An Unfinished History – Daviess County's Black Citizens

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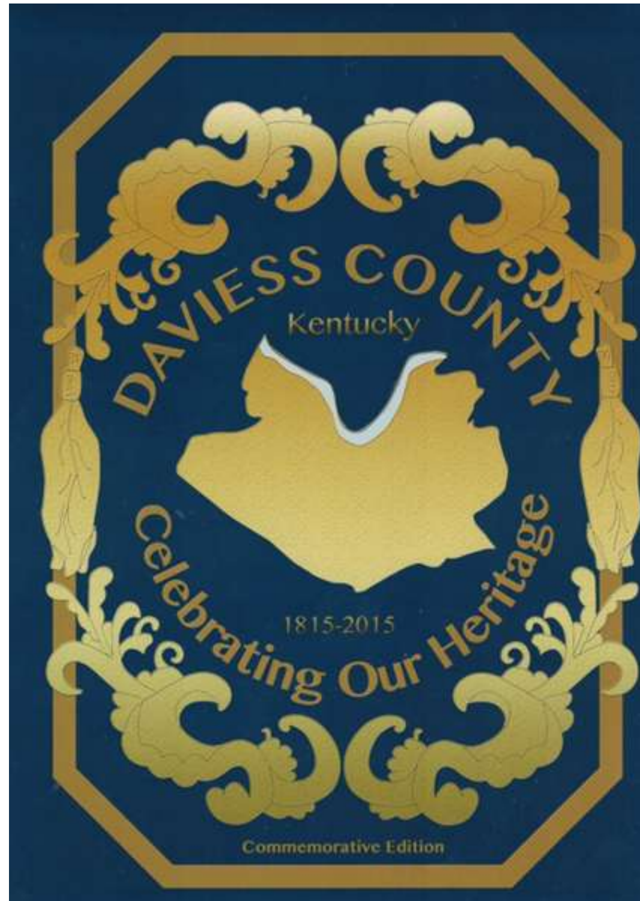


This chapter is based largely on interviews with black citizens conducted by Wesley Acton during the 1980s, and is based on the words of those interviewed as much as possible. It also includes other highlights and notable people in the long and often difficult history of Daviess County's black citizens, most of whom were enslaved until the 13th Amendment in 1865. It is not all inclusive or complete, the authors hope that this scant history will encourage other researchers and writers to dig into the rich and complicated history of our black neighbors in Daviess County.

The authors hope that when the history of Daviess County is written next time, that African Americans and women will not need separate chapters, that they will have been fully integrated into our stories; but for now our objective is to tell stories of people who have not always been included—we all have a story.

Wesley Acton

Wesley Acton was the eighth child born to Levi and Cecil (Collins) Acton in Hartford, KY. From birth to five years of age, he lived on a small farm off what is now Natcher Parkway. In the early 1940's, Acton and his family moved to Daviess County to the Pleasant Ridge Community. Thus began a long and active career as teacher, social activist, and volunteer. He attended Carver Elementary School, then Western elementary, junior, and senior high schools. His dream was to attend Kentucky State University and become a teacher, but lack of money forestalled that dream.

Acton worked hard on the farm-- cutting tobacco, mowing grass, cleaning cemeteries—whatever work he could find which prepared him well. He received the opportunity to attend Brescia College and work for his tuition. Working for a group of professors who encouraged and inspired him also helped him learn skills he would use later as a classroom teacher. He was also encouraged by his life-long friend Leslie Shively Smith.

After receiving his B.A. Degree in history and English in 1960 and receiving certification, he taught at St. William High School in Knottsville and then the Daviess County School System as language arts and social studies teacher at Thruston. Acton was the first African American teacher in an integrated school in Owensboro and Daviess County. During his more than 30 year career, he taught at Thruston Elementary, Burns Middle School, Apollo Junior High, receiving his masters degree in the 1980's and doing additional studies at Abilene University in Texas and Florida College in Temple Terrace, Florida.

Although Acton grew up in rural Daviess County and was sheltered from some of the harsh realities of segregation in the deep South, he still realized at a young age that African Americans were not treated equally. He experienced what it was like to be denied entrance into the parks and playgrounds of his home county, to not be allowed to drink at a public water fountain, eat at a restaurant or sit where one pleased at a movie theater. He realized that the practice of "separate but equal" was simply a phrase to hold on to segregation. Acton was one of the co-founders of the Owensboro Human Relations Commission and he is a past president of the Owensboro NAACP.

One of his accomplishments, working along with Emily Holloway, another retired teacher, was helping to clean up historic Greenwood Cemetery. This project mobilized more than 200 volunteers from area schools, city and county government, civic organizations, businesses, Boy Scouts, churches, Sons of the Confederate Veterans, and many individuals. Ms. Holloway had relatives buried at Greenwood and set as a retirement goal to do "something" about Greenwood Cemetery. She and Acton formed the Greenwood Cemetery Restoration Committee in 1996. The site was overgrown with trees, thorny brambles, sunken graves, trash and flagrant examples of vandalism. Interestingly, one of the first groups to volunteer was the Sons of Confederate Veterans. They had it on their list of neglected cemeteries where Civil War veterans were buried. After enlisting volunteers and help from city and county, the committee made a list of what to do and got organized. The *Messenger-Inquirer* publicized the project and helped bring much needed attention to the work. This project illustrated cooperation between many aspects of the community.

