

Minnesota Unraveled

Episode 208 - She is Here Now: Eliza Winston and Slavery in Minnesota

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Mary Moore Easter:

My name is Eliza Winston. I am 30 years old. I was held as the slave of Mr. Gholson of Memphis, Tennessee, having been raised by Mr. Macklemo, father in law of Mr. Gholson. I married a free man of color who hired my time of my master, who promised me my freedom upon payment of \$1,000.

Chantel Rodríguez: Those are the words of Eliza Winston, as read by the award-winning poet Mary Moore Easter. Eliza petitioned for her freedom in Minneapolis during the summer of 1860. She gained widespread publicity for being the first enslaved person to do so in the state of Minnesota. Other enslaved people, like Dred and Harriet Scott, lived in the territory previously but sued for freedom in Missouri.

For over 100 years, the history books recounted Eliza's court case. But Eliza herself was noticeably absent from the story. There are no photographs, sketches, or even physical descriptions of Eliza in the historical record. Eliza's testimony is the only source she left behind, and it leaves many questions unanswered. Who was Eliza Winston? Why was she in Minnesota and what did her fight for freedom look like?

Two of my guests recently published books that shed light on Eliza's life.

Christopher Lehman:

My name is Christopher P. Lehman. I am a professor in the social sciences department at St. Cloud State University and I have been there for 23 years.

Mary Moore Easter:

I'm Mary Moore Easter. I was a professor of dance at Carleton College for 41 years. I have been retired from there for a decent amount of time, and poetry has been a part of my artistic output for very many years.

Their books inspired my third guest to bring Eliza Winston's story to young students.

Jason Benjamin:

My name is Jason Benjamin. I'm a fourth grade teacher at Burroughs Community School and that is located in the southwest part of Minneapolis. So we're part of the Minneapolis Public School District.

Chantel Rodríguez: Welcome to *Minnesota Unraveled*, I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

I spoke with Mary and Chris about their respective books. Published in 2021, Mary's book of poetry inspired by the testimony of Eliza Winston is called *Free Papers*. A few years later, Chris published a history book called, *It Took Courage*. They both started their research with the same general information about why Eliza was in Minnesota.

Christopher Lehman:

She was in Minnesota because her enslavers wanted to come to Minnesota for the sake of a mistress' health. The couple, Colonel Richard Christmas and his wife, who really was named Mary Christmas, came here in the summer of 1860 because Mrs. Christmas was very sickly and she had been sickly for most of her life. And the waterfall that used to be in the Twin Cities called the Falls of St. Anthony were very highly publicized in the South as this place where people could come if they were invalids or if they felt that they just wanted to have the placebo effect of being by the waterfall. And the Christmases decided that they wanted to do that too. And out of the 160 enslaved people that they had on their plantation in Mississippi, they chose Eliza Winston because she had been taking the most direct round-the-clock care of Mrs. Christmas.

Chantel Rodríguez: While Mary and Chris started with the same source material, they took different approaches to uncovering the details of Eliza's life.

Chris is a trained historian and used Eliza's testimony, which he calls the affidavit, as his starting point for tracing Eliza's enslavement. First, he used ancestry.com to find the full names of her enslavers, as listed in the affidavit. The next step in his research took a bit more detective work.

Christopher Lehman:

What I did after I figured out the full names of the people in the affidavit was to get confirmation that these people actually did enslave her. So what I did was look at digitized deeds and digitized receipts in Shelby County where Memphis is and Davidson County where Nashville is because Eliza did mention being enslaved in Memphis and in Nashville. And I knew that the Mr. McLemore, who turned out to be

John McLemore, was in Davidson County. So I was able to track down the receipt where McLemore actually purchased Eliza.

Chantel Rodríguez: Eliza was born into enslavement. She was bought and sold several times in her life, often because her enslavers were in financial trouble. She was sold for the first time at age 5. It was in the course of his research that Chris made an unexpected discovery, which involved the transfer of Eliza from Lucius Polk to Catherine Gholson.

Christopher Lehman:

But in that deed, I found the surprise of my life in relation to this research because the deed that transfers Eliza from Polk to Gholson says that Polk was assisted in the purchase by General Jackson – and right away I just froze and I realized that the General Jackson that was being referred to was Andrew Jackson and the deed said that Jackson made the arrangements with Polk in 1834. So this was when Andrew Jackson was still president.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Some of the things that we've been talking about is the challenges of doing this kind of research, of doing research on enslaved peoples and the fact that they don't leave behind as many sources. And I feel like there's some basic questions that historians tend to ask, just sort of like, "Oh, Eliza Winston. Okay. Well, when was she born? Where was she born?" Were you able to answer those questions or was it not as straightforward?

