



The Life of Archer Alexander: A Story of Freedom

BY MIRANDA RECHTENWALD

Written on yellow lined paper, this brief statement was the start of one man's journey from enslavement to freedom:

The colored man named Archie Alexander, supposed to be the Slave of a Rebel master, is hereby permitted to remain in the service of W. G. Eliot, until legal right to his services shall be established by such party (if any) as may claim them. Not to succeed thirty days unless further extended. St. Louis, Feb. 20, 1863. F. A. Dick, Lt. Col. Provost Marshall General (Verbally renewed until revoked. March 18, 1863.)

President Lincoln's January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to states in the Union or, therefore, the slave state of Missouri. Here, slavery remained legal, if only for those loyal to the Union. However, in December 1862, historian Diane Mutti Burke explains, "General Samuel Curtis, the new commanding officer of the Department of the Missouri, issued an order that authorized the provost marshals to grant freedom papers to the slaves of secessionist slaveholders who came within military lines."¹ Soon after, in early 1863, Archer (Archie) Alexander left his home in St. Charles County. That Alexander had some knowledge of this military order, or at least some awareness, seems quite likely. His wife lived and worked on the farm serving as Cottleville's town post office, so news would have been easily overheard and passed along. Alexander's trek would start a chain

Archer Alexander, c. 1870. (Image: Washington University Archive)



of events leading him to St. Louis, where he would meet abolitionist Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, and where he would ultimately secure the freedom of himself and of his family.

In 1885, an elderly Rev. Eliot published a small book he called *The Story of Archer Alexander*. Through recollections and earnestly told stories Eliot tells of the man he met and befriended named Archer Alexander. The meandering tale, published approximately four years after Alexander's death, reads a bit like family stories repeated by your grandfather at family dinners. On many details the story is vague or incorrect. Yet, Eliot's purpose – to ensure that future generations knew the exceptional story of a man who became free in the midst of chaos – was, in its way, accomplished. This article takes a deeper look at some of the existing records and documents to examine the history and the story of a man named Archer Alexander.

Of African descent, Archer Alexander was born into slavery in Virginia. By Eliot's remembrance, Alexander was brought to St. Louis around 1831 by the family claiming ownership over him, the Delaneys. In the mid-1830s, Alexander was sold to the Holloman family near the St. Charles and Warren County line. The accuracy of these details is unclear. However, based on existing records, we know that by 1855 Archer Alexander was enslaved to the Pitman family, and by 1861 Louisa Alexander was owned by a neighbor, James Naylor. Married in the 1830s, the couple would have lived separately on the farms of their owners. This situation of "abroad marriage" was quite common in Missouri where, compared to the plantations of the Deep South, most farms were small with only a few enslaved workers on each.² For nearly 30 years Archer and Louisa Alexander lived and labored in St. Charles County, raising several children, and dealt with the daily reality of slavery before the opportunity of freedom came with the Civil War.

Arriving in St. Louis in February 1863, Alexander was hired by Abigail Eliot. She was looking for a man to garden and tend the four-acre lot around her family's home located on Locust Street. Abigail's husband was Unitarian minister and abolitionist William Greenleaf Eliot. Since moving to St. Louis in 1834, Rev. W. G. Eliot had preached against slavery, emancipated numerous men and women by purchasing their freedom, and with the outbreak of war helped organize the Western Sanitary Commission relief agency. After meeting and talking with Alexander, Eliot offered employment, housing, and attempted (unsuccessfully) to purchase Alexander's freedom.

Alexander's testimony to the Provost Marshal explains how he came to St. Louis, and what transpired while working on the Eliots' land:

St. Louis. April 15th, 1863.

To the Provost Marshal General, Department of the Missouri.

Archer Alexander, a fugitive slave, respectfully



The Eliots' "Beaumont Home" in St. Louis, c. 1855. (Image: William G. Eliot Papers, Series 7, Washington University Archives.)



The home of Captain Campbell, on Boons Lick Road, three miles west of Cottleville, St. Charles County, Missouri. This image was taken in 1936 as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey. (Image: Library of Congress)

represents: That he has been for Eight years past the slave of Richard H. Pitman of St. Charles County, near Naylor's Store, having previously belonged to David Pitman, Richard's father. That since the breaking out of the present rebellion his master has been a disloyal man, a secessionist, and has so expressed himself very freely. For the proof of this and for his reputation as an active sympathizer with the "Southern Confederacy," reference is made to Honorable Barton Bates, Fred Hatcher, Esq. and other Union men in the neighborhood.

