

THE LAST TO RISE

THE TRUE STORY OF MISSOURI'S FINAL FUGITIVE SLAVE

STORY Dorris Keeven-Franke and Sydney Jones

Archer Alexander knew a secret: while his master Richard Hickman Pitman was known to be a good man by the community, in reality, he was a traitor.

It was after nightfall in the winter of 1863 in St. Charles County, and Archer had just finished his work for the day. A chilly wind cut through the air, blowing across the dried-up stalks of the ice-covered fields at the plantation. This night would mark the beginning of Archer's journey as a fugitive slave, making him the last fugitive slave to be captured in Missouri.

After four years of enslavement to Richard Pitman, many things had become routine for Archer. Each Sunday evening, he was granted leave to visit his wife, Louisa, who resided a few miles from the Pitman plantation. But this evening would be anything but normal.

During the Civil War, the town of Dardenne Prairie in St. Charles County was home to



The Missouri Home Guard, pictured above, was led by Union forces and placed at the Peruque Creek Bridge. Their job was to protect the bridge, which was a vital crossing for Union troops.

both Confederate sympathizers and Union supporters. The Missouri Home Guard—led by Union forces—was stationed at a fort, safeguarding one of its most vital railroad crossing points in the region: Peruque Creek Bridge.

As the harsh wintry air hit his skin, Archer made his way along his five-mile route to visit Louisa, who was enslaved to James Naylor and lived and worked at his store.

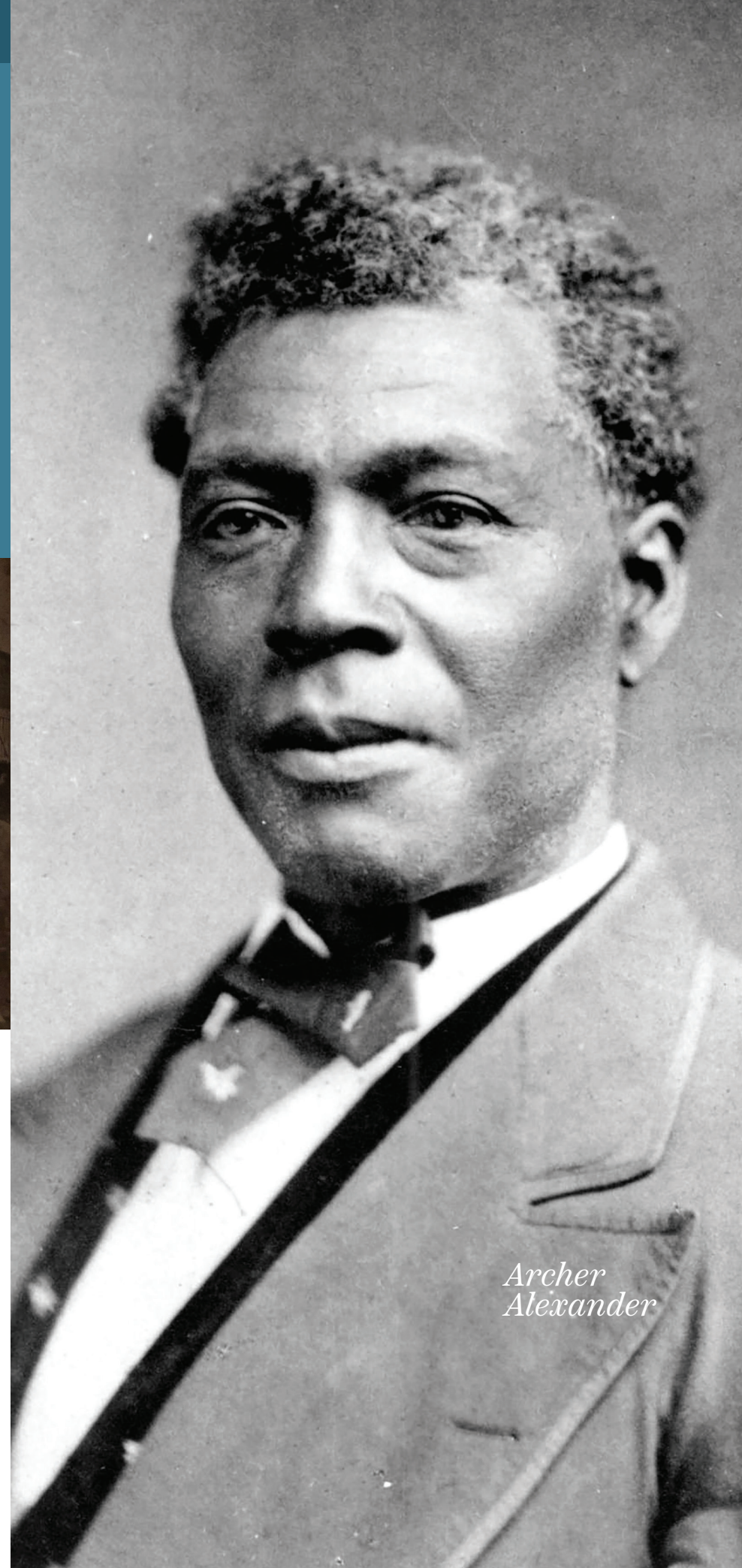
When Archer arrived, he walked around the property trying to find his wife, who lived in a slave cabin behind the store. Not being able to locate Louisa, he made his way to the back door of Naylor's Store. Archer put his hand on the doorknob, then abruptly halted,

