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2-1-1951

# In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

Recently, Palmer Lee Hamilton, now a practising dentist in Brooklyn, N. Y., wrote me, asking that I write of the Negro's contribution to Cleveland county.

When I read that suggestion, my first thought was that, although no people in all the world had ever made such remarkable advancement in so short a time as has the Negro race since its release from slavery 85 years ago, yet in the brief period from 1865 to about 1900 (these articles do not contemplate events later than the turn of the century) there was little that had happened in that short period that I could write of as the Negro's contribution to the county.

Fortunately, I thought again, and realized that although the Negro might have had small opportunity for self-expression during those early years, yet, without the physical toil and mass labor of the black man, there might not have been a town of Shelby or a county of Cleveland.

## THE DIGNITY OF LABOR

In thinking about those laborers—including the black man—who have contributed their share of sweat, blood and tears toward the upbuilding of this lovely Southland of ours, I came across "The Tolling of Felix," a book written by Henry Van Dyke.

According to the story, which occurred more than 1800 years ago, Felix, a very religious man, longed earnestly for a vision of the face of Christ. He sought this vision with fasting and prayer; he sought it in the desert; he sought it in shrines and churches, but without success.

In order to live, Felix got a job in a quarry near the river where, swinging a heavy mallet, he helped break stone for the building of a city. In this city, churches were built where men might worship God; school buildings were erected that children might be educated for better citizenship; roads were laid out and surfaced over which produce could be carried to market and sold that people might have food, manufactories were erected which provided means of livelihood for the citizens, and products for the markets; homes were built where men and women might live and love and raise their families.

When Felix saw the completed city that had been built on the foundations of stone he had helped to quarry, he realized that through labor and service to mankind he had found Christ, even though he could not see his face. Looking at the completed city, he exclaimed:

"They who tread the path of

labor follow where Christ's feet have trod. They who work without complaining, do the holy will of God . . . all this mighty work is ours! . . . every mason in the quarry, every builder on the shore, every chopper in the pine-grove, every raftsmen at the oar, hewing wood and drawing water, splitting stones and breaking sod,

"All the dusty ranks of labor in the regiment of God, march together toward His triumph, do the tasks his hands prepare, honest toil is holy service, faithful work is praise and prayer.""

Even as Felix toiled, so has the black man toiled and labored in Cleveland county. Among these slave workers of earlier days were skilled artisans. They made bricks and built our Court House, and other buildings; they cut trees to make the timbers for our homes; they dug tracks for the railroad, and "the dusty ranks of labor" helped build the physical part of our county and our towns.

## FREEDMAN'S ASSOCIATION

In 1866, a Freedmen's Association made up of ex-slaves of the more prominent and progressive families from the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama and

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Georgia, was organized with headquarters at Fiske University. There were a number of members of this Association in Shelby, among whom were: Henry Johnson, Dan Wilkins, Elick Jennings, and John Bridges. This Association established a little settlement in the north-eastern section of the city, which is now known as Freedmon.

**WENT TO CHURCH TOGETHER**

In those early days, this section was sparsely settled, and there were not a great many churches, but the black folks and the white folks all belonged to the same church. Each church was built with a gallery especially to seat the slaves. When the black people got religion they joined the white folks' church and were baptized. The Negroes used the surnames of their masters.

After freedom was declared the black were told they could continue to attend the white folks church where they held their membership if they wanted to; but the majority of the black people preferred to have their own places of worship, and their own preachers and exhorters.

**BRUSH ARBORS**

Sometimes this place of worship was merely a brush arbor set up near a spring where outdoor services could be held on

Sundays when the weather permitted.

Mrs. Bertha Burchett Bridges recalls that two of the early preachers who used these brush arbors were Rev. Samuel Hunter and Rev. Samuel Fox (Charlie Fox's father). She also recalls that her own father, Jackson Burchett, taught school; and that Jack Wellmon of the Fallston community taught school, and also taught music, and had singing classes.

A few of the Negroes did continue as members of the white churches. I am told that in the 1880's, and perhaps as late as 1890, Oliver Roberts, a highly respected Negro, retained his membership in the Methodist church when it was located where the Webb theatre is now, and that—on occasion—he was called on by the local minister to lead the prayer.

**BELOVED NEGRO MAMMIES**

A contribution made by the black woman, that cannot be evaluated, is that of the beloved Negro mammy of the Southland. These Negro women nursed the white children of their masters, lived with them and loved them, and were in return loved by the white folks.

Some years ago, group of Southern people planned to erect in Washington, D.C., a monument to the Negro mammies of the South. But the National Ass'n for the Advancement of Colored People refused to permit the monument to be erected.

It appears that Rev. J. W.

Roberts and his wife, Rev. Ida Roberts, who is a licensed evangelist, were among the early local religious and educational leaders of their race. Together, they taught and preached for more than fifty years, more than twenty years of that time in Shelby, and Cleveland county. Mrs. Roberts also taught music.

They have six successful children. One daughter, John Ida Jiggetts, is a social worker in New York City. She has just had a book published, entitled "A History of the Jewish People."

John recalls that when he was a little boy four years old, he, with more than forty other slaves, stood in the yard of their master, Billy Roberts, who lived a few miles east of Shelby, and saw a troop of Yankee cavalry ride up. These Yankees told the assembled Negroes they were free. Evidently, this was a part of group coming from Lincolnton to Shelby to set up an Army of Occupation.

