Sylvanus Lowry and Slavery in St. Cloud

by Dr. Christopher P. Lehman

Dr. Christopher Lehman, Holyoke, Mass. 2002.

Ethnic Studies Assistant Professor Christopher Lehman of St. Cloud State University has been researching St. Cloud's early history and the presence of slaves documented in census records and old newspapers.

On September 20, 1905, workers clearing a cornfield on Nehemiah Clarke's Meadow Lane Farm in St. Cloud inadvertently unearthed a vault containing a baby in a casket. The *St. Cloud Journal-Press* reported that "there was a costly casket and every indication that the child was the offspring of wealthy parents who had taken every precaution to protect the lifeless clay of their little one from the depredations of wild beasts or still wilder Indians." The laborers stared reverently at the corpse for a moment and then refilled the grave. The article identified the remains as those of "the progeny of some early pioneer family associated with the Southern colony who settled in St. Cloud in early times."[1]


FOUND DEAD CHILD IN A VAULT

Workmen on Carter Farm Find Crumbling Remains of Child.

From Friday's Daily.

Men cutting corn on the Carter farm just north of the city made a ghastly discovery yesterday. A vault was found in a cornfield in which reposed the moldering remains of a little child. The vault had been built of red brick, there was a costly casket and every indication that the child was the offspring of wealthy parents who had taken every precaution to protect the lifeless clay of their little one from the depredations of wild beasts or still wilder Indians.

The farm is now the property of N. P. Clarke. Yesterday while employes of the farm were cutting corn with a corn harvester, the foot of a mule attached to the harvester dropped into a cavity. The excited men obtained spades and picks and began to shovel in the belief that they had unearthed a treasure. A skillfully built brick vault was developed under the work of the shovels and at the bottom of the excavation was found a wooden casket fast falling to pieces under the action of the elements. Within the tiny casket lay the remains of a child, the face still retaining its youthful contour, but the trunk and lower limbs little more than inanimate dust. The body was reverently covered by the workmen and the vault filled up.

The identity of the child may always remain a mystery. The Carter farm is a part of the original Lowry estate. Years ago Gen. Lowry and Rev. Mr. Calhoun, father of Judge D. T. Calhoun, died and were buried on the estate but some years later the remains were removed and reinterred in North Star cemetery. It is possible that the child whose unmarked grave was found yesterday was the progeny of some early pioneer family associated with the Southern colony who settled in St. Cloud in early times.

*Rev. David Lowry (1796-1877) General Sylvanus B. Lowry's father.*
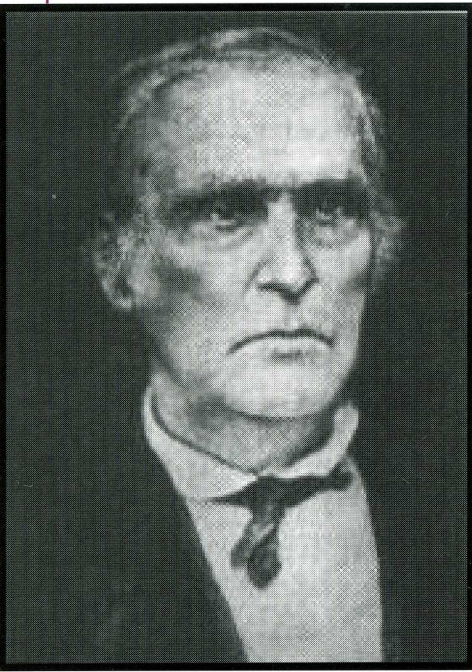
Since no anthropologist determined the race of the remains, it is possible that they are of a slave child who died in service to one of the town's founders. Indeed, the only people having lived on that land before Clarke owned it were city co-founder Gen. Sylvanus Lowry, his relatives, and his slaves. Lowry had acquired considerable wealth from his successful Indian trading posts in the towns of Long Prairie and Watab as well as his lumbering, grocery, post, and ferry businesses in St. Cloud. Therefore, he had the money to afford the casket. Although no child in the Lowry family died on that land, the toddler son of one of his slaves did. Clarke had earlier removed the remains of Lowry and his brother-in-law from the land and reburied them in North Star cemetery but had overlooked the young slave's gravesite.[2]

