

Testimony for the House Government & Veterans Affairs Committee

Senate Bill 2232

Pioneer Room

Andrew Alexis Varvel

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Chairman Kasper, Vice Chairman Koppelman, and Members of the
House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee:

My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel. I live in Bismarck.

This testimony is not about support or opposition, but rather about acquiescence or enthusiasm. I neither support nor oppose SB 2232 as written, yet I strongly support our state celebrating Emancipation in some manner. My preference is for our state to do so in a manner that maintains continuity with the better aspects of North Dakota's past.

Emancipation Day has historically come on many days. The District of Columbia celebrates it on April 16. Columbus, Mississippi celebrates it on the Eight o' May. Florida celebrates it on May 20. Maryland celebrates it on November 1. African Creeks celebrate Emancipation Day on August 4, to commemorate the day in 1865 when slaves got emancipated and accepted as full citizens of the Creek Nation. Juneteenth, short for June Nineteenth, is the Texas variant of Emancipation Day. Since World War II, the Texas variant has become increasingly popular due to Texans moving to other states. Indeed, June 19, 1862, is when Emancipation came to federal territories, including Dakota Territory. September 22 and January 1 have also been celebrated as Emancipation Day. Yet, the oldest Emancipation Day celebrated in the United States since before the Civil War began has been on August 1, to commemorate when enslaved people of the West Indies and Canada were freed.

I think the strongest tradition in North Dakota for celebrating Emancipation Day comes on August 1. When customers of Nathan Norris's barber shop on 63½ Broadway in Fargo opened the pages of the August 13th issue of the Wisconsin Afro-American in 1892, they read a front page story about a massive celebration of Emancipation Day held in Rockford, Illinois, on August 1. And yet, I think the most historically important and culturally significant Emancipation Day celebration in this state was on August 3, 1924, at Rice Lake.

During the 1920's, Ward County was home to a resort area called Rice Lake that had become known for boy scout camps, fishing, picnics, political rallies, and baseball.

On July 31, the Berthold Tribune wrote, "Big Negro Emancipation Picnic will be held at Rice Lake Aug. 3." That same day, the Makoti Sentinel and the Ryder News wrote:

"A function very much out of the ordinary has been planned to be held at Rice Lake, Sunday, August 3, to be patterned very much after affairs of that kind which have been held in the south for years, for which the colored folks have furnished much of the entertainment.

The old-fashioned barbecue will be held and plenty of roast ox with buns will be served free. George Beatty, famous Minot chef, will be in charge of the barbecue.

Wm. Groninger, Sr., civil war veteran from DesLacs, will be the speaker of the day. Arrangements are also being made for a well known colored speaker as well as some talented colored singers and players.

The South Prairie band will play and a baseball game will be played between the Bismarck league team and Karlsruhe. Watch for posters."

This mattered when the Ku Klux Klan was expanding its power base in North Dakota.

One year later, Era Bell Thompson enrolled at the University of North Dakota. Decades later, she would recount the following conversation about Grand Forks from Fall 1925.

"You won't find many places in this town that will take you," said Mrs. Walker.

"They're awfully prejudiced here."

"But why?" I asked.

"I don't know. Used to be lots of colored folks here, nice people with families, but they all moved away. We and Jordans are the only ones left, except a few stray men. Wasn't for Jim's job on the railroad we wouldn't be here either."

Pages 169-170, *American Daughter*, by Era Bell Thompson.

Census figures corroborate Era Bell Thompson's story. Black people were emptying out of Grand Forks and Fargo, cities with a strong Klan presence. President Kane of UND had regularly attended the church sermons of Halsey Ambrose, the local Klan organizer.

These Emancipation Day celebrations at Rice Lake happened at a time when the Non Partisan League's candidate for governor, Arthur Sorlie, had become the rope for a tug-of-war between the Non Partisan League and the Ku Klux Klan. The NPL expected a reputed Klansman to support Robert LaFollette for President, a man who had denounced the Klan. The Non Partisan League had scheduled a massive rally on August 10, 1924 featuring Senator Ladd, Congressman Sinclair, and Arthur Sorlie – after Emancipation Day had been celebrated one week earlier at the same venue. It was as if Emancipation Day festivities had been intended as a political maneuver to ruin Mr. Sorlie's reputation among Klansmen.