Christopher Lehman:

I was able to answer the question, but in answering the question, it required that I challenge the affidavit because in the affidavit, Eliza gives the impression that she was born in 1830 because in the affidavit she says that she's 30 years old. However, when I was going through the paper trail of all the different deeds recording her transition from enslaver to enslaver, the one consistency was that it appeared that she was born 13 years earlier in 1817 because the 1822 deed lists her as five years old, the 1834 deed lists her as 17 years old.

Chantel Rodríguez: Where Chris brings a scholar's approach, Mary looks at Eliza's testimony as only a poet can.

Mary Moore Easter:

So thinking about the Eliza Winston book, connecting with Chris Lehman, with all his abilities as a researcher, it's very impressive to me. But I realized that what I have that maybe doesn't match that, but that is somewhat similar, is I have the music of the era. I have the music of the slave era. So when I am reading Eliza's narrative, I am often connecting it with the songs that I know. And these are the

authentic songs. These are songs from the slaves themselves. I guess the short word for it is folk music, but that doesn't begin to explain what it does and what it does against the background of tremendous resistance.

And I characterize it as a slave narrative

She actually stood up in front of Judge Vanderburgh and said these things, and they didn't have a way to record it and correct it as you are doing for me, but she just spoke. She was able to tell it all and she was able to leave hints.

Chantel Rodríguez: A slave narrative is a specific literary genre, and an invaluable source. It is a first-person account of an enslaved person's life, either written or orally recounted. For many individuals, the slave narrative was an act of free-storytelling; a way to declare their own spiritual and psychological independence in telling their *own* story. There are, however, limitations to the slave narrative as a source. It was often produced to bring widespread awareness of slavery to a white audience. This is something Mary thought a lot about in writing her poetry.

Mary Moore Easter:

The narrative was, first of all, surprising in that it didn't have any of the impediments that various recordings of slave narratives have. They're recorded by a person who has an accent and an idea of what the slave sounded like. And so you have to tunnel your way through that person's interpretation of the language of the time. Well, I have learned since I didn't know how to approach this language, this language from a woman who was so well-spoken. Now, I don't want to add in any way to the stereotype that the slave is deaf and dumb and cannot process his or her own experience. This is a woman who processes her experience just fine. She is even eloquent and she remembers all sorts of details. I learned after reading ... Okay, I read the narrative 50, 100 times.

It may sound silly, but she became a living person for me and her ability became a living ability. And so I did not hesitate. I really didn't. I didn't hesitate to speak for her.

Mary Moore Easter:

That is the connection that I felt and about black poets, the ones that I know, the well-known ones, have written about every historical person of note and no one had written about Eliza Winston yet. She was the gold coin left for me to find. So it felt very, very personal that circumstance had allowed me to be the one to open this conversation. With Eliza.

Chantel Rodríguez: Mary captures these feelings of connection to Eliza in this excerpt from her poem entitled, "In My Extremity."

Mary Moore Easter:

There you were, Eliza,
gold from God in plain sight.

No one had picked you up
wiped the muck from the landscape of your face.

Gold, I tell you, left for me to find,
to polish. I won't say to own –

we've had enough of that.

I'm no colonizer of your shores,
no conqueror to whom you must submit,

rather, a mirror that reflects what it sees –
the you that was me, the background that was your time

the spaces surrounding you where I'd rummage
and find my own things.

Now, as I think about the narrative and where she was in the actual situations, I took her narrative to be the literal truth.

I felt that I understood her through it. So the day that I read Chris's book and learned that she did know her mother, that she actually was raised in a family of people. I was just dancing around the living room saying her grandmother's name was Judah. That was just thrilling to me to discover that. And that, of course, that she knew her grandmother, that she knew these people, that she in some ways was able to ... She was able to draw from all the gifts of immediate ancestry in her bonded life.

Chantel Rodríguez: While Eliza's freedom suit in Minnesota received widespread attention, it was not the first time she had pursued freedom.

Christopher Lehman:

Well, it didn't happen right in Minnesota. It's not as if Eliza realized that she was in Minnesota and decided for the first time she wanted to be free. She'd wanted to be free for a long time, and there had been multiple occasions in which her enslavers

over the years had promised to free her, but plans fell through or enslavers changed their minds.

Chantel Rodríguez: Eliza experienced degrees of freedom during her enslavement in the South. These moments fueled her fight to secure legal freedom.

