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Cold Spring's Slave Connection: Woman Uses Profits from Slave Trade to Develop Central Minnesota City

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The Jodon family of Virginia--came to Minnesota in the 1850s and invested in land in central Minnesota. They are best known for the house built by Zachariah Jodon for his family in Little Falls--a Greek Revival-type dwelling that still stands in the town today. But his sister-in-law Sarah Felton-Jodon joined three men in establishing the town of Cold Spring, and her financial investment brought money from slavery into the new town. Many enslavers from southern states purchased real estate in Minnesota in the antebellum era, because the land had significant monetary value. Some enslavers came to Minnesota just to buy the land they wanted and then return to the South, but others—like Sarah Felton-Jodon—came to Minnesota to permanently settle after having freed or sold away their enslaved people.

Sarah Felton was born in western Virginia in 1817 to parents who did not enslave anyone, but she married into slavery when she wed Benjamin Jodon in the 1840s. At the time Benjamin and his siblings resided with their mother Susan in Virginia, and Sarah joined the household after her marriage. Zachariah was the eldest sibling, but Benjamin was the only enslaver in the family as of 1850. He held an African American woman and her three children captive in the family home in Virginia.

When the matriarch Susan died in 1853, the Jodons moved away from Virginia and settled in Minnesota. They lived initially in Ramsey County, and Zachariah married his second wife shortly after moving there. Laura Jodon--Zachariah's daughter from his first marriage--wed a man named Joseph J. Gibson at around the same time. Then the family separated to different households throughout Minnesota: Zachariah to Little Falls, Laura in Stearns County, and Benjamin in St. Anthony.

In 1857 Sarah Felton-Jodon bought land independently of her husband. She and Gibson teamed with St. Anthony residents Seth Turner and Richard Strout to plat and establish Cold Spring in Stearns County. At the time Sarah and Benjamin kept an African American from the slave state of Maryland in their home in St. Anthony. Even if the couple had not enslaved anyone in Minnesota, part of the money they had made from buying and selling people in Virginia still comprised Sarah's share of the purchase of Cold Spring. Page fifty-nine of *Stearns County, Minnesota Deeds Book G* lists the deed for the sale.

By the time Sarah co-founded Cold Spring, residents of central Minnesota had already grown accustomed to the presence of enslavers. St. Cloud, Minnesota's co-founder Sylvanus Lowry bought the northern one-third of that city in 1855, and at his invitation six of his slaveholding acquaintances from Tennessee purchased \$12,000 of land from him in the summer of 1856. Lowry then used the money to start an express company, and he built warehouses for local entrepreneurs to rent for their businesses. *Stearns County, Minnesota Deeds Book A* contains deeds from 1856 between Lowry and his southern acquaintances.

Some of Lowry's acquaintances later moved permanently to St. Cloud, and their proslavery politics influenced local government until the Civil War. Therefore, they made central Minnesota hospitable for later enslavers like Sarah and her husband. Abolitionists such as Jane Grey Swisshelm lived in the area. However, local supporters of the wealthy enslavers outnumbered slavery's opponents. St. Cloud was not unusual in this regard, because Minnesota's

communities by the Mississippi River attracted southern tourists in the summers and welcomed their money—even when they brought enslaved people with them.

The Jodon siblings did not stay long in central Minnesota. Benjamin and Sarah relocated to Chicago by 1863, Zachariah went to Ohio, and Laura returned to the South to West Virginia. However, Benjamin and Sarah made their mark in Stearns County, because money from their household with enslaved African Americans helped to make Cold Spring possible.