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Alumnus Discovers Possible First Black Playwright

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Research by Eric Gardner '89 has uncovered what may be the first play published by an African-American writer.

Gardner will share his discovery in an article titled “Forgotten Manuscripts: William Jay Greenly’s Antebellum Temperance Drama,” which will appear in the next issue of *African American Review*. He is professor, Braun Fellow and chair of English at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan.

In addition to being a possible first, Gardner said Greenly’s work, *The Three Drunkards*, helps in understanding the wide scope of such literature.

“Several critics and students assume that early black literature consists solely of stories of the South that were published in New York, Boston or Philadelphia,” Gardner said. Greenly, who was living as a free man in Indiana when he published the book of plays in 1858, breaks that mold.

“That presence in an unexpected place suggests that early black print culture was much more diverse in terms of location than we’ve been led to think,” said Gardner. The play’s temperance theme also shows the diversity of early black literature. “[The play] is further evidence that the North’s free African Americans were involved in a rich range of antebellum moral reform activities,” he said.

Gardner’s early work and teaching emphasizes a broad look at cross-racial American literature and culture, but in recent years he has become more interested in early black literature and recovery efforts.

“I love the field because it is both mature and deeply nascent: mature in that skilled critics and historians have been working long and hard on early black literature for decades... but also nascent in that we’re only fully beginning to understand the richness of the subject, still recovering authors and texts, still arguing about the shape of the field,” Gardner said. “It makes for lively discussion — and it is so exciting to start each project knowing that it will teach me something new.”

While at Illinois Wesleyan, Gardner kept busy working at *The Argus*; the literary magazine, then known as *still*; and an on-campus food service job. He also met his wife Jodie '91 while a student.

He majored in English and minored in history and American studies.

“Certainly Bob Bray’s early instruction in critical reading and recovery, Pam Muirhead’s on African American lit, and Paul Bushnell and Mike Young’s on historical method all shaped what I’m doing now,” Gardner said. “I was well prepared for my graduate work and beyond.”

Gardner’s past work, including *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West* (Mississippi 2007), focuses on returning texts and authors to scholarly and classroom discussion. In October 2009, he will publish *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*, which argues that scholars should rethink their assumptions about such literature.

“In all, I’m most proud of the work I’ve done that helps offer a base for other scholars to build on,” said Gardner.