The workers may have found the last untouched reminder of the existence of slavery in St. Cloud, Minnesota. All other signs, from a master's carriage acquired via a town slave's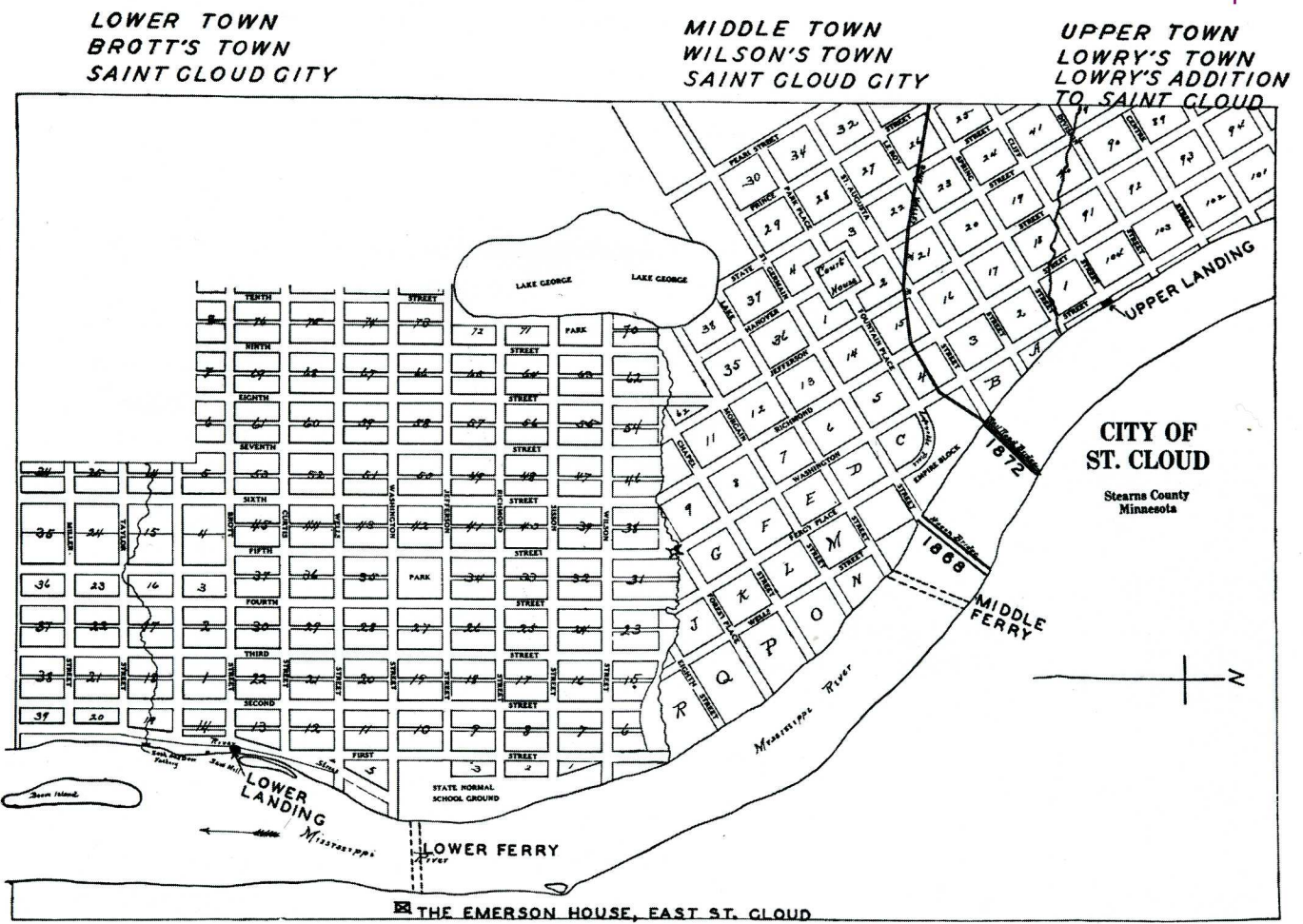 sale to the house where a slave couple married, have long since disappeared. The stories of the city's five African American slaves, like the baby slave's corpse, have been neglected for too long. Slavery influenced St. Cloud's economy, religion, and leisure during the first decade of the town's existence, and it left a legacy that is more widely accessible than one may think.

