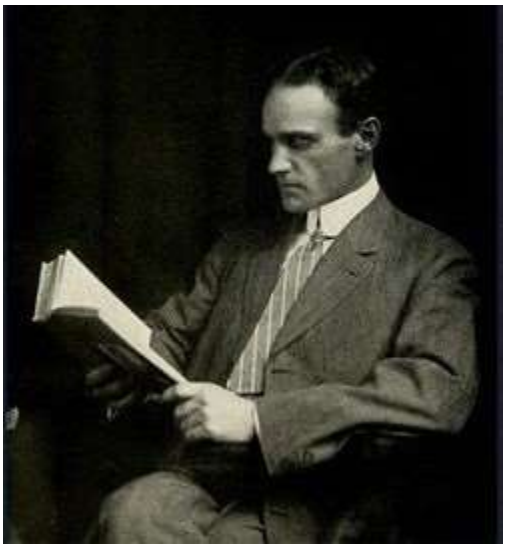
Slavery Days
In Muhlenberg County, KY

By Otto A. Rothert



Otto Arthur Rothert (1871-1956)

Chapter XXVI –"Slavery Days"
from the book, A History of Muhlenberg County,
by Otto A. Rothert (Louisville, KY:
John P. Morton & Company, 1913) pp.338-344:

SLAVERY DAYS

A few slaves were probably brought by the first of the early settlers into what later became Muhlenberg County. Tradition has it that Colonel William Campbell, the founder of Caney Station and Greenville, brought slaves with him. A number of the other first-comers evidently brought slaves with them. There were very few, however, in what was called the "Dutch Settlement."

In 1800 there were 1,313 white inhabitants, five free negroes, and 125 slaves in Muhlenberg. By 1810 the white population had increased to 3,698 and there were 480 slaves. From that date to 1850 there was an increase in the proportion of slaves. In 1860 the population of the county was 9,101 white, 40 free colored, and 1,584 slaves. In 1910 the white population was 25,687 and the colored 2,911. (1)

Footnote 1 – The slave population in Muhlenberg was never proportionately large, ranging from one in five to one in seven of the whole population. The proportion in the State was about one slave to every five of population. The negro population of Muhlenberg and of Kentucky at present comprises about one eighth of the whole. In 1860 Muhlenberg's proportion was at the rate of one slave to every seven of population. See table of population of the county in chapter "Collins on Muhlenberg, Quoted and Extended," page 422.

In slavery days many persons who did not want to own negroes, or who did not approve of slavery, found themselves slaveholders. The slaves were acquired by inheritance or in the course of some business transaction as a necessity. It was not easy to dispose of a slave once owned, except by selling him as one would a horse or a cow.

Many stories might be told of the affectionate relations and personal devotion that sprang up between master and family and slave. It was not uncommon for masters who "hired out" slaves by the year, or were compelled to sell them, to consult the slave's choice of employer or new master. The "hiring out" and sale of slaves generally took place at New Year at Greenville, where there was a general assembling of those wanting to hire or buy, and a regular market opened. Administrators of estates would sometimes sell from one to a whole family of negroes to the highest bidder, at the courthouse door. Selling prices would range from $200 to $1,500. Hiring prices were from $50 to $200, according to the slave's worth. Richard T. Martin says: "In case of sale, as well as of hire, mothers would often be separated from their children. Most of the slaves seemed to be submissive to their fate and apparently enjoyed life as well as they do now with liberty. They were of course ignorant, without any training in self-reliance or self-protection. They did not then have much on their minds, only to do as they were told."

The consideration that masters would show trusted slaves, and the affectionate feelings existing, have been verified from the recollections of a number of old former slaves still living in the county. All of them say they had a longing to remain in their first home or in the neighborhood where they had spent most of their lives. Local traditions contain many instances of the slave's love for his old home. An incident in the life of John Oates, one of the "old-time" negroes, will serve as an example.

