



BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

BURNS LAKE &  
JAMES  
SHEPHERD  
WHAT'S THE TRUE STORY?

THE LEGEND vs. THE REALITY

For generations, the residents of Burns Township and the City of Nowthen have retold the well-known story of a Black man who lived on the South side of the third lakeshore of Burns Lake around the time of the Civil War. Like many local stories, the details varied slightly – some said he didn't live there long, others that he stayed for years. Some said he married, others that he remained single. Some thought he was part of the underground railroad; others said he arrived later. Everyone seemed to agree, however, that the man lived as a vital part of the community, helping where he could and being the kind of person you could count on.

He seemed to leave without a word, but the community continued to remember his residence on the lake by using a popular racial slur to reference the body of water – not just as a local nickname, but on maps printed at the time. As they said, not as an insult, but to honor him because their ancestors claimed he used the word to describe himself. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Burns Township was called upon to change the lake's name. After several iterations and intense discussions, the community decided on Burns Lake, which is still used today.

MEET JAMES SHEPHERD

The most likely namesake for the lake is James Shepherd, though details about him shift. He appears first with an "M" for Mulatto and in a later census with a "B" indicating Black. He was definitely born in the south, but there is no agreement on which state. Who he was before he came to Anoka is unknown due to the hundreds of "James Shepherds" (various spellings) in military and slave records.

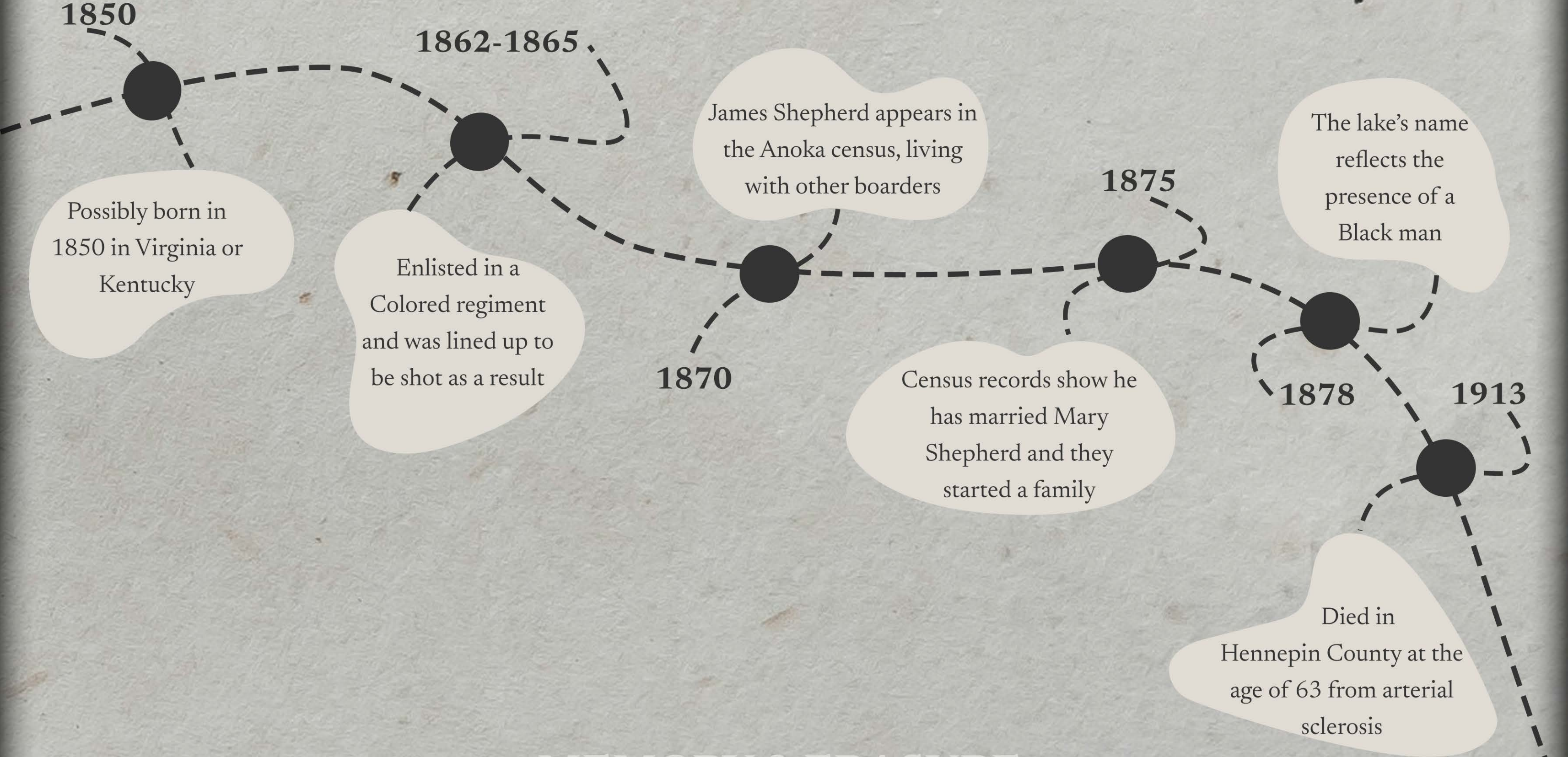


Documentation shapes our history and memories

Families numbered	Name of every person whose residence was in this family on the 1st of May, 1875.	Age	Sex	Color	Marriage	Place of Birth	Place of Birth
1	L. Gilbert	20	M	W		Ill.	Ill.
2	H. C. McAlister	20	M	W		Ill.	Ill.
3	H. C. McAlister	19	M	W		Ill.	Ill.
4	Edw. H. Gill	24	M	M		Ill.	Ill.
5	James Shepherd	22	F	M		Ill.	Ill.
6	Mary Shepherd	4	F	M		Ill.	Ill.
7	Robert Shepherd	1	F	M		Ill.	Ill.
8	John Shepherd	18	F	W		Ill.	Ill.
9	Oliver Debow	29	M	W		Ill.	Ill.
10	John Moulton						

1875 CENSUS, ANOKA

HERE'S WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW



MEMORY & ERASURE  
WHEN STORIES MERGE

History is not just what happened – it's *what is remembered* and *how it is told*. It's who claims the power to recognize and preserve the event and people. James' real name survives only through fragmented records and scattered memories. Did he conceal his identity, or has time concealed it for him?

Conflicting stories and memories, complicated by the passage of time, make deciphering myth from reality difficult. This is particularly true when the myth is beloved and a part of the community's identity.

ONE ACCOUNT claims he arrived as the slave of a settler named Henry Gamm.  
ANOTHER WONDERED if he fled to Canada with Rubious T., who deserted the war.  
YET A THIRD CLAIMS Burns existed as a stop on the Underground Railroad, where enslaved people could find food on their way to Canada.  
Perhaps the man stayed for a time or acted as a conductor.

THIS LEADS US TO A LARGER QUESTION:  
IS THERE A TRUE STORY BEYOND OUR MEMORY?



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