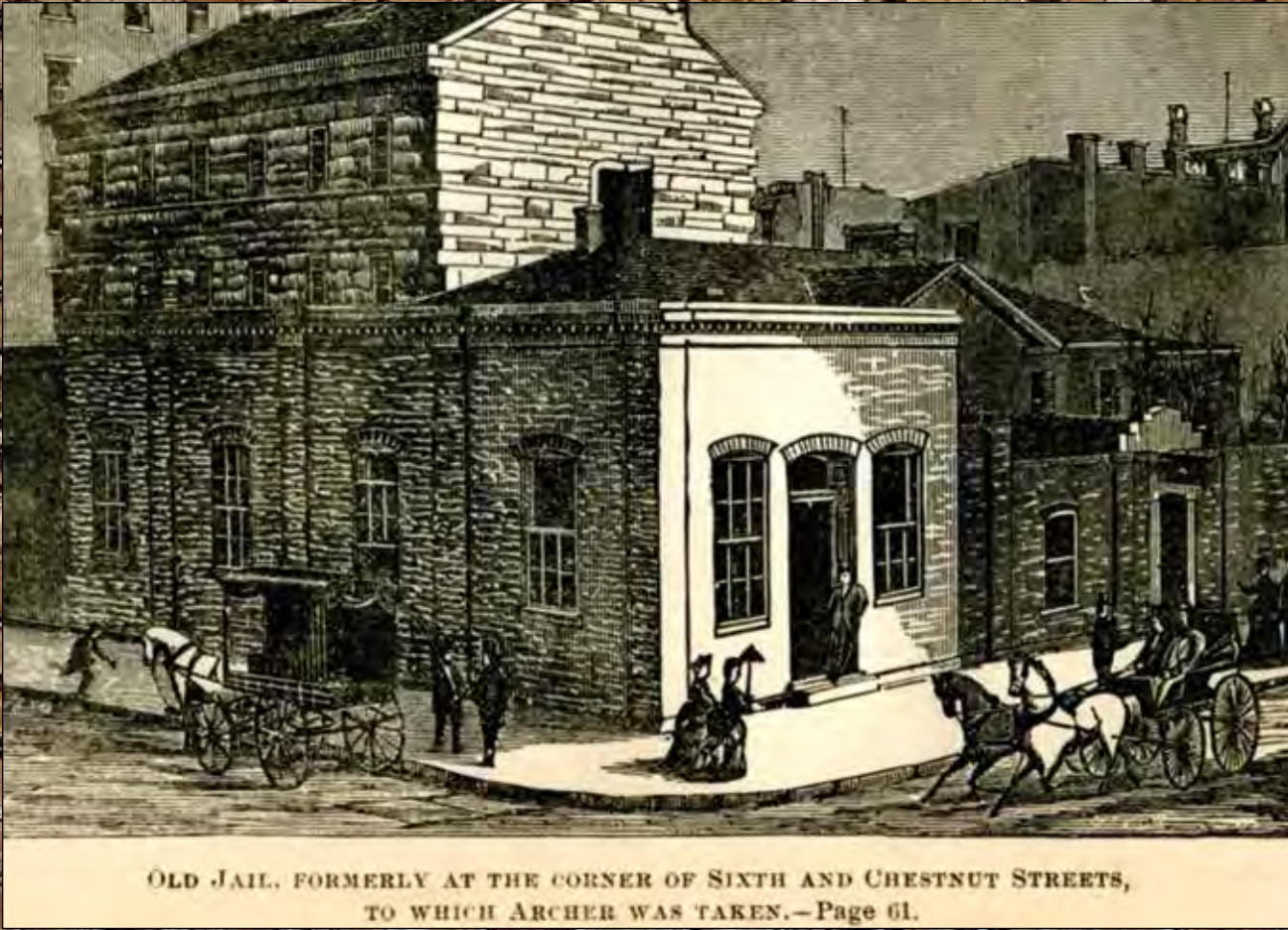
That on one occasion his master took directly from under his care a roan horse (named Prince) and gave him to a young man, the son of a Circuit Preacher of Warrenton (now deceased). This young man was named George __, and had boarded in Pitman's family. He was at the point of leaving for the rebel service, and for this purpose the horse was given to him. Subsequently his master gave a gun and outfit of clothing to another man in the rebel service. This man was soon after taken prisoner & is now in the Enrolled State militia. (His name is Howard Taylor). These facts can be proved by the white neighbors of Pitman, and were well known in his family, & to his servants.