Christopher Lehman:

Then in the 1840s, when she's enslaved by the Gholsons, the Gholsons were relatively lenient as far as enslavers go because I believe Kate McLemore was only 12 when her father had to sell all of his enslaved people. So he never bought any more people after that. So Kate did not grow up early spending her adolescence learning how to be a slave mistress. So when she inherits Eliza Winston as a young newlywed, she doesn't really know what to do with her, aside from keeping her and not selling her away. So one of the things that Kate and her husband allow her to do is to attend a church by herself and without them going to the same church with her. And the church that she attends in Memphis is a church where she is able to associate on a weekly basis with other enslaved people, but also with free African Americans, with other slaveholders, but also with European Americans who have no interest in slavery whatsoever and do not own any people.

Chantel Rodríguez: During Eliza's enslavement with Catherine, or Kate Gholson, she lived in Nashville, Memphis, and Louisville. In 1848, Kate died and Eliza became enslaved to Kate's husband, Thomas, who moved them back to Memphis. Eliza was able to return to church and experience an even greater degree of freedom.

Christopher Lehman:

Thomas Gholson, is even more lenient by allowing Eliza Winston to work outside the house to marry a local free African American man as much as it could be respected as a marital union by Gholson, if not by law, since enslaved people could not marry. But the couple make an arrangement with Gholson to work outside the house and save up their money. And once they reached that amount of money and paid it to Thomas Gholson, then Eliza's freedom would be purchased.

Chantel Rodríguez: Eliza mentions her husband, though not by name, in her testimony. Her description of him, which some sources name as Jim Winston, inspired at least two of Mary's poems.

Mary Moore Easter:

"So then I married a free man of color who hired my time and my master." I want to know who is this man? This is Jim Winston. And she says later he had a free swagger around him. That led to the whole poem about free swagger.

This man, he must have seen her sometimes.

"He had free swagger." Well, okay, this is – a romance's taking place in the description. Yeah. So also, I transformed a lot of her occasions into a sermon as if she was the minister – and the minister, my knowledge of black ministers – would challenge the audience, the congregation to take these words as gospel for them and to answer for themselves if they could do what she did.

Chantel Rodríguez: Here is an excerpt from Mary's poem entitled, "In the Words of Her Mouth, a Sermon is Made."

Mary Moore Easter:

She say, this free man

hired my time of my master

Y'all hear this?

In the language of the day
this means a free black man paid her owner
for her labor to make her time free.
Hallelujah!

Y'all don't hear me. This upstanding man
didn't just come with pretty words.
He was a man of action.
He paid for the work she did
for someone else
to free her of obligation.
Hallelujah!

Look into yourself and see
if you can find that commitment.
Do you have that in you?
Eliza tells y'all to think on it!

Chantel Rodríguez: For Mary, Eliza's plans with her husband show her commitment to securing freedom through formal channels. Unfortunately, a twist of fate got in their way.

Mary Moore Easter:

She wanted her freedom to be this way, wanted it to be right, wanted it to be legal. And during the time that she was seeing, courting, her husband to be, they made intricate plans. They saved money. They bought a house together and they were

making plans for the success of their relationship and their family. And I thought this is not some kind of fly by night relationship.

This is two people working together in an intimate couple relationship where they make the plans and they get the money and they both contribute to this plan that they have. He's not just going to buy her free. She's going to contribute to the freedom that she seeks. He goes to Africa with a group of free men who are recruited to help establish a place in Africa to which slaves could return in freedom.

And he goes to Liberia and he gets a disease or whatever. He dies there. So all of those plans and hopes that were things that they did together are dashed.

Chantel Rodríguez: It is unclear whether Eliza knew the circumstances of her husband's death, but his failure to return did not stop her from pursuing freedom. In 1853, Thomas Gholson experienced financial difficulty and pawned Eliza to Colonel Ralph Christmas for \$800 (or about \$35,000 in today's money). Thomas hoped to pay off his debts and buy Eliza back, but he died in 1855.

Christopher Lehman:

So Eliza is spending another five years in Mississippi in slavery until the Christmases decide to send her with them on their vacation to Minnesota. And on the way, the Christmases had promised that they would free Eliza. Eliza had collected a bunch of clothing from her free African-American friends and the friends of her late husband, and she had put all the clothes in this trunk. And so she went on the boat with the Christmases and took her trunk with her. And the Christmases said, "Once the boat reaches St. Louis where we have to stop and switch boats, you can be free there.

We'll make the arrangements for you to be free and then you can go about your way." But when they reached St. Louis, they changed their minds and they told her to get on the Minnesota boat with them, so she did. And so that was the last promise that an enslaver broke for her until she got to Minnesota and decided to seek her freedom herself.

Chantel Rodríguez: Eliza's preparation for Minnesota resonated with Mary.