hearing muffled voices on the other side.

Golden light streamed out of the slim crack at the bottom of the door. Archer inched a little bit closer. He overheard what was being said: a group of men were deliberating, and an alarming plan was revealed. Richard, along with several other Confederate sympathizers, was devising a secret plot to demolish Peruque Creek Bridge and to kill the surrounding Union troops.

In that moment, Archer remembered his father, Aleck. His father had been known for shouting from the fields, the streets, and wherever he could find an audience, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Archer remembered

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Archer Alexander

his father's outcries; Aleck's determination and insurgence were forever burned into his memory.

Archer knew he must make a choice. Did he truly believe the words his father risked his life for? And if so, was this belief strong enough to risk his own life for it?

A SORROWFUL JOURNEY

Archer was born into slavery in 1806 in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Archer's father, Aleck, was an outspoken man who refused to stay silent about his inherent right to freedom. It wasn't long before the neighbors became concerned and called a meeting, according to William Greenleaf Eliot's biography, *The Story of Archer Alexander*. The neighbors were outraged at Aleck's enslaver, John Alexander, for being reluctant to sell him, claiming, "It was not doing to his neighbors as he would be done by, to keep such a mischief-maker there; that a slave insurrection would be the next thing."

Archer was only 12 years old when hard times fell on the plantation. Aleck was the first to be sold. Archer and his mother were kept at John's plantation to take care of his home, cooking, washing, and cleaning for him. During this time, John died from cholera, and the estate was passed down to his son, James Alexander. Soon after, Archer met his wife, Louisa. They were married and had their first of ten children, Wesley. Their lives passed in drudgery in Virginia as they worked the farm, which was deteriorating in value.

In August 1829, when Archer was 23 years old, James decided to move to Missouri in hopes of better land and increased profit. He took with him a group of the enslaved, including Archer and Louisa, and several of James's extended family members. Along the journey, Archer and Louisa's infant son, Wesley, was sold to a family in Louisville, Kentucky.

After arriving in Dardenne Prairie, Archer was sent to work in the St. Louis brickyards. In 1830, he was brought back to the Alexander plantation to build homes for James. Archer and Louisa continued to be enslaved to James until his death in 1835. The couple remained enslaved as part of James's estate even after his death—their earnings sent to his four orphaned children.

Archer and Louisa were sold in 1850 and resided with two different enslavers. Archer

was sold to David Pitman, while Louisa was sold to James Naylor. David handed ownership of Archer over to his son, Richard Hickman Pitman, when he came of age. Over the years, Archer and Louisa had nine more children. Two of them were sold as babies and one died during the Civil War, but the rest would live to adulthood.

Under Richard Pitman, Archer was highly trusted. Times were changing though, and tensions were growing between masters and their enslaved. The Missouri Compromise—a legislative agreement that admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state—was ruled unconstitutional, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was set in its place. It required all runaway slaves to be returned to their masters, no matter if they resided in a free state at the time of their capture. Freedom for these slaves was more difficult to achieve than ever before.