That in or near the month of December last, he (Archer) and another black man named Peter, gave information to the Home Guard of St. Charles, (to Lieutenant Jn. Bailey) of a small lot of arms concealed by the Rebels in the Icehouse of Captain Campbell, in St. Charles Co., and in consequence of such information said arms were seized by military force. That this fact was discovered by the parties concerned, and they have openly threatened to take

summary vengeance on the informers. Partly in consequence of such threats, he (Archer), being in fear for his life, ran away, and he would now be afraid, under any circumstances, to return to that neighborhood.

That immediately on coming to St. Louis, two months ago, he went to the office of the Provost Marshal & asked protection, which was given to him in writing on the 20th February. That under this protection he hired himself to W. G. Eliot, corner of Beaumont & Locust Streets. That on the 27th day of March at 11 a.m. while at work plowing, he was suddenly & violently assailed by three men, who threatened his life with pistols & daggers, cruelly beat him with clubs, knocked him down, stamped upon & handcuffed him, dragged him, to a wagon & carried him to jail. John Pitman (brother of his master) was in the wagon & witnessed the above treatment. All of this can be proved by white witnesses. The men showed no warrant and would not permit him (Archer) to speak. He had his military protection in his coat pocket at the time. That he was released from jail, the same day, by order of the Provost Marshal, and is now under military protection as before.

He now respectfully petitions that in consideration of the known & active disloyalty of his master, of the service which he has himself rendered to the Union cause, of the threatened danger to his life by those against whom he informed, as of the cruel treatment he received, as above stated, when under military protection, his free papers should now be given to him: under the confiscation act, so that he may have the rightful privileges of freedom, and be exempt from interference or violence on the part of his former master.



OLD JAIL, FORMERLY AT THE CORNER OF SIXTH AND CHESTNUT STREETS,
TO WHICH ARCHER WAS TAKEN. — Page 61.

Myrtle Street Jail, St. Louis (Image: *The Story of Archer Alexander*)

Archer Alexander X his mark

Witness, W.G. Eliot.

The above statements have been written for the man Archer at his request. I know nothing of their truth, except since he has been in my service. I am willing, and have offered to his master to pay a full price for his freedom. — W.G. Eliot

The order of protection signed by Lt. Colonel Franklin Dick on yellow lined paper was in Alexander’s pocket when the kidnapers forced him to the Myrtle Street Prison. This yellow paper resulted in Alexander’s release the same day. It also resulted in the arrest of the kidnapers who violated those military orders. We are left to wonder the look on other men’s faces as Alexander walked free and they were imprisoned in a building, which until the year previous, had been used as the city’s largest slave-holding pen.

*Office of the Provost Marshal General,
Department of the Missouri.*

Saint Louis, Mo., March 27, 1863.

My dear Sir, I return “Archer” to your charge, and under herewith additional protection paper, as I do now clearly understand that you have written protection per Col. Dick. It is but to be safer.

Archer’s case will receive attention, as will that of his abductors now in Myrtle Street Prison.

Very Truly, Your Ob[ediant] S[ervant], James F. Dwight, Capt. & Provost Ec.

Head Quarter Department of the Missouri, Office of the Provost Marshal General

St. Louis, March 27, 1863

The black man “Archer” 47 years old, 5 foot 8 [inches] claimed as a slave by [Richard] Hickman Pitman of St. Charles County, is declared under protection of the military



The Pitmans' house, built c. 1840, in Cottleville, St. Charles County, Missouri. This image was taken in 1938 as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey. (Image: Library of Congress).

authorities until the question of the loyalty or disloyalty of Hickman Pitman is established, & until further orders from the Headquarters. All persons are forbid interfering with said "Archer," who is resident with and servant of Rev. William Eliot of St. Louis County. By Command Major General Curtis, James F. Dwight, Captain & Provost Marshal General. (State Seal).

The Provost Marshal's Office did investigate these crimes and sent men to inquire of Pitman's loyalty. The military file records that Pitman "is well known in the neighborhood as Secessionist" and that Louisa [Archer's wife] "belongs to Naylor, who is a noted Secessionist. Every Saturday 30 or 40 Secessionist farmers, etc. are accustomed to meet at Naylor's Store."

In Eliot's published recollections he never mentions the name Pitman. This choice seems quite deliberate, since Eliot does include passages from his letter to Pitman, a letter that Eliot would have consulted in order to transcribe it for the publication. In print, the letter's heading is only given as "Mr. --." Why Eliot made this omission is unknown, but the most obvious motive would be to avoid any charges of libel or tarnished reputations. When the book was published in 1885, Richard H. Pitman was principal of Woodlawn Female Seminary, a girls' school in O'Fallon, Missouri, and a noted community member.