“Uncle” John Oates, 1912

"Uncle John," as he is called, still lives near the Wyatt Oates Old Place in the Pond River country, where he was born about 1845 and where, as he expressed it, he hopes to die "among his white folks." John's father belonged to pioneer Jesse Oates, and John in turn belonged to Wyatt Oates, one of the sons of Jesse. During the autumn of 1862 John, then a boy of about eighteen, while working near his master's blacksmith shop, was kidnaped by a band of guerrillas, who at the same time stole two horses belonging to Wyatt Oates. The young negro traveled with his captors through Hopkins, Christian, and Todd counties, and although not treated as a prisoner he was anxious to return home, and therefore took advantage of the first good chance that presented itself and made his escape. He left the guerrilla camp, then near Elkton, and although he avoided the public roads, succeeded in finding his way through the woods and over fields to what is now Cary's Bridge, where he entered Muhlenberg County. There he began traveling on the main road, for he was known in that neighborhood and felt safe from pursuers. He had not proceeded far when he arrived at the farm of a man who was well acquainted with his master. The owner of the place seemed glad to see him, and urged him to eat supper and stay all night. He accepted the invitation, and his friendly host informed him that Wyatt Oates was offering fifteen dollars reward for the return of his "lost, strayed or stolen John." The farmer proposed to lodge John that night and to return him to his master the next morning, receive the reward, and pay the slave five dollars of the proceeds. To this the slave replied that he thought his involuntary absence was in itself a loss to his master, and that under the circumstances no one was entitled to a reward. After he had been assigned a bed, and after all others had retired for the night, John quietly resumed his walk home, where upon his arrival he was received like a long-lost son by his master, who not only paid him the fifteen dollars reward but granted him two weeks' "lay-off" after hearing his story.

Notwithstanding the kindness shown, the slaves, after all, were held in ownership much as highly prized domestic animals are, and were treated in everything, except as regarded their work, as children requiring strict discipline and sometimes sharp punishment. They had no civil or educational rights or privileges. Slave-owners generally frowned upon the few who permitted slaves to be taught reading and writing, as the awakening of higher intelligence tended to arouse the slave's discontent with his condition and to give him longings for freedom. There was little or no attempt made to educate or Christianize the slave. He was left to his own devices, and even his morals—except as to personal honesty and conduct toward the whites—were disregarded. Slaves could not marry according to law. They cohabited by consent of their owners or according to their own choice, though many slave unions were as sacredly maintained as those of the white people.

Religion among them was a rude imitation of the worship of the whites. They were permitted to hold church meetings in schoolhouses and in white churches temporarily unoccupied. "Copper John," as he was called, who belonged to Edward R. Weir, Sam Elliott, owned by Edward Elliott, Peter McCormick, and Wilson Weir were the leading slave preachers for many years. They were men of some intelligence, and would preach in various parts of the county.

Slaves were housed usually in log cabins erected near the owner's residence. Edward R. Weir, sr., provided good brick, one-story houses for those he owned. The last of these brick slave cabins has disappeared, and only a few of the log huts are left standing in the county.

No slave could give testimony in court against a white man, and he was therefore without defense against brutal treatment of any kind unless it occurred in the presence of white witnesses. Any slave convicted of murder, attempt to murder, or of assault on a white woman was after trial in the circuit court sentenced to death, and a valuation placed on him by those before whom he was tried. The owner of the slave, upon presentation of the sheriff's certificate showing the date of execution and the appraised value, received from the State Treasurer the amount specified. The

first legal hanging in the county was of a slave named Isaac, who was convicted of an attempt to murder Aylette H. Buckner, and, as related in the chapter on the "Story of the Stack," was valued at $1,000 and hanged July 6, 1838. The second legal execution was that of a slave known as Mitchell Martin, or Bogges, who was hanged April 26, 1850, and valued at $700. The third was a slave called Edmond Reno, or Edmond Elliott, who was hanged June 17, 1853, and his master, Jesse H. Reno, received $800 as compensation. All of these but Isaac were convicted of criminal assault.