Missouri slave owners tightened their grasp. Confederate sympathizers looked for any chance to thwart a Union victory, and this was the impetus behind the plot to sever the support beams of Peruque Creek Bridge.

A CALL TO COURAGE

Standing outside the door after overhearing the plot to destroy the Peruque Creek Bridge, Archer made up his mind. William Greenleaf Eliot, author of Archer Alexander’s biography, hints at Archer’s mindset at the time:

“He had pretty well outgrown the spirit of bondage, and was already entered upon that of freedom. He was quite prepared to do his part in breaking his chains.”

And so the time had come to act.

Quietly backing up from the door of the store, Archer broke into a run in the frigid night air. Knowing the Union supporters and their lives were at risk, he ran the five miles to the Union troops stationed near the bridge to inform them of the plot.

The Union troops immediately halted anyone from crossing over the bridge, saving the



William Greenleaf Eliot

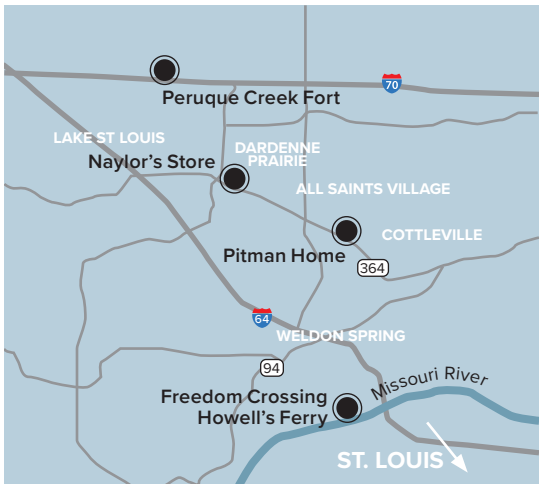
bridge and the lives of many Union soldiers. The Confederate sympathizers were livid and began searching for the informant.

A QUICK ESCAPE

Word spread quickly of the events at the bridge. Archer returned home, thinking that he was safe, but that was far from true.

Upon arriving to the Pitman plantation, Richard told Archer to stay put because some area men wanted to question him. Multiple slaves had already been interrogated in an attempt to find the informer. Knowing that staying at Richard’s was a death sentence, Archer made a run for it.

En route to the Missouri River, Archer encountered 16 other runaway slaves traveling the Underground Railroad and joined



them. A boat had been hidden for them at Howell’s Ferry crossing by an Underground Railroad conductor.

The men climbed onto the ferry, trying to push the thoughts of ice shards and the swift freezing current below the belly of the boat out of their minds. Their next stop was the city of St. Louis, only 20 miles ahead, and the very idea of it warmed their stiff limbs and eased their tired bones.

Once docked, the warm reality of freedom quickly faded. News had traveled fast. Local slave owners had already been informed about the runaways and were waiting nearby to capture them. The bounty for returned slaves varied greatly based on their age and who owned them, but the amount paid for this many fugitive slaves would have been immense.

The slaves were taken to a local tavern where a room had been readied for their arrival. The bounty hunters offered bacon, cornbread, and “bad whiskey,” to the slaves, according to Archer’s account in William’s biography, and told them that if they stayed quiet and cooperated, no one would be hurt. With the windows nailed shut and the doors locked tight, the slaves huddled in the upper room as their captors celebrated downstairs. While all the other slaves ate,

MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY, DORRIS KEEVEN-FRANKE

drank, and fell asleep, Archer formed a plan.

In William’s retelling, Archer is quoted describing his escape. “As soon as it was all quiet down stairs,—‘I thote they would never be done swarin’ and singin’,’—he quietly got up and examined the windows. They were nailed down tight; but fortunately he had a small claw-hammer in his pocket,—‘I allays had it with me, and it was mighty good luck,’—and without any noise he drew the nails carefully.”

Archer sat still for a few minutes, making sure that he had not awoken the sleeping bounty hunters below. Then, in an act of courage, he jumped out of the window, making a run for the forest. Coming upon a marsh, Archer dove in despite the cold, hoping that the water would keep the bounty hunters’ hounds from finding his scent.

