

# From lash marks to hash marks

*The story of Sergeant Isrel Larry Blackburn (May 3, 1818-March 6, 1902)*

By Lois Sterba

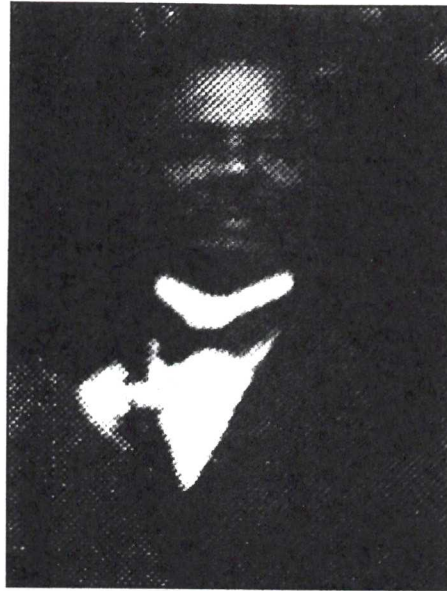
In the small pioneer cemetery located on Main Street in downtown Downers Grove, Illinois, is the grave of Sergeant Isrel L. Blackburn, a veteran of the Civil War. There are about nine other Civil War soldiers buried here but Sergeant Blackburn is special because he was a member of Co. C of the 124th United States Colored Infantry. The Bureau of Colored Troops was established in 1863 and provided about 186,000 colored troops to fight in the Union Army during the Civil War.



The life of Isrel Blackburn began on the plantation of John Bowman, a gentleman from a well-known family in Mercer County, Kentucky. Mr. Bowman stated on the claim for compensation of his slave completed in 1864 that he raised Isrel, born near Fayette, Kentucky in 1818, from an infant and has owned him ever since.

By 1864, Isrel was no longer a young man; 48-years old he may no longer have been able to do the hard work required on the plantation. Giving him to the United States Government in 1864 to enlist in the 124th Colored Infantry was profitable for Mr. Bowman. Section 24 of the Slave Compensation Act of 1864 entitled loyal slave owners in border states where slavery was still legal after the Emancipation Proclamation to be compensated for the loss of a slave with a payment of \$300.00—if the slave enlisted in the Union Army. When the Civil War ended these slaves received their emancipation papers.

Bowman



*Sergeant Isrel L. Blackburn*

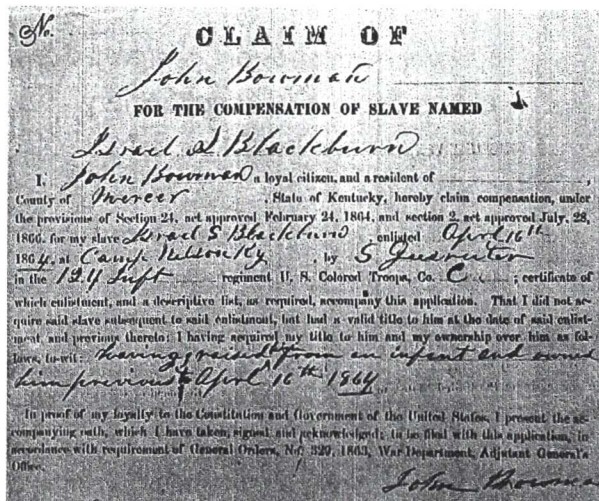
took Isrel to Camp Nelson, about twenty miles south of Lexington, to enlist. It was only about 30 miles from his plantation. Camp Nelson opened under the direction of General Ambrose Burnside in June of 1863. Named after the deceased General William "Bull" Nelson, this camp was opened as a supply depot for the Union and a training facility for Union troops. Soon it was determined that supplies could not easily be hauled from this location so the camp became the training area for black soldiers of the U.S. Colored Troops. Of the 186,000 African Americans who served in the Union army, Kentucky

supplied more than 23,000, the largest number of any state. The importance of this camp was recognized in 2014 when it was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Due to

his age Isrel spent his time at Camp Nelson doing garrison duty. His service earned him the rank of sergeant before he was discharged on June 23, 1865. The camp stayed open until June of 1866. Local history tells us that by 1866 Isrel came to live in Downers Grove, Illinois. Why he came here is not known; its proximity to Chicago on the newly opened line of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad may have had something to do with it. Founded by abolitionists from New England, Downers Grove sent many men to fight in the Civil War. It also did its part in supporting veterans of the war. So, when Isrel arrived here in 1866 it was not surprising that the local citizens helped him. Samuel Curtiss who owned land in the Village offered Isrel about two acres of land to farm. Here he made a living selling crops he grew on this land.

Census records of 1870 reveal that Isrel was living in Downers Grove with his 5 children ranging in age from 8 to 21 years old. All had been born in Kentucky. The youngest son was even named Lincoln, possibly in honor of the late President. No mention was made of his wife, Challis Hares, on this census. By 1880 all the children moved away except his daughter, Mary. Over the years Sergeant Blackburn became well known in the village. When the village voted for incorporation in 1873, he was one of the select 37 to sign the papers. He became an active member of the Naper Post of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) in Downers Grove and participated in many Decoration Day parades to honor the graves of the Civil War soldiers buried here. A tall man of 6 feet 2 inches, "Uncle Larry"—as his neighbors called him—was always noticed when he walked around the village. The children who followed him around could clearly see the lash marks on his back from his former slave days.

In 1901, Isrel went to live in the Old Soldiers Home in Danville,








Illinois. Records show he entered the home on November 15, 1901 and died there from heart disease on March 6, 1902, at the age about 86. The general remarks on the Danville records say Isrel L. Blackburn was a farmer with black eyes, grey hair, and unable to read or write. His effects included \$13.52 and a pension of \$31.00 a month. The land he owned in Downers Grove had been sold to one of his sons sometime before he died. Isrel's body was sent to Chicago for transfer and eventual burial in the Downers Grove Main Street Cemetery. The United States Government provided a marker for his grave.

The story of Sergeant Blackburn

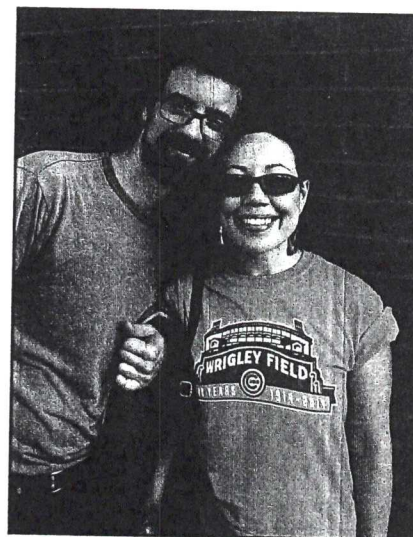
*Isrel L. Blackburn's gravestone in Downers Grove.*

doesn't end here. Over the years the marker fell into disrepair. In 1973 a new marker was placed on his grave thanks to efforts of the local American Legion Post and the Downers Grove Historical Society. And several years ago a G.A.R. star was added to the stone to honor his participation in this organization. Several times a year the American Legion Post places a flag on his grave. On Memorial Day they visit the veterans in the cemetery just as Sergeant Blackburn used to do.

It has been 112 years since Sergeant Isrel L. Blackburn passed, but the Village of Downers Grove still respectfully cares for his grave in the Main Street Cemetery. 

*Lois Sterba is the Treasurer of the Downers Grove Historical Society and a member of the ISHS.*

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