

# Mary Stowers – A Long Lost Mother

By Jerry Long



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 6 May 1874, p.1:**

## A Long Lost Mother.

[Evansville Journal.]

Twenty-eight years ago Mary Stowers, a slave woman, belonging to Harrison Stowers, of Owensboro, was sold to parties living in Shelby county, Kentucky, and was with her little girl of two years taken away, leaving her boy, Willis Green, then four years old, with her former master, John Stowers, who had sold her to his brother. For some time after her sale she managed to send word to her boy occasionally, but after a couple years she was sold to the dreaded negro-traders, and was taken south, after which all trace of her was lost. The boy Willis grew to manhood, and by the events of the war became free and came to Evansville. During all these years, not having heard of his mother, he supposed her dead, but her memory was still bright, and he often thought of her as she must have suffered in the cotton-field under the lash of the cruel taskmaster.

On Monday he was almost electrified at being told that an old woman, claiming to be his mother, was in the city in search of him, but the lapse of time had been so great that he was incredulous, but faint as the hope was, he determined to follow it, and see if it should prove delusive. He went, as directed, to the house of his uncle Ed. Davis, and there met an old woman who clasped him in her arms, and wept over him as her son. To test the genuineness of her claim, Willis asked, "How do you know I am' your son?" And the old woman gave her reasons, detailing facts that were known to him as having occurred. He then showed her his right hand, and asked, "Can you tell how I lost that little finger?"

"Yes," replied she, "your young master cut it off while chopping a trough," and Willis accepted the evidence as much stronger than that of the traditional strawberry mark.

The aged woman, after being sold to Alabama, was placed on a cotton farm, and worked as a field hand until the close of the war extinguished slavery. As soon as free, she determined to return, and worked to that end, but ill health several times interfered to prevent, and it was not until two weeks ago that she found her way to Lewisport, and subsequently to Owensboro, where she heard that her daughter was dead and her son, and brother, (Ed. Davis), were in Evansville, and now, after a separation of twenty-eight years, the old and broken down woman has found her son, who rejoices at the reunion, and welcomes her to his humble home.

[This article was published in the Evansville Journal, Evansville, IN, 29 April 1874, p.8.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 4 July 1976,  
Bicentennial Section, Part III, p.13:**

## Mary Stower's journey illustrates slavery's evils

No one, other than an Evansville Journal reporter, ever wrote much about Mary Stowers of Owensboro, but her life, even more than Josiah Henson's, was a testimony to the evils of slavery.

In 1846, her master, Harrison Stowers of Owensboro, sold Mary and her two-year-old daughter to a man in Shelby County. When she was taken away from Owensboro, Mary was forced to leave behind her only son, Willis Green, then four years old.

A couple of years later she was sold again, this time to a slave dealer who took her south on speculation. Eventually she was a field hand on an Alabama cotton plantation. She remained there until the end of the Civil War.

She had heard nothing from her boy in more than 15 years but Mary Stowers set out across more than 1,500 miles of dirt roads for Owensboro to find her boy.

Ill health slowed her down and it was spring of 1874 before she finally reached Owensboro.

In Owensboro, she was told her son and her brother, Ed Davis, had gone to Evansville after the war.

Mary continued her journey, finally reaching her brother's house.

After all those years, Green had assumed his mother was dead.

So he put her to the test. Holding up his right hand, Green asked, "Can you tell me how I lost that little finger?"

The old woman had no trouble remembering, "Your young master cut it off while chopping a trough."

Mary Stowers' journey had ended.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 3 August 1900, p.2:**

**FORMER SLAVE**  
**Who Obtained an Education and Studied Medicine.**

Dr. Willis S. Green, colored, the "Baptisttown surgeon," of Evansville, is in the city visiting his sister, who is the wife of Albert McFarland, a well known colored man of 813 West Third street. Mr. Green is well known in Evansville as an expert in smallpox, and is also a surgeon of some ability. In slave times he was owned by the late Harrison Stowers, of Daviess county, and during the war ran away from his master. After the war was over he concluded to make a doctor of himself, and by much toil managed to secure an education and study medicine. He is a successful practitioner and a man of influence among his race. He expects to spend a few days in Owensboro and meet some of his old friends, both white and colored.



**Evansville Courier, Evansville, IN, Monday, 26 March 1900, p.3:**

**SLAVE** How Dr. Green  
Came Up in Life **PHYSICIAN**

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His Escape—Office Boy in Doctor's Office—How He  
Learned His Letters—Smallpox  
Expert



“If Tom McGee can become a doctor I can. He hasn’t had any more advantage than I have.”

