

Honoring a forgotten legacy: Historical marker placed in honor of Scott Bibb

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Robert Wadlow, Elijah P. Lovejoy, Miles Davis... These names invoke familiar images of Alton's great and troubled history, but what about Scott Bibb?

Bibb was born a slave in Missouri in 1855. His family moved to Illinois in 1863, during the height of the American Civil War. He was able to graduate Alton High School, after entering the then desegregated school system in 1872. After graduation, Bibb was qualified to teach, but since he was black, no school would allow him to do so. He then attained a good job at the Alton Glassworks as a firefighter.

In 1897, however, Bibb brought a lawsuit against the mayor and city council of Alton in honor of two of his children: Minnie and Ambrose Bibb. While Bibb was able to attend a desegregated school, his children were not. Between his graduation from Alton High School and his children entering school, two new schools were built in Alton with the purpose of segregating students based on race.

Those schools were ironically named after abolitionists Frederick Douglas and Lovejoy. From 1897-1908, Scott Bibb fought for his children to attend integrated schools. His struggles were among many throughout the state from 1874-1900s. Illinois cities such as Quincy, Bloomington and Alton were struggling with school integration, despite it being a part of the 1870 Illinois Constitution and the subsequent school laws passed in 1872.

Scott Bibb heroically fought for the rights of all students to receive the same public education through both political and social fundraisers. Political rallies would be followed by picnics or even rides on riverboats. That style of awareness built several bridges in the community, and was able to garner support from several different groups of people.

His case in honor of his children was brought to the Illinois Supreme Court five times. Finally, in 1908, Scott Bibb won his case, but it was not the victory he intended. The ruling only applied to Minnie and Ambrose Bibb. So, following the 11 years of fighting the law, only Scott Bibb's two children were able to attend integrated schools.

At that time, Minnie Bibb was 18 and was forced to enter the third grade. She did not finish, due to the sheer amount of ridicule and abuse she faced upon entering the system. Ambrose Bibb was 19, and did not decide to take advantage of the ruling in his father's favor. Instead, he left to Iowa where he was able to find work.

After that historic ruling, Bibb was forgotten in the dusty file cabinets of Alton's history until one local historian brought him to the forefront again through the Illinois State Supreme Court's "History on Trial" series.

Shirley Portwood, a professor emeritus at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) had a strong focus on African American history in Illinois with her research. She showcased the story of Scott Bibb for the History on Trial series, which brought a name, which would otherwise be forgotten to the attention of Lewis and Clark Community College.

To honor Bibb, the college had the former St. Patrick's School, located at 1004 E Fifth St., renamed to the Scott Bibb Center. A historical marker detailing the work of Scott Bibb to desegregate Alton schools was unveiled Monday, June 19, 2017.

"In honoring Scott Bibb, we are honoring those who stood with him," Portwood said at the unveiling of the marker.

Portwood then detailed the majority of the story of Scott Bibb detailed above. Lewis and Clark Community College President Dale Chapman, Alton Mayor Brant Walker, Illinois Supreme Court Justice Rita Garman, Lewis and Clark Vice President of Administrative Affairs Linda Chapman and Vice President of the Illinois State Historical Society Stu Fliege also spoke at the event.