



Northern Slave, Black Dakota: The Life and Times of Joseph Godfrey

Walt Bachman

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Separated from his mother when their master sold her, Joseph Godfrey grew up in bondage serving Minnesota's fur-trade elite. Escaping his masters' beatings, Godfrey sought refuge among the Dakota Indians who had befriended him as a child slave.

Conscripted to join Dakota warriors in the U.S. Dakota War of 1862, Godfrey became the first of hundreds of men tried by a military court when the six-week war ended. Commander Henry Sibley, who created the court, was one of Godfrey's former masters. Sibley approved the death sentences of Godfrey and 302 Dakota soldiers.

In this riveting biography, historian and retired trial lawyer Walt Bachman untangles the thorny questions that tangle Godfrey's story: How was he enslaved in free territory? Did his testimony send 38 Dakota men, including his father in law, to the gallows? Bachman argues that the 1862 Dakota War trials that ended with the largest mass execution in U.S. history, were both more just, and more unfair, than we've ever guessed.

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