Born in Kentucky in 1823, General Lowry became central Minnesota's political boss during the 1850s by deviating from his father's footsteps. Rev. David Lowry, a Cumberland Presbyterian Church missionary, spent seventeen years trying abortively to convince Winnebago Indians of Iowa to abandon their lifestyle of hunting and trapping and learn white ways of farming. Sylvanus, on the other hand, started speaking the Winnebago language fluently in his childhood and at age sixteen became the mission's interpreter. His
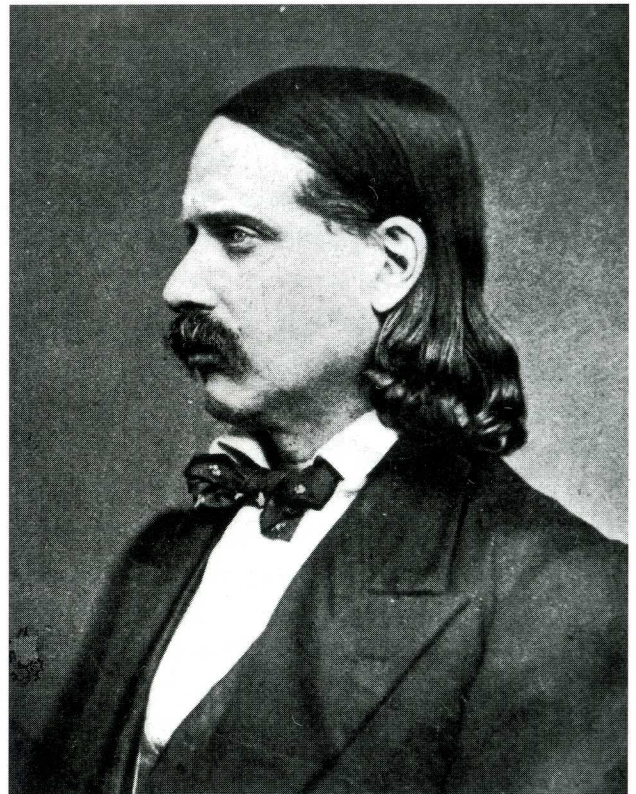
General Sylvanus B. Lowry (1823-1865) founder of St. Cloud's Upper Town. His home was located on the current St. Cloud Hospital site.

LOWER TOWN
BROTT'S TOWN
SAINT CLOUD CITY

MIDDLE TOWN
WILSON'S TOWN
SAINT CLOUD CITY

UPPER TOWN
LOWRY'S TOWN
LOWRY'S ADDITION
TO SAINT CLOUD

Map showing Lower, Middle, and Upper Town additions in St. Cloud

fluency paid off when, as an adult, he traded with the Indians as an agent for the American Fur Company. Ironically, the fur agents had made his father's teaching job difficult. They enticed tribal members with liquor to trap animals for fur, and the minister could not effectively instruct inebriated Indians. Nevertheless, the wealth that Sylvanus acquired as an agent enabled him to afford to be one of the founders of the city of St. Cloud.[3]

The General was one of three people who platted land in the 1850s in modern St. Cloud. George Brott's section of "Lower Town" and John Wilson's "Middle Town" had populations mostly of recent European immigrants. Meanwhile, Lowry's "Upper Town," which he called "Acadia," consisted of at least five wealthy, educated, pro-slavery southern families, including his own. Visiting Acadia in October 1856, his close friend, C.C. Andrews, described Lowry's lavish, Southern-style house, "The residence of my friend is a little above the limits of St. Cloud, midway on the gradual rise from the river to the prairie. It is a neat white two-story cottage, with a piazza in front. The yard extends to the water's edge, and it is in a grove of handsome shade trees." Because he saw Acadia in the fall, he could "sit on

the piazza and have a full view of the river through the branches of the trees." He depicted the farm as "splendid land, which is well stocked with cattle and durably fenced. A better barn, or a neater farm-yard than he has, cannot be found between Boston and Worcester." At the time the dwelling housed Lowry, his parents, Uncle Leonard Jones, and his European immigrant farm laborers.[4]

Lowry was an influential figure in local politics during the city's early years. He served in Minnesota's territorial legislature in 1852, as Benton County's District Attorney in 1854, and as St. Cloud's first mayor two years later. He possessed a great talent in mesmerizing people, and they respected his wealth and his opening of much of Minnesota's Indian land to white people. Moreover, they seemed to endorse his pro-slavery position. In 1857 new resident Jane Grey Swisshelm received warning from a local citizen that her abolitionist rhetoric would fall on deaf ears in Lowry-dominated northern Minnesota.[5]

However, he suddenly withdrew from politics after suffering from a "ringing in his head." In the spring of 1857, he traveled to Europe to see a doctor about his condition. Before his illness, he had usually given the public his best appearance. His friend Julia Wood described his posture as "straight as an Indian, and carrying his finely shaped head like a lord." Even Swisshelm, his political rival, called him "born to command—of splendid physique and dignified being." However, when he returned home in September, Andrews noted that Lowry "did not look strong."[6]

