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African-American and Quaker Pioneers in East Central Indiana

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The agricultural history of east central Indiana is unique in that many of the first pioneers were African-American farmers. Many Quakers also migrated to this region, often bringing with them recently manumitted or fugitive slaves as well as free persons of color. Antebellum African-American and Quaker farm settlement in Randolph have recently become the focus of archaeological and historical investigations which are examining the dynamic relationship within and between these cultural groups.

Indiana was admitted to the union as a free state in 1816 and a significant migration of African-Americans and Quakers from southeastern states soon followed. Settlement in this period in Randolph County included the communities of Greenville, Cabin Creek, and Snow Hill. African-American and Quaker settlers assisted fugitive slaves on their way north and cooperated in the establishment of a school. These communities seem to have largely disappeared in the 1860s, and only the school building, the Union Literary Institute, is the only extant structure associated with these communities.

To date, investigations of these communities have included primary source research and a reconnaissance level survey of nearly 1,000 acres. Thirty-three historic sites were identified and 14 of these appeared to date before 1850. All of the early historic sites were associated with African-American landowners.

Some of the assemblages recovered from these sites reflected characteristics commonly associated with rural African-American sites. The assemblages include only small numbers of artifacts (e.g. N=20), and those recovered were of modest cost, including aqua glass, undecorated whiteware, utilitarian stoneware, and architectural elements, suggesting only brief occupation by poor tenants.

Other sites appeared to represent relatively wealthy individuals and families. These assemblages consisted of greater quantities of material (N=130) and diversity of artifacts of greater cost including an array of transfer-printed and other decorated wares. Brick scatters at two of the sites suggested that some homes were more substantial than others were. The archaeological evidence indicated that there was broad variation in the economic circumstances of African-American farmers in these communities. Thus, these cooperatively organized communities were also clearly economically stratified to some extent.

The transformation of the agricultural system in east central Indiana coincided with deteriorating race relations as the Civil War drew nearer. The migration of black farmers out of the settlements in Randolph County may have been motivated by decreased economic opportunities in farming or marginalized social position as a result of the changing political climate or perhaps both.

Through these investigations, the social, political, and economic context of farm life during the early to mid-19th century in east central Indiana was revealed. Three tentative conclusions were reached during this first phase of research: 1) the communities operated with some degree of cooperation, 2) stratification existed within and between these cultural groups, and 3) these agricultural settlements were abandoned as a result of economic and political conditions.