



# **Sankofa Lecture Series Focuses on African American Ambition in the Era of Slavery**

by Megan Wieser  
February 8 2021 4:57 PM



EDWARDSVILLE – The life and experiences of local Black influencer Conway Barbour serve as the foundation of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s first Sankofa Lecture and Dialogue Series presentation of 2021.

The ongoing series features robust conversations surrounding the history of slavery and its lasting legacies, and is organized through SIUE’s Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Campus Center, specifically its membership of the international Universities Studying Slavery (USS) consortium.

Victoria Harrison, PhD, instructor in the Department of Historical Studies, will present, “Fight Like a Tiger: African American Ambition in the Era of Slavery” at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 24 via Zoom.

The presentation is based on Harrison’s book: “Fight Like a Tiger: Conway Barbour and the Challenges of Black Middle Class in Nineteenth-Century America.”

“Focusing on the life of ambitious former slave Conway Barbour, I argue that the idea of a Black middle class traced its origins to the free Black population of the mid-19th century and developed alongside the idea of a white middle class,” Harrison said.

“Although slavery and racism meant that the definition of middle class was not identical for white people and free people of color, they shared desires for advancement.”

The presentation aims to engage those interested in African American history, the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and local history, since Barbour and his family played an important role in Black Alton in the 1860s and beyond. Harrison’s work makes “visible a man formerly invisible to history.”

“My research supports the idea that the Black middle class, though small, developed alongside the white middle class,” she explained. “African Americans shared the middle-class mores of the larger white society and at the same time, although this was made more difficult by a hostile environment and tumultuous national politics. I use the life and experiences of Conway Barbour, a former slave, to trace these small, but significant communities in four states over 30 years.”

“In search of upward mobility,” she continued, “Barbour worked as a steamboat steward, tried his hand at several commercial ventures and entered politics. In each place that he lived, Barbour found that he was one of many free Black people who fought to better themselves alongside their white countrymen, challenging the customary narrative of downtrodden free African Americans in the midcentury.”

Registration is available at [https://siue.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_ttL7EX8SSU-eYzav3EEJXA](https://siue.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_ttL7EX8SSU-eYzav3EEJXA).

The Sankofa Lecture and Dialogue Series is one of the University's many anti-racism initiatives. For more information on the TRHT and its future programs and initiatives, visit [siue.edu/provost/trht](https://siue.edu/provost/trht).

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](https://siue.edu) provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of nearly 13,000.