That thought came to Willis S. Green, an unlettered runaway slave working as a laborer on the Jacobs farm near Evansville. Years afterwards he realized his dream after surmounting difficulties that would have appalled ninety-nine men out of every hundred. And that he was enabled to do so he owes to three of the men whose names are most honored in the annals of Vanderburg county’s medical history. They are Dr. E. T. Runcie, Dr. G. B. Walker and Dr. A. M. Owen, all dead and gone but their memories are alive in the heart of this the first colored physician in southern Indiana. Their pictures occupy the place of honor in his office and he delights to talk of them and their kindness to him in his struggles.

There are few better known characters in Evansville than Dr. Green “the Baptistown surgeon,” and yet few even of those who have known him ever since his advent into the city nearly forty years ago are aware of the obstacles he has surmounted. Born in slavery near Owensboro, Ky., on the Harrison Stowers farm in 1842 he remained there until 1863 when the desire for freedom which had long burned in his veins burst into flame and he fled to Evansville.

As a free man his first work was for a contractor named Harvey, famed locally as a cistern builder and for ten years the future physician laid bricks in the ground.

When he fled from his master the slave left a wife in bondage. He tasted of the sweets of freedom and wanted his wife to share them. During the summer of 1863 he made his way back to his old home in an attempt to spirit his wife away. He found the task impossible and set out in the night to return to Evansville in a skiff. He pulled until he fell asleep exhausted. When he awoke near morning he made for what he thought was the Indiana shore. While he slept his boat had become turned and he landed in Kentucky instead of Indiana. He met a white man and asked him how far it was to Newburg. The man was Bill Stone’s overseer and Green was soon under arrest. He begged to be allowed to work with the others instead of being locked up in a stable as the overseer had intended. His wish was granted and he was given a mule and plow.

At noon he managed to escape and was soon hurrying down the road. He passed a band of guerrillas and they proved his undoing. When they reached Stone’s place they were asked if they had seen a negro of his description. In a few minutes more they had him surrounded and back again on the way to Stone’s. Then he confessed he was a runaway but claimed he was on his way back to the old plantation, that freedom was not what it was painted and he had had his fill. He was taken back to his old master and made much of and pointed out to the discontented negroes as an example of what freedom meant. But in three weeks Green slipped off into freedom again and as long as slavery existed he never ventured back into Kentucky. His wife ran away and joined him just before President Lincoln declared all slaves free.

Tom McGee who fired Green’s ambition to become a doctor was a white man who had worked by his side in the old Jacob’s farm. McGee worked and scraped and saved, studied and struggled and worked his way through the Evansville medical college. But it was long after McGee was enabled to write M. D. after his name before Green saw even the beginning of the realization of his dream. In 1874 he entered the office of Dr. E. T. Runcie as office boy, driver, man of all work and student. He was 32 years old and did not even know his letters. He began at the very bottom and he began late.

One of the boys in the family taught the eager scholar his letters. The lessons were written on a blackboard which stood in the room where Green slept. He studied after his work was over at night and when he went to bed it was with a lighted lamp shining on the blackboard. If he worked at night his eyes fell on the letters and he studied until he fell asleep again. Slowly, patiently the man learned the things usually acquired in childhood.

There were no medical laws in Indiana then and the student began to practice among people of his own color, asking the advice of his medical mentor in every case and picking up a little money here and there to help him live. As soon as his letters were learned the man began to read the medical books in Dr. Runcie's library. As long as the doctor lived Green remained with him, working and studying.

Dr. G. B. Walker was Green's next mentor and he obtained for the ambitious colored student a place as janitor in the Evansville Medical college, where he absorbed medicine with his work. He remained there until the college was abandoned and although he never graduated attended most of the lectures.

Outside of his own people Dr. Green's chief reputation is as a smallpox expert. He has made the disease a special study and during the epidemic four or five years ago was the physician at the pest house and was located there all during the epidemic.



**Alexander Harrison Stowers**  
(1817-1863)

Alexander Harrison Stowers (1817-1863) was the owner of Mary Stowers and her son, Dr. Willis S. Green. The 1860 Slave Schedule of Daviess County, KY records that A. H. Stowers was the owner of 6 slaves – male age 51, male age 30, female age 24, male age 18, female age 8 and male age 6. The male reported to be 18 years old is probably Dr. Willis S. Green, who was four years old in 1846, when his mother was taken from him and sold away.