Mary Moore Easter:

She had friends who were helping her sew and assemble clothes that would be suitable for, as they said, what the weather might be in Minnesota. I just slapped my thigh laughing at that because I thought that's exactly what we're doing every day. They're sitting down there in humid, Mississippi, trying to think what clothing

she's going to need to protect her from this terrible winter that's going to come. And she's not used to things being cold.

So that led to a sonnet:

As long as these old fingers hold a thimble
you will not tremble in whatever cold
they have for you, Eliza.
You are not motherless without cover
in your solitude. Take with you this vest
with sleeves, stitched and doubled, cotton-stuffed
these skirts and sack shirts closed with pilfered buttons
tagged with bits of cut-off ribbon
to remind your joy to rise
inside your obedient face
your fire to blaze inside
whatever cold they have for you.
Take us with you in each fold and pleat
armored by the freedom that you seek.

Chantel Rodríguez: Eliza and the Christmas family arrived at the opulent Winslow House in St. Anthony on July 12, 1860. Situated near the present-day Stone Arch Bridge off of Central Avenue, the Winslow House was a large, five-story hotel. It boasted 200 total rooms with elegant furnishings and a grand staircase beckoning wealthy visitors inside. The hotel sat prominently on a hill, dominating the skyline and offering breathtaking views from various balconies. Visitors played croquet in the open space in front of the grand hotel. It was against this lavish backdrop that Eliza developed a new plan to secure freedom.

Mary set out to retrace Eliza's steps to make sense of how she must have felt in this unknown, northern state.

Mary Moore Easter:

for eight months, I lived and ate and thought and traveled around the city to locations that Eliza must have been in. I traced the root of the river. I spent time in the Gale Museum, the Gale Family Museum at the Minnesota History Center. And I once asked to see items from the Winslow House and they brought me a tray of actual items from the Winslow House.

And it included things like postcards people had written because the Winslow House was a destination. And so anyway, here's Eliza and she's staying there because she is charged to be in care of the mistress of the house who she records

is sickly. And so she is housed with all of the masters and mistresses with the elegant people.

She's getting up and changing her clothes and she is doing all the maid servant duties of a woman who is sickly and who has a small child and she is caring for the child.

Chantel Rodríguez: The Winslow House may have been elegant, but it had a dark side.

Christopher Lehman:

And it was very grand, very opulent. It was also very segregated. People who were African American generally hid, not hid, but they tended to congregate in the basement area. And whenever there was a meal time, everybody who was European American was able to eat first. And then after that, the African Americans would eat and African Americans entered from the basement and European Americans could enter from the front door. So this was the environment that Elias and Winston came into

Chantel Rodríguez: The Christmases were not the only family who brought enslaved people to the hotel. The Winslow House was a favored destination for wealthy southern slave owners. Its proximity to the waterfall was a big draw, but so was the legal protection afforded to their enslaved people.

In 1857, the US Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case. Beyond denying citizenship to African Americans, it made two other important rulings. First, slavery could not be banned in federal territories. Second, the temporary residence of an enslaved person in a free state did not make them free.

In 1858, Minnesota was admitted to the Union as a free state. The Dred Scott ruling meant that an enslaved person like Eliza would not be free by simply setting foot in a free state.

Southerners, however, had been bringing their enslaved people to Minnesota well before the 1850's.

Christopher Lehman:

in Minnesota, there was just a constant stream of southerners who were in the state temporarily, but they were a constant presence nonetheless. It started with soldiers being stationed at Fort Snelling, starting in the late 1820s. Some of them were permitted by the US Army to bring enslaved people with them and for the army to even pay stipends for the care of those enslaved people. Also, outside the fort, there were trading posts of the American Fur Company, and American Fur was a company that was run in St. Louis by slaveholders. So people we would consider

to be Minnesota's founding fathers like Henry Sibley and Henry Rice were getting paid by the slaveholders to run their trading posts in Minnesota.

Minnesota had a history of welcoming Southerners to Minnesota because there was a lot of money to be made from tourist revenue.

So when the Christmases came, they were expecting the same kind of hands-off treatment from Minnesotans that all the other Southern guests had been receiving.

Chantel Rodríguez: The Dred Scott ruling happened in a moment when slavery was the most volatile issue in the nation. Resistance to slavery was also ramping up, with state and local judges outright ignoring the Dred Scott ruling.

When Eliza and the Christmases arrived in 1860, there were an estimated 259 free Black people in Minnesota, of which 82 lived in what we now call the Twin Cities. Abolitionist supporters, both black and white, created a secret network of safe houses and routes that helped enslaved people escape to free states. This network was Hennepin County's Underground Railroad.

