

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

# MIZZOU

## Understanding History, Understanding Today

Corps of Discovery lecturer discusses slavery and homicide in antebellum Boone County.



James S. Rollins' Columbia home, nicknamed La Grange, was the site of a family portrait circa 1870 that included a black child, perhaps a household servant or servant's child, standing left of the seated and bearded Rollins. Rollins was one of the richest and largest

slaveholders in Boone County in the 1850s and early 1860s, yet he was also a Union sympathizer. As a United States congressman, he supported the bill that on Jan. 31, 1865, became the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. Rollins was instrumental in establishing the University of Missouri in Columbia in 1839. When the Civil War took a toll on university enrollment and funding, Congressman Rollins helped pass legislation that financially strengthened it. Because of his dedication to MU, the Board of Curators passed a resolution in 1872 giving him the honorary title of “Father of the University of Missouri.” Rollins died in 1888. From left, the photograph shows Curtis Burnam Rollins, George Bingham Rollins, Flora Rollins, Frank Blair Rollins, Edward Tutt Rollins, James S. Rollins, Sallie Rodes Rollins, Mary Rollins (wife of James), Mary Elizabeth Rollins, Laura Hickman Rollins Hockaday, Irvine Oty Hockaday. Photo courtesy of the Ruth Rollins Westfall Photograph Collection, The State Historical Society of Missouri.

*Story by Mark Barna*

*Reprinted with permission from Mizzou Weekly*

*Published May 21, 2013*

**I**n a mid 19th-century photograph, James S. Rollins, known as the “Father of the University of Missouri,” is shown in profile seated in front of his white Columbia home with his family surrounding him. Behind him and his family, peeking from the shadows, is a black child.

Frank O. Bowman III, a professor at the School of Law, lingered over the photograph displayed on screens March 12 at his 21st Century Corps of Discovery Lecture in Reynolds Alumni Center.

Rollins served on the Board of Curators off and on from 1847 to 1886, and while a Missouri congressman in the late 1860s, he helped ensure that the university remained in Columbia. Rollins was also one of the wealthiest and largest slaveholders in Boone County, a major slaveholding Missouri county in antebellum America. Bowman speculated that the child in the tattered photograph might have been a servant in Rollins’ home.

Bowman's lecture helped illuminate a dark paradox within state history: Missouri was ostensibly Unionist, yet many residents owned slaves. The professor's talk also suggested how far the university has come in creating an open and racially diverse campus.

Addressing about 200 students, staff and faculty, Bowman said that mid-Missouri culture "is a legacy of the slave economy on which it was built." Understanding this history aids in understanding state culture today. "Without history, we have no memory," he said. "Those who know history are better armed for the present."

## **Antebellum Missouri**

The Corps of Discovery lecture series is named after the 1803-04 Lewis and Clark expedition, which followed arguably America's greatest land grab, the Louisiana Purchase. The explorers' goal was increasing knowledge, according to the Office of the Chancellor website. And a goal of the lecture series, now in its ninth year, is to "help us understand ourselves," Chancellor Brady J. Deaton said at the event.

Bowman turned his attention to Boone County's past after receiving a ticket for a traffic violation five years ago. When he lost in traffic court, he opted for community service, which turned out to be at the Boone County Historical Museum in Columbia. There he combed through county court cases from 1850 to

1875.

In county records, combined with his reading contemporary Columbia newspaper clippings, Bowman discovered a Boone County that embraced slaveholding, guns and frontier justice. In 17 homicide trials in which the defendant claimed self-defense, 15 cases resulted in acquittal, which implies a legal system amenable to citizens taking the law into their own hands, Bowman said. Overall, 60 percent of homicide court cases ended this way.

By 1860, Boone County had a population of about 19,000, of which 5,034 were slaves, the third highest number in 114 Missouri counties. William Switzler, founder of the *Columbia Statesman* in 1843 and a university curator, was a slaveholder who wrote anti-abolition editorials, Bowman said. As of 1860, Odon Guitar — a Columbia lawyer, university curator and, in 1852, first president of the university's alumni association — owned seven household slaves, according to some accounts.

In a region where blacks were considered chattel, they were also afforded due process in court. The reason was slaveholder self-interest, Bowman said. “Black defendants received the benefit of representation before the court that poor whites of the period could not afford because slaves were valuable property,” Bowman wrote in a 2010 article in *The Marquette Law Review*. “They belonged in law to relatively affluent whites with the resources and incentive to ensure that their property was not damaged or

destroyed by hanging, castration, imprisonment [or] flogging.”

Despite due process, the scales of justice tipped precipitously toward whites. “It’s a different kind of law with different suppositions and a different type of infrastructure,” Bowman said of justice then. “For a slave, self-defense [in a homicide] was no defense.”

Bowman sketched the political and racial climate of the era in Missouri. The unofficial start of the Civil War was 1854, he said, when skirmishes broke out on the Missouri-Kansas border, as Missouri slaveholders tried to intimidate Kansas into becoming a slave state. (The antebellum battles lived on in the sports rivalry between the Missouri Tigers and the Kansas Jayhawks.) In the years surrounding the Civil War, mid-Missouri was called “Little Dixie” because it was settled mostly by immigrants from the slave-holding South.

Yet Columbia stood somewhat apart. As home to MU and being near the state capital of Jefferson City, it was relatively “cosmopolitan,” Bowman wrote in *The Marquette Law Review* article. In the early 1860s, forward thinkers including Rollins helped expunge Missouri’s secessionist leanings, and “Missouri’s allegiance to the Union was precariously upheld,” he wrote.

## **Diversity at MU**

At lecture’s end, Bowman called for more community

efforts to help those in need, or as he put it — “to help our brothers and sisters who still struggle in the shadows.”

Among MU’s efforts in the past were launching a diversity initiative two decades ago and the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative in 2006.

Today the campus has numerous student, staff and faculty diversity programs, Chief Diversity Officer Noor Azizan-Gardner said. Students of various ethnicities also spend hundreds of hours in schools as mentors of underrepresented ethnicities: African-American, Hispanic and Native American.

“Our campus culture is respectful and inclusive,” Azizan-Gardner said. “We encourage meaningful diversity, which happens when people meet and engage with one another. It is really exciting to create an atmosphere where there is engagement.”

**Topics:** [Academics](#), [Alumni](#), [Business](#), [Law and Public Affairs](#),  
[Community](#), [History](#), [Research](#), [Web Exclusives](#)  
**Tags:** [Faculty](#)

---

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone:  
573-882-5916 | Email: [mizzou@missouri.edu](mailto:mizzou@missouri.edu)

*Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the  
Mizzou Alumni Association.*

© 2019 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and [other  
copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and veteran employer](#).