A SECOND CHANCE

Archer hid in the marshes and swamp land for several days. The bounty hunters were unable to locate him, and he successfully made his way to the western suburbs of St. Louis. At the edge of the city, Archer spoke with a butcher at a market, who asked him if he was a fugitive slave. Archer realized that he had come upon an Underground Railroad stop, and knew it was safe to say “yes.” The butcher asked Archer to wait and returned

with a woman who needed help carrying a few things back to her home. She offered him a dime and a hot meal for his service. This woman was Abigail, wife of author William Greenleaf Eliot. Archer describes her as an angel and said her kindness was evident upon their first meeting.

William and Abigail welcomed Archer to stay with them, and Beaumont Estate became his new home in 1863.

William was well-known in the community as a Unitarian Church minister and for cofounding Washington University and establishing and leading the Western Sanitary Commission at the start of the Civil War. Through the commission, William worked closely with President Abraham Lincoln and the Union to establish and staff hospitals for wounded soldiers. The commission also donated clothes and food to fugitive slaves being held in contraband camps—a Union encampment for slaves that had escaped and joined the Union army.

William describes Archer as quiet and timid, a man who just wanted “a quiet place to work.” The family empathized with Archer and were adamant about not returning him to his slave owner, even though the Fugitive Slave Act required them to do so. William visited the provost marshal to request that Archer be protected under the law. The

provost marshal agreed to place a 30-day order of protection over Archer, keeping him from being captured and returned to his owner during that period. William informed Archer that he could safely stay another 30 days with them and recalls the immense joy and relief that washed over his face.

In an attempt to fully secure Archer’s freedom, William wrote Richard Pitman a letter, informing him that Archer was in his care and that he would like to purchase him in order to emancipate him. There was no reply.

Archer became a part of the Eliot family and made friends with everyone. He fell in love with the lush beauty of the estate. William describes the estate as “a sort of paradise,” containing four acres with tree groves, gardens, and expansive lawns, along with a quaint farmhouse and his own separate living quarters. Archer gleefully took



care of the estate while the Eliot children laughed and chased after him. “He was quiet, gentle, diligent, and sufficiently intelligent. The stable, garden, and the whole grounds soon felt the difference,” William recounts.

AN UNJUST UNDERTAKING

Before the order of protection was to expire, William made his way to teach an early morning class at Washington University. He recalls, “I stopped a moment to look at Archer with his plough, and the children at his heels ... The two boys, Christy and Ed ... and their one-year-old baby sister Rose, in the arms of Ellen, her nanny, were the company. As they came towards me, and, reaching the limit of the garden lot, the horse was turned and the plough swung round with a scientific flourish, Archer bowed, and said, ‘Good-morning, sir,’ looking as happy as freedom could make him.” Before turning the corner, William saw two men standing by a wagon. Thinking little of it, he rushed off to work.



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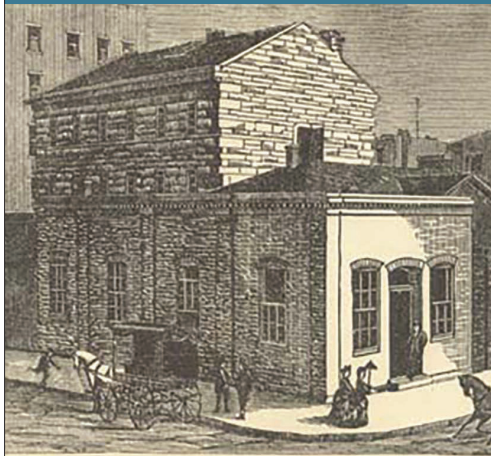
As soon as he was out of sight, the men with the wagon approached 11-year-old Christopher (Christy) in the yard. They asked him to identify Archer and once confirmed, they attacked him, beating him unconscious before dragging him to the wagon and quickly leaving.

When classes were finished for the day, William came home to complete chaos. The children and their nanny were inconsolable, and his wife, Abigail, remained in shock. The nanny recounted what had happened, and William was enraged. He rushed over to the provost marshal's office. William reported the defiance of the order of protection, which angered the marshal. He ordered several detectives to hunt the men down and bring Archer home. William recalls him shouting, "I'll show these fellows what it is to defy this office!" When asked what they should do if the men refused to give up Archer, the provost marshal replied, "Shoot them on the spot."