Harrison Stowers was born 26 October 1817 in Breckinridge County, KY. He was the son of John C. Stowers and Nancy Ann Edwards, who were married on 10 December 1807 in Jefferson County, KY. John Stowers is listed in the 1820 census of Breckinridge County, KY, at the time he owned 4 slaves, two males and 2 females. In Breckinridge County, KY deed book C, page 259 it is recorded that John Stowers, of Jefferson County, KY, purchased 600 acres in Breckinridge County from Norborne B. Beall. It included the mouth of Blackford Creek along the Ohio River west of the town of Lewisport. The area became part of the new county of Hancock County, KY in 1829. Harrison's mother, Ann Stowers, is listed in the first tax list of Hancock County in 1829 and appears as a household head in the 1830 census of Hancock County.

Harrison Stowers married Elizabeth Balee, on 19 February 1840 in Daviess County, KY. He is listed in the 1840, 1850 and 1860 censuses of Daviess County, KY. He resided near where the town of Sorgho is now located. He died on 8 November 1863. He has a monument in the Stowers family cemetery near Sorgho. His widow, Elizabeth Stowers, married John K. Smith, 16 October 1865, Daviess County, KY. Elizabeth Balee Smith was born 9 November 1822 and died 1 February 1894; she was buried in the Stowers cemetery at Sorgho. Harrison and Elizabeth were the parents of – James William, Catherine L. (Mullican), John Peter, Sumner, Elizabeth (Shaw) and Richard Alexander Stowers.



**Mary Ann Stowers Bradley**  
(c1828-1915)  
and son,  
**Dr. Willis S. Green**  
(1842-1908)

Dr. Willis S. Green is listed in the 1870, 1880 and 1900 censuses of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN. He married Elizabeth Wilson, about 1864; she died during 1870-1880. He married second Sarah F. Morton on 18 June 1883 in Vanderburgh County, Indiana; a marriage document recorded he was the son of Samuel Liken & Mary Stowers. He and Sarah F. were divorced in Vanderburgh County, IN on 29 March 1887.

Willis Green and his first wife had at least three children – Katie (born c1865, died 18 January 1887 Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN, married Aaron Witherspoon, 22 December 1880 Vanderburgh County, IN), Ollie Ann (born 1869, died 26 May 1876, buried Oak Hill Cemetery, Evansville, IN) and Edward O. (born 1872, died after 1904, married Ella R. Mathis, 26 June 1899 Everett, Middlesex County, MA). Bessie Witherspoon, granddaughter of Willis & Elizabeth Green, was living with Dr. Green at the time of the 1900 census. Bessie Witherspoon (1882-1951) married William Henry Bell (1870-1938), a prominent hotel keeper; see article, “Negroes in Evansville’s history: Hotel owner helped young city grow”, Evansville Press, Evansville, IN, 18 February 1972, p.13).

Dr. Green was issued a license to practice medicine in Vanderburgh County, IN on 6 August 1885 (Evansville Journal, 7 August 1885, p.5 and History of Vanderburgh County, Indiana, Brant & Fuller, 1889, p.234). The Directory of Deceased American Physicians, 1804-1929 recorded that Dr. Willis S. Green died 10 July 1908 in Evansville, IN, his medical specialty was allopath. His death certificate reported his parents as Willis Green & Mary A. Stowers. It listed that he was a physician, was divorced and was interred at Locust Hill Cemetery in Evansville. The informant on his death certificate was his mother, Mary S. Green.

Mary Ann Stowers, mother of Dr. Willis S. Green, is listed as Mary Ann Bradley in Vanderburgh County, IN records. She appears in the 1880, 1900 and 1910 Evansville censuses. These three censuses place her birth between 1821-1828 in Kentucky. The 1900 census records that she was the mother of two children, one of whom was then deceased. The 1874 Evansville Journal article had reported that she had a daughter, who was then deceased. The 1910 census recorded that she was the mother of two children, both of whom were deceased. Mary Ann Stowers Bradley died in Evansville on 12 August 1915. Her death certificate reported that she was about 100 years old. Three months earlier her great-granddaughter, Bessie Bell, had petitioned the Vanderburgh County court to appoint a guardian for her. In the petition Mary Ann Bradley was reported to be 95 years old. Shortly after the petition Stephen B. Lewis was appointed guardian. Mary Ann (Stowers) Bradley was buried in Locust Hill Cemetery in Evansville, IN.

