

YOU'RE FREE TO GO

But go where? Moses Lonian, a young slave belonging to Lewis Ross, had just been told he was free! It was 1862 and Union soldiers had swept down both sides of the Grand River catching most inhabitants unaware. The Ross family who owned Moses had fled in panic. Lewis Ross owned all the land around Salina, including the salt works as well as 150 slaves. Moses' family had been purchased by Ross for \$1,500.00 from a white slave owner in Arkansas whose last name was Lonian, so Moses father had adopted Lonian as the family's surname.

Although the Constitution developed by the nation's founders implied otherwise, the buying and selling of slaves was an accepted business until Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It has been estimated that 645,000 slaves were brought to the United States prior to the time importing was outlawed by Congress in the early 1800s. For a few years after that it appeared that the practice of owning slaves was diminishing since it had been banned in many northern states. But then, Eli Whitney had invented the cotton gin. Whitney, who had been hired as a tutor on a southern plantation, developed a simple machine that could clean seeds out of cotton 50 times as fast as slave fingers and, as a result, the demand for cotton, and the need for more slaves to cultivate and pick cotton soared. And by 1860, even without importing slaves, according to census reports, the slave population had increased to nearly four million.

Around 1800, the Cherokees and other civilized tribes started buying and using slaves in the traditional manner. Cherokee law barred intermarriage with tribesmen and freed mixed bloods could not hold office, bear arms or own property. But unlike many slave owners, Cherokees worked side by side with their slaves and, like the Lonian family purchased by Lewis Ross, most were kept as a family unit and not sold separately. In contrast, the Seminoles were much more liberal, allowing slaves to actually rent land, bear arms and live independently. After removal, that contrast between the more liberal lifestyle of Seminole slaves and those of other tribes had created the unrest leading to the failed slave revolt in Indian Territory in 1842.

So, until the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, January 1, 1863, slavery was legal in Indian Territory and when the war erupted, 8000 or nearly 14% of the total population were slaves. Selling slaves was a profitable venture. For example, in 1839 Lewis Ross had transported several hundred by boat from Georgia and sold most of them to other land owners. While there had been increasing efforts by northern congressmen and various abolitionists to contain and end slavery, as a practical matter it was still technically constitutionally legal, often referred to as "the Peculiar Institution." In 1857, the Supreme Court had ruled slaves were not citizens and thus could not be freed if they entered non-slave states. Even after the war began, Union troops returned slaves who had fled until one general, Benjamin Butler, set a new standard by determining they were contraband and freed them.

But now in 1862, slavery and all of its restrictions and deprivations were history and according to the soldiers, Moses Lonian and his fellow slaves were free to go when and where they wanted...or were they? After the Union soldiers had arrived and the Ross

family fled, the soldiers ransacked the Ross home from cellar to attic, ordering the slaves to load wagons with furniture, dishware, all counter band imaginable. They rounded up the livestock, including over 500 head of cattle, then in a lengthy procession, crossed the Grand River at Salina and turned north on the Military Road. The procession continued northward, past Rock Creek, then to the crossing at Cabin Creek, “Greenbriar Joe Martin’s plantation. From there the Union soldiers, slaves, cattle and their contraband wound its way through the bluestem grass, across Hudson Creek in present day Ottawa County and on to Baxter Springs, Kansas. Just north of town a Union officer announced to the former slaves that they were leaving and, “From here on you best skeedadle and you better not let them Indians catch up with you.”

Free? The Lonians and their fellow slaves were left with stolen property, and as destitute as they were, the frightened slaves burned the contraband, ran off the cattle and fled to Fort Scott for protection. From there, the new found “freedom” became a continual nightmare. Destitute, with no one to provide food and shelter, the slavery survivors scattered and after the war fared poorly. In fact, the horror was just beginning. Even the Emancipation Proclamation that set slaves free proved to be faulty. Slaves who later were convicted of crimes and sent to prison could be “leased” by entrepreneurs who then would “rent” them...back into slavery. Those who “share cropped” were literally held in financial bondage and for the remainder of Moses life various forms of depredation ran rampant. Over time the effects of freedom announced to Moses Lonigan have been well documented. Was Moses “free to go?” Well not quite yet.