in the Grinnell paper. And this was the same year that the triplets were born, an event that also got a lot of attention.

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<sup>19</sup> Photograph from Edith Renfrow Smith of the Lucas triplets.

<https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/grinnell%3A12142>

<sup>20</sup> Obituary. Grinnell Herald Register, Jan. 24, 1946. <https://www.grinnell.lib.ia.us/Obit/46/BrownAnna.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> 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."

George was a barber. His daughter, Anna, had the only beauty shop in town. So they were known to many community members through their businesses. There were only a few Black families in town. And with the additional attention from these stories published in the papers, it's fair to say they were now even more visible than before.

In 1896, one year later, George Craig was arrested for bootlegging and put in jail for 3 months<sup>22</sup>. Iowa had prohibition laws at the time and the story was covered in the local paper. It's easy to assume it was talked about in town.

Then, a few years later, in 1900, George Craig ran for state office.<sup>23</sup> We know this because 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 Grinnell for their support. Now 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, the papers indicate he was arrested several more times, some were alcohol related and some were for gambling. 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 skin<sup>24</sup>?

A few cases got more coverage than others and 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 guilty<sup>25</sup>. Can we assume there were others who testified on his behalf? Character witnesses from the community? How many times did similar things happen? We can't be sure.

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<sup>22</sup> 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?

<sup>23</sup> *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."

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> *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."

What we do know is that in 1915 George Craig retired from barbering. He was 75 and probably looking forward to some restful years. Sadly, his mind was starting to slip into confusion, so they were not easy years.

There is a puzzling report in the Grinnell Herald of a court case involving someone stealing his window shades.<sup>26</sup> And a couple of years later, he was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. Soon after, his wife signed papers declaring him of “unsound mind,”<sup>27</sup> and the court appointed a guardian to manage their finances.<sup>28</sup>

His granddaughter, Edith Renfrow Smith, was 10 when he died in 1924. She remembers that both of her grandparents were in poor health, with her mother and her two aunts caring for them. It was a strain on the families and there just weren’t good options. Sadly, George Craig was sent to the State Asylum in Mount Pleasant in April 1924. Seventeen days later he was dead<sup>29</sup>. The family didn’t have money to bring his body back to Grinnell so he was buried in the hospital cemetery in an unmarked grave.

His wife of 60 years, Eliza Jane, died less than two months later. She lies here, evidence of the lives of two remarkable early Grinnell residents whose stories deserve to be told.

And whose family legacy lives on.

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The End

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<sup>26</sup> 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.”

<sup>27</sup> 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.”

<sup>28</sup> 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.”

<sup>29</sup> Death certificate and information available on Find a Grave at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/242652375/george-russel-craig>