

**Northern Slave, Black Dakota:
The Life and Times of Joseph Godfrey**

Walt Bachman

(Bloomington, MN: Pond Dakota Press, 2013. 412 p. Cloth, \$34.95.)

Joseph Godfrey, like millions of African Americans in the southern and border states during the antebellum period, was born into slavery and legally remained so until 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified. But unlike the multitude of American bondsmen and women, Godfrey spent his life as a slave almost entirely within the state of his birth—Minnesota.

He was not the only slave living in Minnesota. For example, Jim Thompson, a woman named Rachel (who won her freedom in a Missouri court on the basis of having lived on the free soil of Minnesota) and, of course, Harriet and Dred Scott all lived and worked as slaves at Fort Snelling. But Walt Bachman, in *Northern Slave, Black Dakota*, tells a different story, one of a slave who belonged not to military officers but to fur traders whose names are prominent in the annals of Minnesota history.

Godfrey became a fugitive, fleeing from abusive masters to find sanctuary among the Dakota. He rode with them during the U.S.—Dakota War of 1862, a unique figure in that conflict. His war was not the Civil War, then being transformed into a struggle to free all men, for slavery had faded into his past. Godfrey now identified himself as Dakota and was drawn into the 1862 conflict because of his marital ties and, as Bachman tells us, coercion. Like other Dakota prisoners accused of engaging in military actions, he was forced to testify in the subsequent military trials, but ill-repute would be forever after affixed to his name because he testified against other prisoners. Afterward, he lived out his days in relative isolation on the Santee Sioux Reservation in Nebraska. Godfrey’s life was indeed unique and thus merits the deep examination that Bachman provides in this biography.

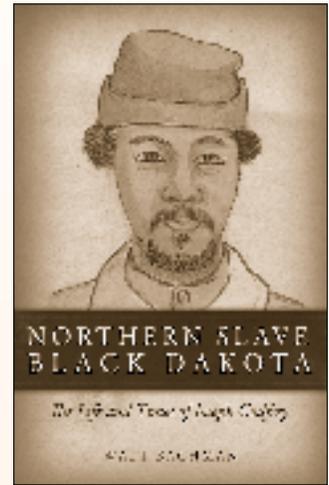
All of the thorny issues in Minnesota history are right here: slavery; every aspect of the U.S.—Dakota War; the moral failure of historical figures and prominent officials; abject racism; the fluid nature of racial identity on the frontier—reasons enough to discourage most scholars from tackling this large, multifaceted subject. Moreover, even with the extraordinary circumstances of his life, Godfrey (at least as Bachman portrays him) was a pretty ordinary guy. The paradox of his legacy has been shrouded either in denigration or circumspection. It also begs the question: once Godfrey became a pariah, why did both the Dakota and white Minnesotans (many of whom were probably Lincoln Republicans) feel compelled to refer to him with racial epithets?

Despite these challenges, Bachman, confronting conventional wisdom and bias, gives us a fascinating portrait of a man who for so long lived as a “man without footnotes.” This book supplies plenty of them. Bachman’s research is meticulous. His analysis is sound. And though he writes as one who knows that pitfalls abound, it is quite evident that he values and executes an even-handed approach to telling an otherwise awkward story.

Though much of the book deals with the 1862 war and the military trials, readers should understand that it is not a history of the war or its causes. Bachman’s central intent is to examine the life of a single man; his book primarily focuses on events as Godfrey experienced them. In itself, this goal is an important aspect of that tragic and yet-to-be-resolved chapter in history, perhaps giving us insight into why some of the other men fought. Possibly because the author is a retired district attorney, he may, at times, be too expansive on what some may consider arcane aspects of legal procedure, but his handling of these passages is accessible to the lay reader—and necessary for understanding what happened and gaining insight into the motivation of the participants. It should be mentioned that there are a few brief but disturbing passages of violence that may be taxing for some to read.

Bachman has written an important addition to the canon of Minnesota history and one that should stimulate much conversation.