Out of the slave's helplessness before the law there sprang up among many of them a unity of feeling almost Masonic, against cruel and harsh masters. Such masters were feared and hated, and among slave cabins, and even in the kitchen of the "big house," as the owner's residence was called, slave and white children alike were held in discipline and fear by stories of "ghost hauntings" of cruel slaveholders. The feeling extended to white men who were merely rigid disciplinarians, not sparing of the lash when they thought its use necessary. The ghost-stories were of course pure imaginings. One story that has long been heard of a haunted house near an old muster field evidently grew out of a substitution of identities, since the owner of the house was a liberal and kind-hearted man who, I found after careful investigation, always treated his slaves well. Nevertheless the story is told that he had caused two of his slaves to be buried near the milk-house in order to keep other slaves from entering and helping themselves to its contents. This tale is as improbable as the one that relates how, on a certain occasion, the, same owner, wishing to punish a slave, took a barrel, drove two-inch nails from the outside through the one-inch staves, placed the negro in this barrel, and rolled it down the hill to the spring near the milk-house. The story is that the negro died from the effects of the treatment, and of course the place has been "ha'nted" ever since.

Slave cabins built about 1840 on the Doctor R. C. Frazier farm near Powderly

About twenty years before the beginning of the Civil War the mutterings of the movement for national emancipation of slaves began and rapidly grew louder. The idea had many followers in Muhlenberg and other parts of Kentucky. In 1845 Cassius M. Clay established an antislavery paper at Lexington, and by his fiery personality, eloquence, and fearlessness made many converts and induced many who already believed in emancipation by some gradual and businesslike method to take a bold stand publicly. By, 1850 antislavery opinion had spread widely in the State and was openly discussed in Muhlenberg. In his diary, under date of June, 1849, the Reverend Isaac Bard records that at Colonel Wilson's home, near South Carrollton, "we debated emancipation. My great surprise is how any true Whig or true Democrat can oppose it. . . . They say if Kentucky should emancipate her slaves we would be ruined. Bob Wickliffe said, 'The darkies are the best shade I have ever seen.' . . . But I think some more sunshine would be better for health and a cure for empty corn-cribs and barns as well as a good cure for ignorant, idle and dissipated youth." Mr. Bard was traveling much of the time and was in close touch with public subjects. (2)

Footnote 2 – Robert Wickliffe, here referred to by Mr. Bard, was a son of pioneer Robert Wickliffe, and like his father was a slaveholder. He, like a number of slave-holders in the county, became an abolitionist about ten years before the Civil War.

Robert Wickliffe's will (that part dealing with his slaves) is here quoted as throwing light on the slavery question at the time. It was written in 1850 and recorded in 1855, in Will Book 3, page 153:

"Section Two: I will and direct, that after the death of my wife that all of my property (Negroes excepted) be sold, including my land, the proceeds to be applied as hereinafter directed.

"Section Three: I wish to provide for the comfort and happiness of my slaves, and wish the money arising from the sale of my other property as mentioned in section two applied for their benefit. I wish to colonize them, should the newly established Republic of Liberia continue to flourish. I desire that they may be removed to that country and the money raised from sale of property as before directed applied to their outfit and settlement in that country. I hereby will and direct that at the death of myself and wife all the slaves now owned by me and their increase shall be free and enjoy all the rights and privileges of free persons, but believing that they can do this but imperfectly in Kentucky I wish them removed to some country where they will be more advantageously situated, and for the purpose of providing for this and for their comfortable establishment do will and bequeath to them the proceeds of all my other property remaining after the death of myself and wife for the purposes aforesaid.

"Section Four: As it is likely that some important changes will be made in the organic law of our State by which negroes can not be emancipated and remain in the State, I hereby invest my executors with full and complete power to make such arrangements in regard to the future location of my slaves as may to them seem best, all circumstances considered, vesting them with power to send them to Liberia or colonize them in some other State as may be deemed most for their interest, retaining such control over said slaves as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this section."

His wife, Aggy Wickliffe, in September, 1862, made her will bequeathing all her property "to and for the use of the slaves emancipated by the will of my deceased husband." Her will is recorded June 13, 1867, Book 3, page 230.