After diligently searching, the detectives located Archer, badly wounded and asleep, in the Confederate's St. Louis jail at the intersection of Sixth and Chestnut Streets. They seized his captors who were keeping guard over Archer and arrested them before returning Archer to the Eliots' estate. Though Archer had become close to the Eliots, William decided it was best to temporarily send him to Illinois so that he could better ensure his safety. Before taking him to a safe house in Alton, Illinois, William wrote Richard Pitman one more letter, pleading to purchase Archer's freedom. Still there was no response.

After several months, in June of 1863,

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Above, an illustration of the St. Louis jail shows where Archer was briefly held. Below, William Greenleaf Eliot's Beaumont Estate rests among acres of trees in St. Louis in the mid-1800s.

the tide changed when Richard Pitman was investigated and charged by a military commission. At the hearing, under the Second Confiscation Act of 1862, Richard was found guilty of treason against the United States. The act stated that the slave

property of anyone who was found aiding the Confederacy, known also as the rebellion, was to be released as free. The courts consequently deemed that all of his slaves were now free. On September 24, 1863, Archer was declared free "under the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862 for his assistance to the US Military."

A few months later, Archer hired a local farmer to bring his wife, Louisa, their daughter, Nellie, and their grandson, James, to his home at Beaumont Estate by hiding them under corn stalks in the back of a wagon. The Alexander family was reunited in late 1863 after a long and perilous journey to freedom.

A few months after the couple reached freedom, Louisa mysteriously died. It is not documented how she passed, and her grave has never been located.

Archer remarried a woman named Julia and lived the rest of his life alongside her. He passed away December 8, 1880, and was buried in St. Peter's United Church of Christ in St. Louis County. According to William, who was at Archer's bedside as he passed, his last words were a prayer of thanksgiving that, regardless of the strife he endured as a slave, he was a slave no more, and he would die free.

IMMORTALIZED IN BRONZE

After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865, Charlotte Scott, a Black woman in Marietta, Ohio, heard the news. It moved her to donate the first \$5 she had earned since being freed toward a memorial for Lincoln. She was the first of many to donate.

The Western Sanitary Commission held the funds, and each dollar donated was from the hand of the formerly enslaved, a



Emancipation Memorial

freedman, or the US Colored Troops. The troops alone gave over \$12,000 toward the memorial.

William made a trip to see one of his close friends, Thomas Ball, who was working as a sculptor in Italy. Thomas agreed to create a monument to memorialize Lincoln and was paid with the funds that had been raised, close to \$16,000 (worth \$500,000 today).

It was decided that the monument would be a statue of Abraham Lincoln alongside an enslaved man rising—and that man would be Archer Alexander.

On April 14, 1876, the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, the statue, named the Emancipation Memorial, was dedicated by President Ulysses S. Grant in Lincoln

Park in Washington, DC. Today, Archer Alexander remains immortalized in bronze beside President Lincoln above the carved word, "Emancipation."

Coauthor Dorris Keeven-Franke, a St. Louis native now living in St. Charles, has spent over 35 years writing about Missouri history. Dorris is a professional genealogist and member of the Missouri Speakers Bureau. Her work on Archer Alexander is featured by the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, and she is currently writing a book on his life. View her extensive research on the life of Archer Alexander at ArcherAlexander.blog.

An Event to Celebrate the Life of Archer Alexander

September is International Underground Railroad month, highlighting the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, run by the National Park Service.

The burial site of Archer Alexander is at the St. Peter's United Church of Christ Cemetery in Normandy, Missouri, and was added in 2023 to the 800-plus sites recognized by the program. Nine sites and two programs are located in Missouri.

A memorial service for Archer Alexander and for his day of freedom will be held on Sunday, September 21, 2025, at 1 PM in the St. Peter's United Church of Christ Cemetery.

This event will include a one-act play and speakers such as Ibn Ali, the great-great-great-grandson of Archer Alexander and nephew of Muhammad Ali, and historian Dorris Keeven-Franke.



Abraham Mohler and Dorris Keeven-Franke

Sculptor Abraham Mohler will present the plans for the Archer Alexander Memorial that will be located at the St. Peter's United Church of Christ Cemetery. The public is encouraged to attend this free event.

Scan the QR code for event information or to learn about the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom's nine Missouri sites and two programs.