1870 Federal Census of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN:

p361B	Green, Willis	26	male	mulatto	plasterer	KY
	Elizabeth	22	female	black		KY
	Kate	5	female	mulatto		IN
	Ollie	8/12	female	mulatto	born Nov 1869	IN
p476B	Davis, Edward	40	male	mulatto	laborer	KY
	Harriet	35	female	mulatto		KY
	Phillip	8	male	mulatto		IN

1880 Federal Census of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN:

p263B	Green, Willis	38	mulatto – physician – widowed			KY-KY-KY
	Katie	15	daughter – mulatto – cook			IN-KY-KY
	Edward	9	son – mulatto			IN-KY-KY
	Bradley, Mary	51	mother – black – keeping house			KY-KY-KY
p378B	Thompson, Hattie	35	black – keeping house			IN-VA-VA

Davis, Philip 19 son - single - at school

KY-KY-KY

1900 Federal Census of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN:

p294A Green, Willis S. Jan 1842 black - physician - divorced KY-KY-KY  
 resides 1337 Canal Boulevard, owns house  
 Weatherspoon, Bessie G. Aug 1882 black - housekeeper IN-IN-IN

p302A Bradley, Mary Ann May 1821 black - widowed - rents KY-KY-Ky  
 wash woman - 2 children 1 deceased - lives alone

1910 Federal Census of Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN:

p208B Bradley, Mary 85 black - widowed - lives alone KY-US-US  
 2 children both deceased

PLACE OF DEATH  
 County of *Vanderburgh* Indiana State Board of Health. 417  
 Township of *Pigeon*  
 OR  
 P. O. of  
 OR  
 City of *Evansville* No. *11* Reilly Registered No. *542*  
 (If death occurs away from  
 USUAL RESIDENCE  
 give facts relative to such  
 "Special Information.") FULL NAME *Willis S. Green* M. 7

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS.  
 SEX *Male* COLOR *Black*  
 DATE OF BIRTH *Jan 1842*  
 AGE *66* years - months - days  
 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED *Divorced*  
 NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE *none*  
 BIRTHPLACE (State or Country) *Ky*  
 NAME OF FATHER *Willis Green*  
 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or Country) *Ky*  
 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER *Mary A. Stowers*  
 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or Country) *Ky*  
 OCCUPATION *Physician*  
 THE ABOVE STATED PERSONAL PARTICULARS ARE TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF  
 Deponent *Willis S. Green*  
 (Address) *Evansville*  
 Filed *L 13 1908* Death Office in Book

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.  
 DATE OF DEATH *7 10 1908*  
 I HEREBY CERTIFY that I attended deceased from *July 5 1908* to *July 10 1908*  
 and that death occurred on the date stated above, on *5 15*  
 and the IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF DEATH was as follows:  
*Myocardial Infarction*  
 Contributory Cause *None* Unknown  
 Name of Physician *John S. White*  
 Address *408 S. 1st Street*  
 SPECIAL INFORMATION as to English, Intellectual, Training, or Social Status.  
 Name of New England  
 Date of Birth  
 Date of Death  
 Date of Burial  
 Location of Burial  
 Date of Burial  
 THE ALBERT JOHANN & SONS CO.

**Evansville Courier, Evansville, IN, Saturday, 11 July 1908, p10:**

**ONCE ONLY COLORED  
DOCTOR IN THE CITY**  
—  
Dr. Willis Green Dead—He Stud-  
ied Medicine While Serving  
as Coachman

Dr. Willis Green one of the best known colored men in Evansville, for many years the only negro doctor in Evansville and one of the wealthiest members of his race in southern Indiana died Friday forenoon at his home 11 Reilly street.

Dr. Green suffered a stroke of apoplexy last Sunday morning and never regained consciousness. Dr John McCutchan attended him.

The deceased was 66 years old. When a young man he was employed as coachman by Dr. E. T. Runcie of this city and he became ambitious to be a doctor. In his spare hours he studied medical books loaned him by Dr. Runcie and Dr. George B. Walker Later Dr. Walker secured him the position of janitor at the Evansville Medical college which stood on the present court house square. He took his medical course at the college while serving as Janitor.

**Evansville Courier, Evansville, IN, Saturday, 21 July 1908, p.1:**

#### Wealthy Negro Provides For the Colored Aged

Provision for a home for aged colored people is made in the will of the late Dr. Willis S. Green, who was the wealthiest colored man in the city, filed for probate today. Property on Riley-St near Lincoln-av in Baptistown is to be used for the home after being remodeled. The property in the rear of the premises is to be rented to support the institution. Liberty Baptist church is given charge of the home. Dr. Greene's son, Edward, is cut off with but \$1, but his wife, Mrs. Ella Green and Bessie Bell, are well remembered. His mother, Mrs. Mary Bradley, is provided for. Rev. J. D. Rouse, col., is named executor.