While overseas, Lowry recruited his brother-in-law, Cumberland Presbyterian minister Thomas Calhoun of Lebanon, Tennessee, to manage the Acadia farm. In many aspects Calhoun was qualified for the job. He came from Middle Tennessee, where masters worked the land alongside their slaves. As a result, he would have known not only about agricultural labor but also about supervising the General's workforce. Perhaps Lowry trusted him because they led similar lives. They had Cumberland Presbyterian ministers for fathers, both of whom had pastored the same church in Lebanon, Tennessee at different times. Sylvanus and Thomas came from the South. As a slaveowner, Thomas agreed with Sylvanus's beliefs. Both of them loved the General's thirty-year-old sister Elizabeth. The men were even born in the same year.[7]

The minister took himself, Elizabeth, and their children to a starving and unfriendly St. Cloud in 1857. The city suffered the nation's economic panic that year. Grasshoppers destroyed the crops of the city's inhabitants, causing famine. Residents ate only salt pork and potatoes—a diet similar to the Lebanon, Tennessee slave's typical dish of meat, meal, and molasses. Concerning religion, the city consisted mostly of Catholics and Lutherans, and the European immigrants dominating St. Cloud's population resisted the Presbyterian denomination. Still, the city provided an opportunity for

Calhoun to rise in his denomination; in Tennessee, he had no church, but in St. Cloud, he helped run the local Cumberland Presbyterian Church run by his father-in-law.[8]

Under Reverends Lowry and Calhoun, the church gradually became stable in membership and location. The local Presbyterians had an unpredictable first year. For example, they held services in several buildings. Although the General did not help facilitate services, he frequently provided housing for them in one of his several Acadia warehouses. However, by May 1858, the Everett Schoolhouse had begun to host the church's semi-weekly prayer meetings, and the ladies had formed a sewing circle. The members expressed to Swisshelm their desire to construct a building before the next winter.[9]

Calhoun's greatest imprint upon St. Cloud, however, lay in his bringing to the city two African American slaves, thirty-two-year-old mother Mary Butler and her two-year-old son. The minister's decision was not unique, for southerners often traveled with their slaves when vacationing or temporarily

residing in Minnesota's towns of Fort Snelling, St. Anthony, Sauk Rapids, and St. Cloud. In fact, as the Calhouns and Butlers made their way up north, the Supreme Court was deciding whether Dred Scott, a southern slave who had married and started a family in Minnesota while accompanying his master, was a freedman or a slave. The Court's decision affected not only Mary Butler's life but also the politics of central Minnesota.[10]

Continued in next issue of *Crossings*.

1 "Found Dead Child in Vault," *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, 21 September 1905, 7.
2 Ibid.
3 *Long Prairie Leader*, 27 November 1941, in *Todd County Histories* (Todd County Bicentennial Committee, 1976), 376; *Long Prairie Leader*, 4 December 1941, in *Todd County Histories* (Todd County Bicentennial Committee, 1976), 377.
4 Christopher Columbus Andrews, letter to *Boston Post*, October 1856, in Christopher Columbus Andrews, *Minnesota and Dacotah* (New York: Arno Press, 1857), 141-2, 143-4; Gertrude B. Gove, *A History of St. Cloud in the Civil War* (St. Cloud, MN: Stearns County Historical Society, 1976), 8.
5 Jane Grey Swisshelm, *Half a Century* (Chicago: Jensen, McClurg, and Co., 1880), 172-3.
6 Julia A. A. Wood, "In the Early Days," *Sauk Rapids Free Press*, 27 July 1894, 3:3; Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 172-3; C. C. Andrews, quoted in William Bell Mitchell, *The History of Stearns County, Minnesota*, volume one (Chicago, 1915), 184.
7 Harriet Simpson Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (New York: MacMillan, 1960), 249.
8 Gove, *A History of St. Cloud in the Civil War*, 19, 31, 63; Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1981), 19.
9 *St. Cloud Visiter*, 20 May 1858.
10 Gove, *A History of St. Cloud in the Civil War*, 27. Minnesota's 1857 census, Stearns County, noted Mary Butler's age as thirty-two as of September of that year. Minnesota's territorial census of 1857 and federal census of 1860 showed the names and ages of individual African American slaves, unlike the anonymous listings of slaves in southern states and territories, because Minnesota was officially free land. Its census forms had no column for recording either the number of slaves a master owned or their monetary value.

Correction (last month's *Crossings*): Thanks to Josef M. Schmitt, *Crossings* Editors would like to update the following. The donor for part of the land that the Grasshopper Chapel stands on was that of Philipp Bold, Jr. Popular history cites Anton Bold. However, the platt map from that time period verifies Philipp as the donor.