While on an errand to the tailor, Eliza met someone who took part in the Underground Railroad. Her name was Emily Grey, a free African American woman, who worked as a seamstress. Emily has been described by one scholar as, "rather tall, with a large frame, bluish-grey eyes, and a fair, freckled complexion."

Christopher Lehman:

And this free woman, Emily Grey, had come to Minnesota from the East Coast from Pennsylvania, where her father had been freed from slavery. And in his freedom, he was a conductor on the Underground Railroad there. So Emily Grey brought that family history with her to Minnesota, and when she arrived, she tried to find people who were just as anti-slavery and abolitionist as she was, and she was able to develop a network of people who were similar to her in that regard. So when Emily meets Eliza Winston and Eliza tells Emily her story about wanting to be free, Emily right away says, "I know people.

I can help you out?

Chantel Rodríguez: It took several weeks for Emily to develop a plan. Her husband owned a barber shop located 800-feet from the Winslow House, which likely made it a convenient location for Eliza to check-in on the plans. By the second week of August, Eliza visited the Grey's home, the first stop on the Underground Railroad where she met local abolitionists and learned about the plan.

Christopher Lehman:

And they tell her this plan of going to church at a particular church, that immediate Sunday, and then right after the service is over, get into a specific coach where a specific person is waiting for her, and then get in that coach and that person will take them to Canada. So Eliza is so excited about this plan that she goes back to the Winslow House Hotel and she tells at least one other African American enslaved person who's there, but then that person ultimately starts a chain that leads the information to the Christmases and the Christmases right away realize that they can't stay at the Winslow House anymore because now the abolitionists know where they are.

Chantel Rodríguez: The Christmases made a quick getaway with Eliza to a cottage at Lake Harriet, about 5 and a half miles southwest of the hotel.

The abolitionists are still able to find her at that lake house and by then they have a new strategy of a writ of habeas corpus, which allows for prisoners and enslaved people to protest their captivity. And the abolitionists find a judge who grants the writ, which means that the judge then has to send the sheriff of Hennepin County to the lake house to arrest Eliza for the purpose of bringing her to the judge's courtroom so Eliza could plead her case. So that's what the sheriff does. And one of Emily's friends is a lawyer who advocates on Eliza's behalf. There is a Southern lawyer at the lake house and he agrees to advocate for the Christmases

Chantel Rodríguez: The sheriff escorted Eliza to the Hennepin County Court House located across the river from St. Anthony and in full view of the Winslow House. At the court house, rowdy crowds on both sides of the slavery issue gathered. The Christmas' lawyer argued that Eliza's enslavement in Minnesota was legal. Eliza's lawyer read the one line from Minnesota's Constitution that banned slavery and sat down. Judge Charles E. Vanderburgh was an abolitionist and ruled in Eliza's favor.

Christopher Lehman:

And when the judge said at the end to Eliza, "You are free," the courtroom just exploded in celebration, at least among Eliza and her allies.

Mary Moore Easter:

After the court case, she was met at the door with a mob that did not want her to be free because of what that freedom represented for them, the loss of money, the loss of patronage by Southern masters who would bring sometimes their whole households up to stay at the Winslow House and to be at the falls, St. Anthony Falls.

Christopher Lehman:

There were two separate mobs that roamed the streets of Minneapolis that night looking for where Eliza's helpers were keeping her. They went to Emily Grey's house and trashed it. They also went to the home of an abolitionist named William Babbitt, who had been very crucial in organizing the legal strategy. And Babbitt's wife, who was pregnant, had to leave the house and roam the streets to find the sheriff to bring him to her house and tell the mob to go away, which eventually they did, but nobody in the mob and either mob was ever arrested for what they did.

Chantel Rodríguez: After the judge's ruling, Eliza sought refuge in Babbitt's home, which was less than a mile from the courthouse located on the edge of what is today downtown: Park Ave. and 10th Street, just north of I-94.

When the mob violence continued into the evening, Eliza was sent to a different safe house. Three days later she filed her affidavit—the testimony we heard at the top of the episode. Eliza's court case significantly impacted the business of southern tourism in Minnesota.

Christopher Lehman:

they were upset that the abolitionists made this such an issue because it violated this understood agreement that Minnesotans just don't mess with the South's master slave relationships that they bring to the state. And they worried, especially people who made a living off of Southern tourism, that with this verdict, Southerners are just going to be too scared to come to Minnesota and that the Southerners who are in Minnesota at the moment of that verdict are going to leave in droves.

And that is what happened. A lot of Southerners immediately caught the first Steamboat back to the South so their enslaved people wouldn't try to meet with the same judge.

Chantel Rodríguez: What happened to Eliza Winston following her court case is a bit of a mystery. Chris' research shows that Eliza spoke at Woodman Hall to the Hennepin County Antislavery Society in Minneapolis on October 19, 1860.