In Muhlenberg among prominent men who advocated emancipation were Edward R. Weir, sr., William L. Green, Edward Elliott, and Thomas Salsbury. (3)

Footnote 3 – Mrs. Salsbury (who was a daughter of John Dennis) died January 16, 1860, and the Salsbury tract of land, three miles southeast of Greenville, was divided among the freed negroes and the to-be-freed slaves. In 1910 only one family of Salsbury negroes lived in the "Salsbury Free Negro Settlement." The others, one after another, sold their farms to white men, and few, if any, ever owned a farm afterward. It may be well to add that Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Salsbury had no children, nor did Mr. and Mrs. Robert Wickliffe.

The latter died in 1848, and his will, dated May 30, 1844, provided for the immediate liberation, after the death of his wife, of all his slaves who had then reached the age of twenty-five, and for the later liberation of the others when they too had reached that age. Weir, Green, and Elliott were so convinced of their duty that they liberated all their slaves that were willing to accept freedom. They sent a few of them to the new Republic of Liberia in Africa, defraying their expenses, and then Green and Elliott removed to "free" States.

As early as about 1850 there began to arise fears of a "negro rising" or "slave insurrection" in many parts of the country, even in Muhlenberg. These rumors served to alarm many quiet persons and to frighten children, but there was never any "rising." Close watch was maintained and slaves were kept within rigid bounds. Runaway slaves would come into Muhlenberg from the South and from other counties in the State, but they were soon captured or driven from the county. In Greenville and all the towns in the county "patrollers" were paid to watch the conduct of slaves. Negroes were not allowed to stir out after nine o'clock at night. If caught abroad after that hour without passes from their owners they were severely whipped and driven in. The negroes living in the country did not go out much after nightfall except for "possum" and "coon" hunting, with the knowledge of their owners.

About this time a sort of temperance "order" had been established among the negroes. It had its start in Greenville. There were two bodies, apparently rival organizations. One was known as the "Washingtonians," headed by "Copper John" Weir; the other, known as the "Socodonians," was led by Sam Elliott. These orders appeared throughout the county. Members of both would meet at Greenville on Sundays and march, making considerable display. When the "abolition" movement had grown acute, however, the whites put a stop to the marchings, and the "orders" vanished. It was feared that they covered some secret understanding concerning freedom.

Suspicion and distrust between master and slave grew greater as a general proposition, although that fact did not disturb the confidence between some slaves and their masters. The Civil War put an end to all doubts and to the institution of slavery. There were many negroes in Muhlenberg. who did not welcome freedom, and who were uneasy after it was conferred upon them. They had suffered like children, but they had had no sense of responsibility for their own maintenance. Some of the more intelligent had believed that some day they would be liberated, but they were not prepared when liberation came. A great many of the slaves never had to be punished while in slavery, but were obedient and kindhearted and were treated well by their owners, some of whom often trusted particular slaves with important affairs.

It is paradoxical perhaps to say that many persons, former slaves as well as slave-owners, regretted the passing of the old days. As they got further and further away from slavery only its best and most sentimental sides were remembered. In the old days slaves were generally allowed a few holidays during Christmas week and at election days, which came on the first Monday in August in each year. Election days were always a feast for white boys and negroes. Slave-owners would allow their negroes, if they desired, to make cider and bake "ginger-cakes" on Saturday or

Sunday before the election on Monday, from the sale of which they would make a little pocket-money. Greenville would be full of boys and negroes, ginger-cakes and cider; fiddling and dancing on the streets would be an attraction of the occasion. Negroes were not allowed to drink or quarrel or to fight; if they did they were severely whipped. Negroes on election day kept more civil and sober than some of their masters. Sometimes a sober slave would have to care for his drunken master and take him home. These conditions and others connected with the intimate home relations between master and slave before the Civil War were of course entirely changed by the emancipation of the negroes.

Muhlenberg County's second courthouse. Erected in 1836; the clerk's office (one-story brick house) was built in 1865. Both were demolished in 1906. The old stone jail is shown in the background, between the two brick buildings. From A History of Muhlenberg County, by Otto A. Rothert, p.47.