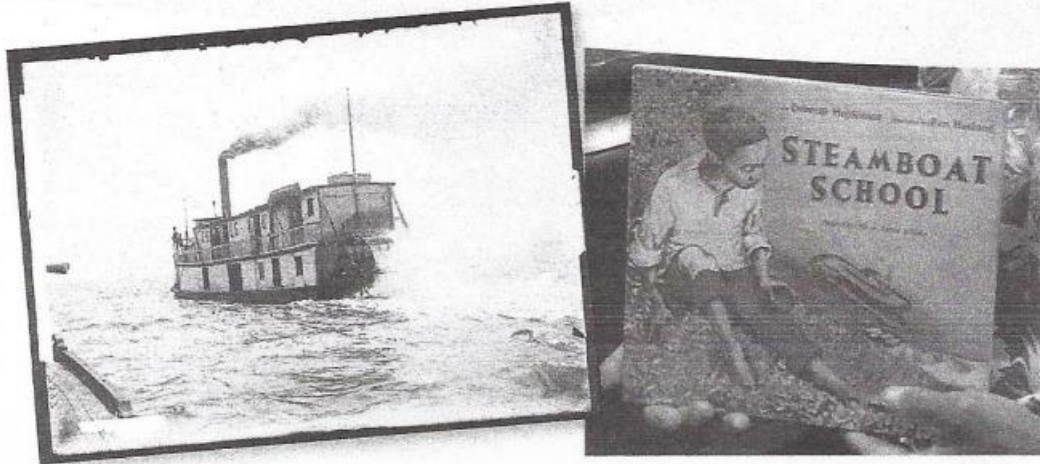


**Likes Lecture # 4 June 27, at 7 PM CDT on Zoom
John and Mary Meachum, abolitionists and conductors on the
Underground Railroad and the Floating Freedom School**

Info gathered by Kaye Iftner
June, 2023



The Floating Freedom School of the Mississippi

The Mississippi River has long been associated with freedom to explore. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn style. But freedom took on a far more powerful meaning on one simple boat with a mission that was anything but.

Missouri was still a slave state but one with a wide mix of views on the topic when in 1946 the state's Rev. John Meachum gave his "Address to all the Colored Citizens of the United States" at the National Negro Convention in Philadelphia.

"I have written this little book," he said, "to show you the great desire we should shake off our lethargy and make the best use of the means we have. In the first place, parents should by no means neglect the education of their children but should endeavor to instill such

Our Mississippi Summer 2022
A publication of the US Army Corp of Engineers





John Berry Meachum

Born: May 3, 1789 in Virginia, the son of an enslaved Baptist minister named Thomas Granger, and an enslaved woman named Patsy.

Born into slavery, his slaveholder was Paul Meachum, whose surname John would take.

John was apprenticed as a youth to a white carpenter and learned cabinetmaking and coopering.

Talented and with a complying slaveowner, John was able to save enough money to purchase his freedom at age 21, and that of his father.

- 1815 John Meachum came to St. Louis looking for his wife and children, who had been brought to Missouri by their owner (Source: a short autobiography published in 1846)
- 1817 White Baptist missionaries John Mason Peck and James Welch establish the Sabbath School for Negroes.
- 1821 Meachum begins preaching and assisting the missionaries.
- 1825 John Meachum is ordained as a minister by Rev. Peck.
- 1827 John Meachum founds the First African Baptist Church and school, the first black church west of the Mississippi. By that time there were 200 congregants, 200 of whom were slaves. His church continued to grow into the 1840s when it had 500 parishioners. It moved to 14th and Clark Streets in 1848.
- 1846 John Berry Meachum spoke at the National Negro Convention in Philadelphia. There he published the pamphlet ***An Address to All of the Colored Citizens of the United States***, which demonstrated his belief that people of color were citizens endowed with the same inalienable rights as any others. It encouraged establishment of schools and programs of vocational education.
- 1853 Meachum was elected as the first vice president of the Western Colored Baptist Convention in Alton

**AN
ADDRESS
TO ALL THE
COLORED CITIZENS
OF THE
UNITED STATES.**

BY

**JOHN B. MEACHUM,
PASTOR OF THE AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH, ST. LOUIS, MO.**

Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.--PSALM 68, 31.

**PHILADELPHIA:
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR,**

Full transcript available as a .pdf contact
kiftner@gmail to be sent a copy by email

Dedication to black freedom and self-reliance

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, John and Mary Meachum purchased at least 20 slaves from their white masters.

Transforming his barrel factory into a training ground for freedom, he hoped to prepare African Americans for life after slavery by teaching them practical skills such as carpentry and coopering.

Once a slave was purchased, Meachum maintained legal ownership of the individual until he or she had earned enough money laboring in his establishment to reimburse him.

In so doing, Meachum hoped to instill in his charges a sense of discipline, hard work and self respect

Educator

Besides his church activities, Meachum also conducted, with the assistance of several white missionaries, a school in the basement of his church, called the Candle Tallow School.