**Courier & Press, Evansville, IN, 1 December 2013, p.11A:**

#### How Evansville became a hub of Quality health care

By Roberta Heiman

... The Medical College of Evansville opened its doors in 1847 in a former brewery building at First and Vine streets. It closed after five years, then reopened in 1871 and continued until 1884... The largest class at the Medical College of Evansville was 21 graduates in 1878. Among its alumni was Dr. Willis S. Green, the first African-American licensed physician to practice in Evansville. He initially had an office at his home on Canal Street and later built a larger office at 313 ½ Main St.



PLACE OF DEATH		Indiana State Board of Health		122
County of <i>Vanderburg</i>		CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		
Township of <i>Lexter</i>		Registered No. _____		
Town of _____				
City of _____		(No. <i>R.R. # 6 Box 32 St.;</i> Ward) _____		[If death occurred in a Hospital or Institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.]
[If death occurs away from USUAL RESIDENCE give facts called for under "Special Information."]		FULL NAME <i>Mary Ann Bradley</i>		
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS		MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		
SEX <i>Female</i>	COLOR OR RACE <i>Colored</i>	SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED <i>Widow</i>		DATE OF DEATH <i>August 12 1915</i>
NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE <i>Unknown</i>		I HEREBY CERTIFY, that I attended deceased from <i>July 29 1915</i> to <i>July 12 1915</i>		
DATE OF BIRTH <i>1815</i>		that I last saw her alive on <i>July 11 1915</i>		
AGE <i>about 100</i> years, months, days		and that death occurred on the date stated above, at <i>2:30 P.M.</i>		
OCCUPATION <i>domestic</i>		The CAUSE OF DEATH was as follows: <i>Tuberculosis of intestines</i>		
BIRTHPLACE OF DECEASED <i>Kentucky</i>		Contributory (Duration) <i>yes</i> yrs. mos. ds.		
NAME OF FATHER <i>Unknown</i>		(Signed) <i>S. R. Loubischer</i> , M. D.		
BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER <i>Unknown</i>		<i>Aug 12, 1915</i> (Address) <i>Evansville</i>		
WIDEN NAME OF MOTHER <i>Unknown</i>		*State the DISEASE CAUSING DEATH, or, in deaths from VIOLENT CAUSES state (1) MEANS OF INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL.		
BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER <i>Unknown</i>		LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (FOR HOSPITALS, INSTITUTIONS, TRANSIENTS, OR RECENT RESIDENTS)		
THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE		At place of death _____ yrs. mos. ds. In the State _____ yrs. mos. ds.		
Informant: <i>Elizabeth Dorman</i>		Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death? _____		
(Address) <i>R.R. # 6 Box 36</i>		Former or Usual Residence _____		
SPECIAL PERMIT ISSUED BY <i>P. H. Lintzsum</i>		PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <i>Locust Hill</i>		DATE OF BURIAL <i>August 13, 1915</i>
The <i>AUG 16 1915</i>		UNDERTAKER <i>W. G. Garris Co.</i>		WAS THE BODY EMBALMED? <i>yes</i>
Name and Address of Health Officer or Deputy <i>E. J. ...</i>		ADDRESS <i>Evansville Ind</i>		EMBALMER'S LICENSE No. <i>1374</i>

The Owensboro Messenger of 3 August 1900 (p.2) reported that Dr. Willis S. Green, of Owensboro, IN, was visiting his sister, the wife of Albert McFarland, of 813 West Third Street in Owensboro. The 1900 census of Owensboro lists Albert & Mel McFarland as being residents at this address. Mel was a short form of the name Melvina. Mel was reported to have been born in Kentucky in August 1853. Mel Bell married Albert McFarland in Owensboro, KY on 8 June 1873 (Daviness County, KY Negro Marriage Book C, pages 66-67). Bond on their marriage was by George Bell. Mel McFarland died at 813 West Third Street in Owensboro on 21 October 1931. Mel and her husband, Albert McFarland (1844-1917) were buried at Greenwood Cemetery in Owensboro.

Mel McFarland's death certificate recorded that her father was George Bell. Melvina Bell, age 18, born KY, is listed in the home of George Bell (56, born KY) & Catherine (42, born KY) in the 1870 census of Daviess County, KY (p.190B). The family were reported to be mulattos and they were residing near the current town of Sorgho. Could George Bell, father of Melvina Bell (born 1853), also have been the father of Willis S. Green (born 1842)? George Bell (64) is listed in the 1880 census of the Sorghotown District in Daviess County, KY. George Bell was then widowed. He was listed 19 households from the widow of Harrison Stowers, who in slavery days had been the owner of Willis S. Green and his mother, Mary Stowers.