John got a little schooling at Compact Academy, and in 1876 he with Alice Roberts, Lavinia Forney, and George Martin went to Fayetteville, N.C., to attend a State Normal School for Negroes.

I regret that I have been unable to get information about the early churches: A Methodist Church—called Roberts Tabernacle in honor of Rev. J. W. Roberts—was built on Pinkney Street in 1927. He was pastor of this church for more than 20 years.

I am not herein discussing Rev.

A. W. Foster and numerous other competent leaders and educators who have come to this county since 1900. This article deals with the early days.

**FARMERS OF THE 1890'S**

The type of Negro citizen found in this county is (as a rule) very much higher than is found in many other sections of the state. I do not know all the industrious, hard-working men and women who owned their own farms more than fifty years ago, but I mention a few. They are: Eli Roberts, Elick Jennings, George Borders, Jim and John Wells, Oliver Roberts, Lewis Hardin, Bert Borders, Ben Carson (who married Mary Dixon) John Border of the Kings Mountain section, and Mason Roberts.

I mention here only a few of the well-known hardworking Negroes of an earlier day. Zeke Shiver, Jack Beam with his cart; John-the-barber peddling ice cream Bill Hoskins a fixture at T. W. Ebeltoff's book store; Joe Telescope with his telescope he charged a' nickle to look through; Wash Webb working with tobacco; John Love and his restaurant back of where Cohen's now stands; and Vance Jolly.

Among the cooks and nurses were: Dinah Roberts, Mat Wilson, Kate Hunter, "big Mag" Wells, Anna Palmer, Mary Turner, Mag Williams, Eliza Elliott, Maria Jennings, and "Mammy Lou".

John Bridges, A Batist preacher, attained some prominence in the state as a preacher. For a while he preached in Boston

Mass.

Watt Elliott, the barber, who died in 1892, must have been a most unusual person. The Shelby Aurora carried a long story about him at the top of the column, and said of him: "Watt Elliott, the most popular colored man in Shelby whom all classes, black and white, respected, is dead. . . under his colored cuticle there beat a warm, generous, and noble heart . . . We need more like him."

Sometime since, I mentioned a group of Negroes who worked at a fire in 1889. They were: Cal McBrayer, Milliard Moore, Dock Hopkins, Zero Ross, Sam Hunter, Watt Roberts, Bill Simmons, Frank Miller, John Homesley, Rufe Hopkins, Jacob Jones, Matt Guyton, Wash Webb, Will Whitfield and Jim Stewart. There was friendship and kindness between the black folks and white folks in those days.

#### **DR. LATTIMORE IN WHO'S WHO**

Only persons who have genuine merit are listed in the book, "Who Who". Dr. John Aaron Cicero Lattimore, 75-year-old physician of Louisville, Ky., who formerly lived in the Lawndale community, is listed therein as a physician and civic leader among the Negroes in Louisville. He was awarded a certificate of merit by the U. S. Government for medical work among the soldiers.

#### **NEGRO SCHOOLS**

The first Negro Academy in this county was Compact, established in 1872. The Negroes responsible for this school were: Peter Forney, George Roberts, Miles Tracy, Caleb Roberts, and E. Hinton. Hill Culp was the first teacher.

Douglas Academy, at Lawndale, was established in 1898 as a boarding school, partly through the efforts of John and Jim Wells, two successful Negroes of upper Cleveland. John gave the first five acres of land toward establishing this school. Mrs. Prudent, a white woman from the North, contributed generously. One of the successful graduates of Douglas is Rev. Charley Hall, who has written a book.

In an issue of the Star published in 1897, there is reference to a two-teacher school for 200 Negro children in Shelby. The school of today in Shelby is quite different. The new Negro schoolhouse pictured elsewhere in this paper is the finest in the county.

There are, altogether, including Shelby and Kings Mtn. 26 Negro schools in the county, with 132 teachers for the more than 4,000 pupils enrolled. The highest paid Negro teacher in the county schools receives \$2,754.00 for nine months work. The highest paid Negro principal in the county schools received \$3,716.00 for ten months work. All teachers are paid by the State of North Carolina according to education and experience. The State fixes the scale of pay. The teachers in the Shelby school (Cleveland Training) are paid according to the same salary scale as are the county teachers, but with an additional ten percent added by the City.

In recent years a number of Cleveland Training School graduates have acquired Master's Degrees entitling them to higher pay. Among those graduates are: Lida S. Galbraith, Ezra Bridges, Virginia Byers, Riley Cabaniss, Togo, Cabaniss, Proodus Howell, Joseph Oates, Adolphus Foster, B. D. Roberts and Boyd Catherwaite, who is now professor of higher mathematics at Johnson C. Smith, in Charlotte.

Two other successful graduates of Cleveland Training school are Capt. Richard Spikes, Jr., who is with the regular Army in Germany, and Palmer Lee Hamilton, D. D. S. of Brooklyn.

As the Negro's contribution in the Revolutionary War, more than 15 Negroes took part in the fighting of the Battle of Kings Mountain, and acquitted themselves creditably.

My memories go back more than fifty years to the "old time darkies" whom I have been privileged to know. Folks like "Aunt Dilly" Chambers, and "Uncle Jesse" Coxon (A godly man), and many others. Ladies and gentlemen in the true sense, they knew the value of politeness in their relations with white people.

There are thousands of hard-working Negro men and women of an earlier day whose names I would like to mention, but space does not permit.

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