

Prominent black writer

■ An escaped slave, William Wells Brown briefly worked as a barber here before going on to become the nation's first black playwright.

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Monroe always has been proud that it once was home to Robert Duncanson, the most prominent black American landscape painter of the 19th century.

But Duncanson wasn't the only black Monroe resident to achieve national and international fame.

William Wells Brown was unquestionably Duncanson's equal in terms of achievement. Brown, a slave who escaped to become a leading spokesman for the abolitionist cause, was the nation's first black playwright, novelist, historian and travel writer.

He lived in Monroe during the winter of 1835, working as a barber to make ends meet until the steamers that traveled Lake Erie would be up and running in the spring (see related story).



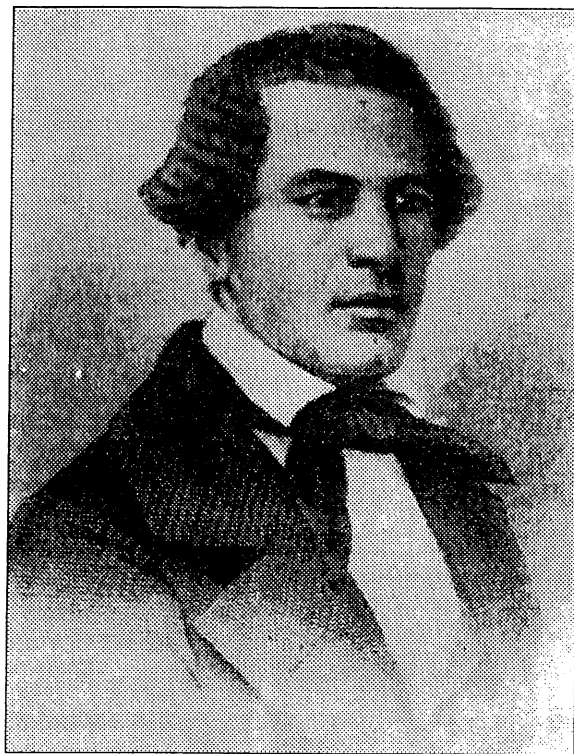
Information on exactly when he arrived, what caused him to leave, or even when he left, cannot be found in the books on him available at local libraries.

But the biographies of him that are locally accessible show he was a unique individual of enormous character, ingenuity and perseverance.

William was born a slave in Lexington, Ky., in 1814, the son of a slave named Elizabeth and a white man named George Higgins, the cousin of their master, a physician and farmer named Dr. John Young.

When William was a toddler, Dr. Young moved himself and his 40 or so slaves to Missouri and eventually, St. Louis.

Dr. Young had William work for other men. His jobs included being a helper at a tavern, a steward on a steamboat, a hotel servant, and a copy runner at the St. Louis Times, a newspaper partially owned and run by Elijah P. Lovejoy, an ardent abolitionist who later was killed by a proslavery mob.



WILLIAM WELLS BROWN

William eventually was sold to other owners and separated from his mother and siblings. He worked a variety of jobs in his teens, including as an assistant to a slave-trader.

On Jan. 1, 1834, while serving as a steward on a steamboat docked in the Ohio River, William escaped and headed north in hopes of finding the Underground Railroad in Ohio.

At the time, he was known only as William. He adopted his full name after a Quaker named Wells Brown took pity on the fugitive slave and helped him reach Cleveland by the end of January.

In the spring, Brown started working on a Lake Erie steamboat, a job that allowed him to help other fugitive slaves escape to Buffalo, N.Y., and Detroit and eventually, freedom in Canada.

Brown would work on the steamboat from spring to winter and then hole up in a particular Lake Erie town until the ice thawed. It was under these conditions that he wound up in Monroe for a short time.

Brown's most famous book, an autobiography called "Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave," reprinted in part in his first novel, "Clotel; or the President's Daughter," does

Black history:

Brown, Wm. Wells

once called Monroe home

not indicate when he left Monroe or why.

But sometime in the 1830s, Brown married in Cleveland and moved his growing family to Buffalo, where he organized a black temperance society and increased his involvement in local abolitionist activities.

By 1843, he was lecturing for the New York Anti-Slavery Society and forming contacts with such leaders as Frederick Douglass, a fellow fugitive slave, and white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips.

He later moved to Boston and began lecturing for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He also published his biography.

In 1849, the American Peace Society sent him to Paris as their delegate to the International Peace Conference. He later lectured on the slave experience throughout Europe and especially in Great Britain, where slavery had been outlawed in 1834 and where support for American abolitionists was growing.

Brown was forced to stay in Britain longer than anticipated because of the Fugitive Slave Law, which took effect in 1850. Brown's friends offered to buy his freedom from his former master, but for four years, he refused.