He taught the fundamentals of reading and writing to black men, women and children.

Unfortunately, white resistance to black education made it impossible for him to continue classes at his church.

An 1847 Missouri statute outlawed education for blacks, slave or free. As a result, Meachum and his followers created a “**floating school**” on a steamboat anchored in the center of the federally regulated Mississippi River. Here he continued to prepare black residents for freedom.

According to a number of sources, one of Meachum’s most famous students was the black civil rights leader **James Milton Turner**, who became the minister resident and consul general to Liberia in 1871 and Missouri’s most prominent black political figure of the post–Civil War era.

Consequently, Meachum’s floating school became an important symbol of African-American defiance and independence throughout the antebellum period.



John Berry Meachum died on March 19, 1854 in St. Louis, Mo, while preaching from his pulpit.

He is buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis

Mary Meachum 1801-1869

Along with her husband, she dedicated her life to educating and freeing enslaved people. Their home on Fourth Street in St. Louis was a safe house on the Underground Railroad.

From there they helped enslaved people escape to Illinois, a free state.

Her work continued after John's death in 1854. She continued her activism in her work with the Colored Ladies Soldiers Aid Society during the Civil War. She died in St. Louis in 1869.

The Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing Site:

May 21, 1855 – Mary Meachum attempted to help a small group of enslaved people cross the Mississippi River to Illinois where slavery was outlawed. However, enslavers and law enforcement officials caught at least five of the enslaved people and arrested Mary for her participation in the plot. She was charged in criminal court for helping the “fugitives” escape.

In 2001, the National Park Service recognized the site as part of the [Underground Railroad Network to Freedom](#). The site is now part of the Mississippi Greenway: Riverfront Trail north of the Merchant's bridge.

Every year, a variety of partners plan and host the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing Celebration. You can find information, including a video at this link:

[Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing: Mississippi Greenway - Great Rivers Greenway](#)



Save the Date for the 21st Annual Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing Celebration- Saturday, October 14, 2023!

Photo from
the 2022
Celebration



Poster and dedicated
created at the Mary
Meachum Freedom
Crossing in 2018.



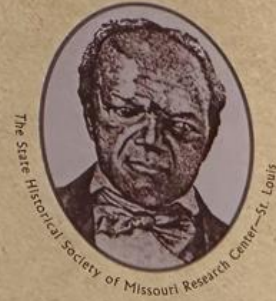
STEAMBOAT SCHOOL

Inspired by a True Story

IN 1871, BRUCE & CO.



by Deborah Hopkinson illustrated by Ron Husband



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Steamboat School is a fictional story inspired by the life of Reverend John Berry Meachum (1789–1854). Meachum was a minister, entrepreneur, and educator in St. Louis, Missouri, who fought tirelessly for the rights of African Americans. Born into slavery in 1789 in Virginia, he was brought by his master to North Carolina and Kentucky, where, by 1815, he managed to purchase his own freedom by working in saltpeter mines. He later wrote:

“Still I was not satisfied, for I had left my old father in Virginia, and he was a slave. It seemed to me, at times, though I was seven hundred miles from him, that I held conversations with him, for he was near my heart. . . .

“In a short time I went to Virginia, and bought my father. . . . My father and myself then earned enough to pay our expenses on the way, and putting our knapsacks on our backs walked seven hundred miles to Hardin county, Kentucky. Here the old man met his wife and all his children, who had been there several years. Oh there was joy!”¹

¹ John Berry Meachum. “An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States.” Philadelphia. Printed for the author by King and Baird, 1846. *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/meachum/meachum.html>

EXPLORE MORE

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

<http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/PAO/history/MISSRNAV/index.asp>

History of navigation on the Mississippi River

JOHN BERRY MEACHUM

<http://www.umsl.edu/~virtualstl/phase2/1850/people/1850meachum.html>

A short piece on John Berry Meachum

MARY MEACHUM AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

<http://www.confluencegreenway.org/locations/mfc.php>

All about the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing

BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND EDUCATION

Bridges, Ruby. *Through My Eyes*. New York: Scholastic, 1999.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *A Band of Angels: A Story Inspired by the Jubilee Singers*. New York: Atheneum, 1999.

Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys*. New York: Aladdin, 2005.

Jurmain, Suzanne. *The Forbidden Schoolhouse: The True and Dramatic Story of Prudence Crandall and Her Students*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2005.

LittleSugar, Amy. *Freedom School, Yes!* New York: Philomel, 2001.

McKissack, Patricia. *Goin' Someplace Special*. New York: Atheneum, 2001.

Paulsen, Gary. *Nightjohn*. New York: Laurel Leaf, 1995.

Questions for future discussion:

What parallels exist between John & Mary Meachum and Frank & Lucy McWorter?

How can we link the stories and experiences of freedom seekers in the St. Louis/Alton area with those in the proposed West Central Illinois Heritage Corridor?

What are the known connections?

What connections should we investigate?

Remember our charge from Lecture #2: Keep digging!

How can we help young people learn the stories of freedom seekers?