One month later she traveled on the national Underground Railroad to Canada before settling in Detroit. Her paper trail runs cold after that.

Like Chris, Mary has grappled with how to make sense of Eliza's life after the court case.

Mary Moore Easter:

I don't know what happened to her afterwards. The story that she went to Canada and came back sounds so good, but then the timeline and the travel, which seems to us simple, just go up 35E and you'll be in Canada. It was not like that. It was a much more arduous journey. So I don't know the answer to it.

Chantel Rodríguez: This helped inspire her poem, "She is Here Now."

Mary Moore Easter:

Eliza steps out from the erasure
of slavery to leave words
in a court document
that blaze a light
and bristle a world.
I refuse her utter blankness
after she seizes freedom.

Although she became free,
as a black woman,
she had nowhere to go, no one to care
once her drama served
their principles.
Unlikely we will find her *a nurse girl in Memphis*

Don't let her go!
Find her here now.
Her courage ignites our courage.
Keep her risk inside our risk.
Let's see the world
out of her open eyes.
Hear her outspoken voice in our own mouths.
Go from these pages
to a freedom she seeds to you
and you
and you.

Chantel Rodríguez: Chris and Mary have shared their work on Eliza at various programs and events, sometimes together. It was at one of Chris' book talks that he met my third guest, Jason Benjamin. He is a 4th grade teacher at Burroughs Community School in Minneapolis.

Jason Benjamin:

So my first classroom teaching experience was actually first grade teaching native Spanish speakers and I've been teaching for over 20 years. I've been teaching first grade, second grade, native language literacy, and then I taught fifth grade for a number of years and currently I teach fourth grade at Boroughs Community School.

it's a general class and it's math, literacy, social studies, which includes history and science.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Do you have a favorite topic? No pressure to say like history. Do you have a favorite subject?

Jason Benjamin:

I do. My favorite subject was science, but it is rapidly moving over to history and there's a really cool podcast called Minnesota Unraveled and I've listened to all of them and all of those episodes and they're very engaging. But yeah, I do like social studies and history as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When did you realize that you wanted to bring her into the classroom and how did you even get started with that process? Did she only live in history or did she also live elsewhere?

Jason Benjamin:

What really I think inspired me to teach this was Dr. Lehman's book. It took courage the Eliza Winston's quest for freedom and I've gone to a few of his lectures and that inspired me more. And so I've been working to integrate it into the curriculum and it's really not so hard to do, to be honest. And what I mean by that is she's part of history and the social political fabric of what is now the United States and what is now Minnesota.

Chantel Rodríguez: Jason shares Eliza's story with his students in several ways, but the one he was most excited to talk with me about was the annual field trip.

Jason Benjamin:

it's called the Tour of Minneapolis with the goal of learning about our community. And so educators, students, parent chaperones, get on a bus, and we basically follow the grand rounds, which is the parkway system of Minneapolis.

And we point out different things. Now, before we get on that bus, of course, we do a lot of pre-teaching of the sites we will see and the things that we will experience. And we call that learning from place. So there's three stops where we get off the bus and we learn from place.

Chantel Rodríguez: The tour includes several locations and stops connected to Eliza's story.

Jason Benjamin:

As we take off from the bus from Burrows Community School, one of the first things we see as we drive past Lake Harriet on the east side and we look across, we talk about, "Hey, there's where Eliza Winston was rescued from being enslaved." And everybody's kind of looking across the lake from the bus and I know they're thinking about things and they're feeling some things because we talked about this and I remember hearing a student saying, "Hey, that's kind of where I live." And I remember hearing another student say, "I think I see it.

" And so they're probably having some visualization of maybe the boarding house that I showed them from Dr. Layman's research. And just to be clear, that boarding house is not there anymore, but they're seeing houses that kind of look like it.

Chantel Rodríguez: A new location on the trip this fall was the Eliza Winston historical marker on the Saint Anthony Falls Heritage Trail. They were unable to stop and take a look, but Jason made time in the classroom to look at the marker's text. Together, the students decided they would update the language on the marker.

Jason Benjamin:

Some of those words are outdated and so we went and read that marker and we went over it and we kind of rewrote it and I'd love to read that marker to you.

And so the original marker, the Eliza Winston marker, St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail, that's the title. It says, "By 1860, St. Anthony had become a favorite summer resort for wealthy southerners who traveled on steamboats up the Mississippi. Often they and their black slaves stayed at the Winslow house. One such slave was Eliza Winston. Slavery was illegal in Minnesota and a local free black woman named Emily Grey persuaded her to leave her owner. A court sustained Winston's right to freedom, but a pro-slavery crowd threatened harm. Anti-slavery people in the town hid her and she later made her way to Canada and I don't know if you can hear some of the outdated language, I bet you can, right? And so we talked about that and we rewrote it sort of as individually, but then kind of checked in as a class. And so this is kind of what we rewrote, and this is from one of the students.