"God made me as free as Enoch Price, and Mr. Price shall never receive a dollar from me or my friends with my consent," Brown said of his former master.

While in exile, Brown wrote "Three Years in Europe: or Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met," the first book of travel sketches written by a black American; and "Clotel," the novel that included a biography with reference to Monroe.

But by 1854, Brown wanted to come home. He felt it unfair to be living in freedom when his brethren were still enslaved.

Once home, he continued lecturing and writing. He published his first play — the first by a black American — "The Escape; or A Leap for Freedom: A Drama in Five Acts."

Later, he wrote the first black American history book, "The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements."

During the Civil War, Brown worked to enlist black soldiers and to raise the standards of living under which they served.

After the war, he worked for the temperance movement and continued to write.

He died Nov. 6, 1884, in Boston.

Brown recounts Monroe days

"...In 1835, having been cheated out of the previous summer's earnings by the captain of the steamer in which I had been employed ... I was ... left without any means of support during the winter, and therefore had to seek employment in the neighboring towns.

"I went to the town of Monroe in the state of Michigan. ...I passed the door of the only barber in town, whose shop appeared to be filled with persons waiting to be shaved.

"As there was but one man at work, ... it occurred to me that I might get employment here as a journeyman barber, ...but the barber told me he did not need a hand.

"...After making several offers to work cheap, I frankly told him, that if he would not employ me, I would get a room near him, and set up an opposition establishment. ...And as I was leaving, one of the men, who were waiting to be shaved, said, 'If you want a room in which to commence business, I have one on the opposite side of the street.'

"...I took the room, purchased an old table, two chairs, got a pole with a red stripe painted around it, and the next day opened, with a sign over the door, 'Fashionable Hair-dresser from New York, Emperor of the West.'

"...In a few weeks I had the entire business of the town, to the great discomfort of the other barber.

"At this time, money matters in the Western States were in a sad condition. Any person who could raise a small amount of money was permitted to establish a bank, and allowed to issue notes for four times the sum raised.

"...The result was, that banks were started all over the Western States, and the country flooded with worthless paper.

"These were known as the 'Wild Cat Banks.' Silver coin being very scarce, and the banks not being allowed to issue notes for a smaller amount than one dollar, several persons put out notes of from 6 to 75 cents in value; these were called 'Shinplasters.' The Shinplaster was in the shape of a promissory note, made payable on demand.

"...I was one evening very much crowded with customers; and while they were talking over the events of the day, one of them said to me, 'Emperor, you seem to be doing a thriving business. You should do business as other business men, issue your Shinplasters.'

"...I accordingly went a few days after to a printer, and he wishing to get the job of printing, urged me to put out my notes. ...

"The next day, my Shinplasters were handed to me, the whole amount being twenty dollars; and, after being duly

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Excerpt (cont.)

signed, were ready for circulation.

"... Through the assistance of my customers, and a good deal of exertion on my part, my bills were soon in circulation; and nearly all the money received in return for my notes was spent in fitting up and decorating my shop.

"... A short time after my money had been out, a party of young men, either wishing to pull down my vanity, or to try the soundness of my bank, determined to give it a run.

"One day as I was sitting at my table, stripping some new razors I had just purchased with the avails of my Shinplasters,

one of the men entered and said, 'Emperor, you will oblige me if you will give me some other money for these notes of yours.' I immediately cashed the notes with the most worthless of the Wild Cat money that I had on hand, but which was a lawful tender.

"The young man had scarcely left, when a second appeared with a similar amount, and demanded payment. These were cashed, and soon a third came with his roll of notes. I paid these with an air of triumph, although I had but a half a dollar left. I began now to think seriously what I should do, or how to act, provided another demand should be made.

"While I was thus engaged in thought, I

saw the fourth man crossing the street, with a handful of notes, evidently my Shinplasters. I instantaneously shut the door, and looking out of the window said, 'I have closed business for to-day: come to-morrow and I will see you.'

"In looking across the street, I saw my rival standing at his shopdoor (sic), grinning and clapping his hands at my apparent downfall.

"... (I) went in search of my friend, who had first suggested to me the idea of issuing my notes. I found him, told him of the difficulty I was in, and wished him to point out a way by which I might extricate myself.

"He ... said, 'You must act as all bankers do in this part of the country. ... When your notes are brought to you, you must redeem them, and then send them out and get other money for them; and, with the latter, you can keep cashing your own Shinplasters.'

"... I immediately commenced putting in circulation the notes which I had just redeemed, and my efforts were crowned with such success, that, ... before I slept that night, my Shinplasters were again in circulation, and my bank once more on a sound basis."

— From "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown," reprinted in "Civetel, or the President's Daughter," by William Wells Brown, 1853.