Naturally concerned for his wife and children who remained enslaved, Archer sent word to Louisa that he was safe and in St. Louis. Edited portions from her reply were reprinted in Eliot's Story; the full text of her letter reads:

Naylor's Store, Nov 16. 1863

My Dear Husband - I received your letter yesterday and lost no time in asking Jim if he would sell me and what he could take for me [...] he flew at me and said I would never get free only at the point of the Bayonet. and there is no use in my ever speaking to him any more about it I don't see how I can ever get away except you send soldiers to take me from the house as he is watching me night and day. Lucinda lives 4 miles beyond this side of Troy. I have her little boy Jimmy with me. I heard from M. Anne about 2 weeks ago she is in Washington both well and doing well she has all her Children with her but the oldest one and he is expecting to go to her every day. If I can get away I will but the people here are all afraid to take me away — he is always abusing Lincoln and Calls him an old Rascall he is the greatest rebel under heaven it is a sin to have him loose he says if he had hold of Lincoln he would chop him up into Mincemeat I had good courage all along until now but now I am almost heartbroken.

Dear Archy I have said all that is nessessary [sic] now only give my Love to Aunt Mary and Judy, and I send yourself my best Love. I am your afft [affectionate] Wife

Louisa Alexander

Answer this letter as soon as possible. Sam told me that you were Doctor Buckners last Saturday night. they are always telling some lies about you.

By the second of December, Louisa, daughter Ellen, age 10, and son James, age 4, were reunited with Archer. Eliot contacted the Provost Marshal's office the next day, asking for written protection, such as Archer had been granted:

Headquarters St. Louis District [...] December 5, 1863

The mulatto woman, Louisa Alexander, 50 years old, claimed as a slave by James Naylor, of St. Charles Co., and her children Ellen and James, are declared under protection of the Military Authority until the Ownership & Loyalty of James Naylor has been established, or until further orders from these Headquarters. All persons are forbidden to interfere with said woman & children, who are residents with, & servants of the Rev. WG Eliot, of St. Louis County.

Clinton B. Fisk, Brigadier-General.

These written protections would remain in place until January 11, 1865, when Missouri passed statewide emancipation orders. After the war, Archer Alexander remained in Missouri and continued working as a farmer.

In 1865 or early 1866, he learned that an older son, separated from the family years earlier, had joined the United States Colored Troops and died in battle. Eliot left word for Alexander about this matter—

Dear Thom [Eliot's son],

Please ask Mr. [Seth] Ranlett if he knows how to get at Archer, (who keeps his accounts at the Provincial Savings [and Loan]) & if he does send word to him that Mr. Topping wants to see him. If not, Please find out the address of Col. Madison Miller, who is somewhere below Carondelet and on whose farm Archer is working. Probably General Chester Harding or John McNeil could tell you. Possibly he is in the directory. If you can find it, address a note to him requesting him to let Archer know that "important business about his son's Bounty" requires his attention at Mr. Topping's office. I forgot all about it before I left.
...

The name Archer Alexander was mentioned at the opening ceremony, but Alexander himself would never see more than a photograph of the monument. (Image: Washington University Archives)



In Eliot's recollection, he states that Louisa returned to Cottleville to retrieve belongings and there fell ill and died under unusual circumstances. While no other documents seem to confirm these circumstances, Archer had remarried by 1870. The census recorded in June 1870 indicates that Archer worked as a farmer, and his wife, Julia, kept house on property near Hillsboro, Missouri. Their real estate was valued at \$1,200, and they reported an additional \$620 in personal wealth. Ellen and John were still living at home, along with two other children: 12-year-old Dora White and eight-year-old Alfred White, who were either adopted, or perhaps Julia's children from an earlier marriage.

At some point in 1870 or 1871, Eliot arranged for his friend Alexander to be photographed in the Scholten Studios, on the corner of 5th and Olive in St. Louis. A set of these images were mailed to Italy, where artist Thomas Ball was sculpting a monument to President Lincoln and emancipation. Ball formed a kneeling slave in Archer Alexander's likeness, representative of all the men and women of America now freed, with the standing figure of Lincoln, arm outstretched. Neither Eliot nor Alexander attended the monument's dedication in Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1876. The name Archer Alexander was mentioned at the opening ceremony, but Alexander himself would never see more than a photograph of the monument. And yet, in a way, the life he lived—as a husband, a father, a farmer—is perhaps a more fitting monument to freedom.

At some point in 1870 or 1871, Eliot arranged for his friend Alexander to be photographed in the Scholten Studios, on the corner of 5th and Olive, in St. Louis. (Image: Washington University Archives)



ENDNOTES

- ¹ Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border : Missouri's Small-slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 201.
- ² Burke, *On Slavery's Border*, 285.