“By 1860, St. Anthony had become a favorite summer resort for wealthy southerners who traveled on steamboats up the Mississippi. Often they and their African American enslaved people stayed at the Winslow house. One such African American enslaved person was Eliza Winston. Chattel slavery was illegal in Minnesota. A local free African American person named Emily Grey supported her on her quest to freedom. A court sustained Winston's right to freedom, but a pro-slavery crowd threatened harm and violence. Abolitionists in the town hid her and she later made her way to Canada and later Detroit, Michigan, where she lived free the rest of her life. She effectively ended de facto slavery in Minnesota”, and that's kind of where we stopped. And so yeah, we need to change that Eliza Winston marker.

Chantel Rodríguez:

can you recall for me what your students, both individually and as a group when they were coming together, what they were thinking when they read the original text and they're like, why is it so important to change some of this language? What were some of the things that they were saying that was going through their mind?

Jason Benjamin:

Yeah. Well, it was also a lesson in language and the power of language, and it was a lesson in historical markers and how they might perpetuate racism, bias, or how they can disrupt those things. And so we talked about the word slavery and what it means to be a slave and how undignified that is, and it doesn't make that person a person.

It sort of dehumanizes that person, and they totally understood that. Fourth graders, they're nine and 10 years old, and sometimes you're like, "Well, what? Is that too much for a nine and 10 years old person?" But they understand justice, they understand what's fair, they understand what's right or wrong. And when there's 30 of them or 26 of them in a classroom, the synergy of all those little bodies creates this big sort of energy and understanding of things and I'm impressed by what they do and what they want to do.

Chantel Rodríguez: Jason's students connected to Eliza's story in several ways.

Jason Benjamin:

Another part of that story that they kind of glammed onto It was when she was on Lake Harriet and she said my mistress knew people were coming to rescue me and so she would have me go into the woods and hide. And so they were very interested in that. And then they were very interested in the fact that Eliza would go out into the woods just a little bit, but not enough to hide. And so we talked about,

hey, she's showing a little bit of resistance there. She's resisting this. She knows exactly what she's doing.

Chantel Rodríguez: For Jason's students, one of the more challenging aspects of Eliza's story was her experiences with family and marriage as an enslaved person.

Jason Benjamin:

You have a family that you're leaving and that family might be a biological family. And that was the case when she was enslaved by Mr. McLemore. And when she got sold, she was torn away from her family and then she created a new family. And what's the definition of family? The definition of family is not your biological family. It's the people you care about and love. And so she had sort of a new group to care about and love and they loved her, et cetera. That's my inferencing. And that was with the Gholson family. And due to financial troubles, she got so pawned to the Christmas family. And with that said, now I'm kind of remembering, I think what might have been interesting or complex for the students is how do you marry somebody and have a little bit of liberty, but still not be free.

Chantel Rodríguez: Bringing Eliza's story into the 4th grade classroom has not been without its challenges. The history of slavery has long been thought of as "hard history." For Jason, the question of "how do fourth graders learn that hard history" is never far from his mind.

Jason Benjamin:

I might respond by, "You know what? Some of them are living that hard history right now, and by my not teaching it, I'm doing an injustice, and so we need to teach that. With that said, yeah, there are some challenges, and one of those challenges is creating a safe space, and so slavery is a heavy topic, and it's a topic where there's going to be some big feelings, like shame, guilt, sadness, anger. And so you want to create that culture where you let them know we're going to feel some hard feelings.

And I also want to say teaching hard history and complex, maybe some complex facts, it's very helpful to attach a story to it. And Eliza Winston is that, I don't want to say perfect story because nothing's perfect, but it's an excellent story. And Dr. Lehman helped us think about that as a really amazing story. And so now we have a story and they can latch onto that story and they know that Eliza Winston went through some amazing, horrible experiences, right? And so what were some of those experiences? Well, those experiences come from bad policies or horrible policies. And so now we're going to learn a little bit about maybe the Dred Scott decision of 1857, and that made Eliza Winston and other African American people, non-citizens with no rights.

And furthermore, with that ruling, it created an unsafe space for Eliza Winston,

Chantel Rodríguez: Jason is very aware of how his own education has influenced how he thinks about this history, and how he needs to account for this in teaching students.

