

Regional

A number of historic events commemorated this year

There are a number of landmark historical events being commemorated in 2015 for which Illinois and Missouri played pivotal roles. This includes the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment ending slavery.

"We have a lot of history here," said Bryan Jack, assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His scholarship includes work on African American history, St. Louis history and the American South.

Congress passed the 13th Amendment, Jan. 31, 1865 and President Abraham Lincoln signed it the following day. Illinois was the first state to ratify it. Jack noted that the 14th Amendment gave citizenship to African Americans and the 15th Amendment gave African American men the right to vote. Jack mentioned the creation of the Freedman Bank and the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 as examples of government programs established to aid freed slaves.

"There were four and a half to five million freed people, penniless, some with just the clothes on their backs and landless," Jack said, adding that the Bureau served

almost like a refugee assistance program for people in their own country. It recognized and recorded marriages, as they were not acknowledged during slavery. It negotiated labor contracts, provided food, clothing and medical assistance. "It was a massive undertaking but many say it was not big enough," Jack added.

The Freedmen's Bureau's records currently serve as a valuable source of information for genealogists. With the end of the Civil War the former slaves endeavored to reassemble their families, who had oftentimes been forcibly separated and fragmented. The Bureau assisted them with this as well by registering the names and last known locations of former slaves. Bureau records, Jack said, are a "treasure trove" for people wanting to build their family trees.

Equally as important, Jack said, was the Freedman's Bank, which was designed for economic independence so that freed blacks could raise money and pool it to collectively develop a common fund for economic uplift. The bank ultimately failed due to bad investments.

Jack said these early institutions paved the



Bryan Jack

way for not only for putting families back together, but obtaining land and building churches and schools.

In St. Louis 160 years ago was the historic Dred Scott case, which was one of many suits by and for slaves vying for their freedom. St. Louis saw many of these kinds of suits due to its Spanish and French history

where enslaved people had rights to sue in court, Jack explained. The Dred Scott case was based on Scott and his wife suing the Missouri Court for their freedom as they had been taken into free territory then returned to Missouri, then a slave state. Their white attorneys argued that they should now be considered free based on living in free territory. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled against Scott. Justice Roger B. Taney ruled that slaves do not have the right to bring court cases.

"It started right here in the Old Court House downtown," Jack said. "In every shot that shows the Cardinals games you can see it right there."

Jack said that the Exodusters, the name given to the recently freed slaves who formed the first mass migration of blacks out of the South, were also a large part of the story of freed slaves' contributions to American society. The migration began in the late 1860s and continued on until the 1880s. About 20,000 African Americans left Mississippi and Louisiana and followed the Mississippi River into St. Louis, and eventually the Missouri River into Kansas.

Upon reaching Kansas they began creating towns and communities, which included Nicodemus, Kansas.

Prince Wells College Talk

2015 also marks the 60th anniversary of the Montgomery Boycott that established Rosa Parks as an iconic civil rights figure. Also 60 years ago was the murder of Emmett Till for flirting with a white woman. Till was a teen from Chicago visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. Jack said many historians purport that the Till tragedy sparked the modern civil rights movement. In 1965 the Supreme Court, ruling in reference to *Brown v. Board of Education*, stated that "schools should desegregate with all deliberate speed," which Jack added continues to be "a work in progress."

Prince Wells, associate professor of music and director of black studies program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.