Reviewed by William D. Green, JD, PhD, professor of history at Augsburg College, who focuses on African American history in Minnesota, civil rights, and legal history. He is presently working on a sequel to his 2007 book, A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota.



The Big Water: Lake Minnetonka and Its Place in Minnesota History

Frederick L. Johnson

(*Minnetonka: Deep Haven Books, 2012. 282 p. Cloth, \$29.95.*)

The Big Water is one of very few volumes concerning the history of this important Minnesota lake. Formatted as a coffee table-style book with abundant images and graphics, it is nevertheless a thoroughly researched and scholarly work, complete with extensive endnotes for each chapter. It is accessible both to the casual reader looking for an anecdote and the more serious one desiring to delve more deeply into the subject. The tone is on the lighter side, and Johnson does a good job of bringing people and events to life.

Focused solidly on the last 150 years of history around the lake, the book's main body commences with the arrival of white settlers in the 1840s. Johnson addresses the region's long American Indian history in a prologue, and although this acknowledgment is nice, the book might have benefitted from more attention to this subject. *The Big Water's* true purpose, however, seems to be demonstrating how Euro-American development shaped Lake Minnetonka and gave it its present structure and character. The book appears to be targeted at least in part to those living around the lake now, highlighting things that might be of interest to them. The names of prominent local families figure heavily and are repeated many times. The detailed index was useful in this respect; some of the wealthy nineteenth- and twentieth-century residents had similar names over the generations, and I sometimes needed clarification as to who was being referred to. I appreciated being able to find that information easily.

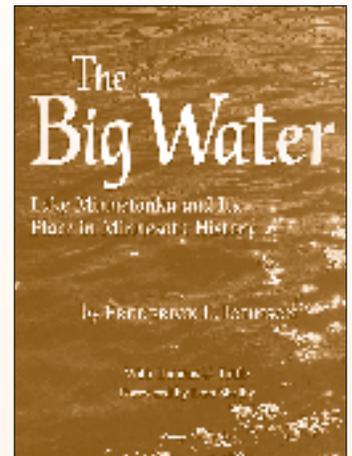
Repetition is a bit of a problem. Given the book's format, one could guess that the author did not necessarily intend for it to be read straight through. For example, certain historical events are covered more than once in consecutive chapters, which makes sense if the book is meant to be picked up and perused on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Overall, *The Big Water* is roughly chronological, but each of the eighteen chapters also has a theme, so some overlap results from that organizational decision, as well. The book is grouped into five large sections: Taming the Big Woods, about early white settlement; Saratoga of the West, on the resort period; A Summer Place, about the cottagers who crowded out the large hotels; Changing Times, on transportation and land use at the lake, with an interesting section on the fruit-growing history of the area; and The Advance of Suburbia, which details the transformation of Lake Minnetonka and its surrounding communities from the farms and vacation homes of the past to the suburbs of today.

Johnson uses developments around Minnetonka as a vehicle to explore some of the larger issues of Minnesota and national history, such as the bicycling craze, the growth of the automobile, the Good Roads movement, suffrage, Prohibition, suburbanization, and the divide between the leisure and working class. These larger perspectives add to the work and bring it above the

level of an encomium to the wealthy white families whose descendants still live around the lake. Their history is valuable, too, but is more often told; the incorporation of some of the racial tensions, experiences of the urban middle class who day-tripped to the lake, and stories of the small farmers who made their living from the land rounds out the book well. Johnson is particularly detailed in his accounts of the changes in transportation and land-ownership patterns, stories that are interesting and perhaps less known.

The book is well written, reads smoothly, and is a valuable addition to a slim field of books on the history of Lake Minnetonka and its surrounding communities. It could have benefitted from a tighter eye on the editing, as there are some unfortunate small typos, but these are minor and do not detract from the overall value of the book and its contents. It is obviously a work of love and is a worthy addition to the history of the state.

Reviewed by Molly Huber, editor and project manager of MNopedia, the Minnesota encyclopedia (www.mnopedia.org). She has a B.A. and an M.A. in history and is an internationally published author in the fields of history and art history.





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