Jason Benjamin:

I have to unlearn things myself. And so after reading that book and listening to his lectures and emailing Dr. Lehman, who I want to personally thank, he sends those emails back pretty timely and gives me answers. I had to learn when I grew up and still into my 20s and 30s, et cetera, very prideful Minnesota, hey, we were a free state, we didn't believe in slavery, we had these high morals.

And so the institution of slavery and the economics of it were all over the United States. And so I had to unlearn that, no, Minnesota was morally, I don't know, superior. We had these great values, but with this story, it gets a little bit more complex and it's really drawn out in the book, in the courtroom scene, and when she's declared free immediately, you'd be like, "Yeah, but not quite the case. There's a big crowd that does not want to see her free due to economic reasons." And so that's something that I had to learn or one of many things. And so once I have more of that knowledge, that helps me teach a little bit more to fourth graders.

one thing about fourth grade is they come in as fresh human beings, beings, where I come in with, I've learned some history, now I have to unlearn it, or I'm comfortable kind of where I'm at so that I'm not sure what's the right thing to do because I don't want to give up my comfortability and that they just come in and they know what they want and it's, yeah, you're right. You learn a lot from them.

Chantel Rodríguez: For several years now, Jason and Chris have been in dialogue about how to make Eliza Winston's story teachable. In working toward this goal, Chris revealed that he always keeps one question in mind.

Christopher Lehman:

it's part of what I do in general, even on the college level, is to answer the question, "So what?" It's a question that my professors in my undergraduate years at Oklahoma State had ingrained in me. They would say, "You never want to do a whole lot of research and write a big paper, have somebody read it, and then at the end say, so what?"

"That you have to establish the relevance. You have to establish why it's important for me to read this, why it's important for me to learn about this person's life.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So thinking about the question that your professors asked you so long ago, the so what? Question about Eliza Winston, why do you think it's so important for people to know about Eliza Winston's story?

Christopher Lehman:

It is very much an American story because she was enslaved for most of her life in places that were not only in the South, but would also be considered part of the West. And she was enslaved in Tennessee when Tennessee was a fairly new state. She spent some time in Kentucky. She spent some time in Mississippi when Mississippi was relatively new to the Union. And then of course, she was enslaved in Minnesota when Minnesota's statehood was only two years old. So she's part of this story of Western expansion when the West opens up and land is taken away from indigenous people and given to enslavers, enslavers take enslaved people with them.

And so they're part of this story of Western expansion. And for Minnesota to be so reliant on money from slaveholders just shows that Minnesota is part of the United States. Minnesota becomes a state when the abolition of slavery is still seven years away and you can't be part of a country with slavery and not be affected by it at all. So what I've tried to do with its courage and what slavery's reached before that is just to show what Minnesota's role was in all of this. And my point was never to bash Minnesota or to say that Minnesota is evil, but to say that Minnesota is American and that just because slaveholders didn't have plantations here and grow cotton and so forth doesn't mean that their money didn't build Minnesota like it built the slave holding South.

Chantel Rodríguez: Jason hopes that his fourth grade students will take the lessons from Eliza's story and apply them to life.

Jason Benjamin:

I want students from fourth grade to take away, "Yeah, I know what to do because we worked on this. We were taught this. We learned the stories. I know how to stand up for justice or I know what to do when I see injustice or unfairness." And they kind of do. They're pretty good at it. I've seen it in action.

I want them to understand injustice what that looks like, maybe the history of racism, bad policy, slavery, and the legacy of that, and what that looks like today.

Mary Moore Easter:

*When you can't go forward,
healing is in the past
the old folks used to say.*

I grappled for the gone bodies,
slippery spirits toppling in flailing mist.
I fumbled the air
for some one of them
to right, (write!) me.

Known to be indifferent
when inflicting pain,
the Universe poured forth mercy on me
in black abundance:

Chantel Rodríguez: For over 100 years, Eliza's life story outside of her court case existed in the shadows. The work my guests are doing has brought Eliza into the light. But this process was not without its challenges. Enslaved peoples rarely left behind records, and other source material like deeds and newspapers often stripped enslaved people of their humanity.

My guests Chris, Mary, and Jason have shown that looking outside of the archival box is needed to uncover the personal lives of enslaved, and formally enslaved, people. Eliza was born into enslavement, but after her court case in Minnesota she lived the rest of her days as a *legally* free woman. Thanks to my guests, Eliza is here now, living on in books and the classroom.

Mary Moore Easter:

Eliza is my gift to you
Eliza's trembling heart is my gift for you.
Eliza's risk is my gift for you
Eliza's courage is my gift for you
Eliza's open eye is my gift to you.

Special thanks to Jason Benjamin and his fourth grade class at Burroughs Community School, for carrying Eliza's light into the future.