The important thing about this celebration is that Ward County's black community has remained intact ever since May 1884, two years before Ward County's earliest newspaper.

August First comes on a Sunday in 2024. It is my hope that the first Sunday of August three years from now will feature baseball games and barbecue picnics throughout North Dakota to celebrate Emancipation Day to honor the centenary of that picnic and baseball game.

And yet, if we are truly serious about celebrating black agency in the armed struggle to end slavery, the best day to celebrate would be September 11. September 11, 1851 was a day that I would like to call Christiana Day, or rather, the Day of the Christiana Resistance.

On that day, Edward Gorsuch and raiding party that included a professional slave catcher deputized as a federal marshal descended upon Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Armed with the Fugitive Slave Act, soon before dawn, they barged into the house of William Parker, a local abolitionist and militia leader who had himself escaped from slavery.

An argument ensued. Edward Gorsuch demanded his escaped slaves, while William Parker refused to cooperate. The argument escalated until it turned into a brawl. Shots were fired, prompting Eliza Parker to blow her horn to alert the neighborhood militia to their aid. Friends and neighbors of the Parker household came from miles around to help.

According to William Parker's narrative published in the March 1866 issue of *The Atlantic*, Edward Gorsuch had said, "My property I will have or I'll breakfast in hell."

He got his wish. His entourage fled the scene in disarray.

Dozens of men, black and white alike, would be hauled before federal court to face treason charges. The first man to be tried for treason was Castner Hanway. He had merely refused orders from the Gorsuch family to let himself get conscripted into enslaving his neighbors, something he felt was morally wrong. Because it failed to dawn on the prosecutors that black people were perfectly capable of military leadership and exercising their God given right to bear arms to defend their liberty, prosecutors presumed that Castner Hanway had to have been the leader of the rioters because he was white and he was there.

The jury of men from Pennsylvania refused to convict him.

The immediate result of this melee was a reign of terror in Lancaster County. Gangs of slave catchers prowled the countryside and many black people had to flee for their lives. Some escaped slaves were handed over by the federal court in Philadelphia to slave masters in the South. William Parker, aided by Frederick Douglass, fled to Canada.

This incident was variously called the "Christiana Riot", "The Christiana Tragedy", or the "Christiana Outrage". Black people have since called it "The Christiana Resistance".

That resistance of September 11, 1851, became an inspiration to the cause of Abolition.

When Eliza Parker blew her horn, resistance against the Fugitive Slave Act began in earnest. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, she showed that the right to bear arms is not – and never has been – a white privilege but rather a universal right. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, white men refused to let themselves get conscripted by slave catchers to enslave their neighbors. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, she shattered the myth that black people could never lead anything of consequence. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, abolitionists, black and white, became inspired to act. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, militias called the Wide Awakes sprang up throughout the North to defend their neighbors from kidnappers. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, Hans Christian Heg would become inspired to lead Wisconsin's Wide Awake militia and fight and die in a war to end slavery. When Eliza Parker blew her horn, the walls of legalized slavery came tumbling down.

September 11, 1851 was the dawn when Eliza Parker blew her horn. September 11, 1851 was not merely the dawn of a new day. September 11, 1851 became the dawn of a new era. Much more needs to be done since that day of resistance, for on September 11, 2001, other slavers attacked Americans with the express purpose of forcing us all into slavery.

To celebrate the Christiana Resistance is to celebrate black agency, for that resistance was led by black people. It is to celebrate black women, for it was Eliza Parker who blew her horn to alert her neighbors. It is to celebrate the right to bear arms, for it is that right that protects liberty against slavers. It is to celebrate the ongoing resistance against slavery, for the events of that day inspired a generation to resist likewise. From the slave markets of Da'esh to the concentration camps of Xinjiang Province, we must not look away now.

Whatever we decide here at the North Dakota Legislature will send a message to the rest of America. Some people want us to celebrate June 19 as a state holiday. I would respectfully prefer that our state celebrate Emancipation Day on August 1 and Christiana Day on September 11. Whatever you decide on this particular legislation, please let us all celebrate emancipation from slavery, the fight against slavery, and the right to bear arms.

Thank you. I welcome questions from the committee.

Andrew Alexis Varvel
2630 Commons Avenue
Bismarck, ND 58503
701-255-6639
mr.a.alexis.varvel@gmail.com