Greenwood Cemetery was begun in 1906 as a burial ground for African Americans and was the primary cemetery for several generations for at least 70 years. The oldest monuments are for Kittie Ann Jones (9 Aug 1853-13 Jan 1905) and Benedict Hayden (12 Feb 1828-13 Aug 1905).

These pre-date the purchase of the property in 1906, so they may have been moved and re-buried there. Among others buried there are two Civil War soldiers—Richard Hardesty and George W. Robertson, at least 48 veterans of WWI and 14 WWII soldiers are buried there.

Acton remembered how the schools he attended were given handed down old materials and desks which had been discarded by white schools. Although he knew that change comes slowly, he and a small group of friends conducted a "sit in" at a theater in Owensboro after informing the management of their plan. To the surprise of many people, there were no arrests or negative repercussions. As a result of their peaceful protest, African Americans became able to sit wherever they pleased and were no longer required to sit exclusively in the balcony.

Integrating restaurants was more difficult for Acton and his friends. When they "sat in", often they were forced to wait hours, despite the fact that they kept ordering every time a waiter came their way. Then after many attempts, they were served and finally the restaurants in Daviess County, just as the theaters, were opened to African Americans as they were for whites. Though the U.S. Supreme Court Case of *Brown v. Board of Education* came down in 1954, it was not until the early 1960s that the schools here became integrated.

Acton continued as a substitute teacher after retirement and devoted himself to public service, his church and education as well as human and civil rights. He received numerous awards. Among them, the 1992 KEA Human Relations Lucy Harth Smith-Atwood S. Wilson Award for Civil and Human Rights in Education; 2010 Brescia University Distinguished Alumni Award; 2010 Kentucky Civil Right Hall of Fame Award; and 1998 Owensboro Mayor's Award for Excellence in Volunteer Service with Emily Holloway for their work in restoring Greenwood Cemetery.

Those interviewed by Acton and included in this chapter include: Leslie Shively Smith, C.D. and Babe Davidson, James R. Crump, Georgia Thruston, Carrie Lewis, William Norris, Martine Hicks, Theodora Smith, Katie Brown, Emma Edwards, James and Lucille Ayers, Marvelene Jackson, and Florence Baker Perkins. The tapes of these interviews are at Western Kentucky University.

Leslie Shively Smith

African Americans in Daviess County, just as other counties across the state and the south, were impacted with the negatives of Jim Crow laws which dominated society for many years. Leslie Shively Smith, who grew up in the Pleasant Ridge community, was interviewed for a book *Behind the Veil: Documenting Life in the Jim Crow South*.

She said, "We didn't pay attention to it {segregation} because that's the way it was. We just knew what to do and how to get along. We just knew not to go out of the way." Some of the things she recalled were the worn out discarded furniture and books given to black schools—they never had new books. Students brought books from home to fill the school book shelves and to share. She observed, as did Wesley Acton, that even after the 1954 desegregation order, few if any attempts were made to follow the new law. She felt, as did many, that the "separate but equal" tactic was used to delay integration.

One of the more hateful rules was that African Americans were required to address whites as Mr. or Miss, regardless of how young they were, yet whites called all African Americans by their first names.

Ms. Smith remembered that even with the dominant Jim Crow laws, one incident on Christmas Eve in 1915, when she was four years old, gave her hope. As her family sat around the fireplace, they heard singing coming nearer and nearer. When the carolers came to their home, her

mother told the children it was the Bell Family who enjoyed serenading friends and neighbors on summer evenings and Christmas Eve. From that evening on, when she became despondent over the treatment from Jim Crow laws, she would think of the Bell family, who sang to her family just as they had to white families, and she felt hope.

Unlike many teachers, Smith was a college graduate when she began teaching at the Rosenwald School at Pleasant Ridge. The school had been built in 1909 and closed in 1936 after consolidation. After many years of being a haven of academic and leadership training, the school sat empty and was used as a residence, a place for stripping tobacco, and storage until it was purchased by Pleasant Point Baptist Church. The church was considering demolishing the building when former student W.A. Howard, remembering his experiences at the school, wanted to save it. The Preservation Alliance was interested in the building and purchased it with a donation to the church and took possession of the school 55 years after the last students had left. The school was refurbished, and finally, at a cost of $2500, it was relocated to Yellow Creek Park where it stands to remind Daviess Countians of early African-American education. The land in the park and the time of vocational students were given as in-kind contributions of $9,200 with a matching grant from the Kentucky Bicentennial Commission and an additional $800 given by the Preservation Alliance. Now the school serves as an environmental center and a link to the African-American education history of the area.

Because teachers were expected to be community leaders, they were expected to participate in all the activities of the community as well as Sunday School and church. Teaching was one of the traditional areas open to women and they were able to provide strong role models and found power and an outlet for creative energies. They offered discipline, hope, and liberation for young people.

Leslie Smith recalled some of her students: Rosella French who became a teacher in northern Kentucky; John Marsh French was a county farm agent in Mason county; William French who had a professional job in Lexington and all of his children attended college; and Beatrice Johnson Caldwell who taught in Indianapolis. Another student who stood out was Milton Harris who served in the Navy in WWII and then enrolled at Howard University where he earned a BA degree. He then studied at the American Conservatory School of Music in Washington D.C. And re-enrolled at Howard and studied in the school of music. He returned to Owensboro and taught in Hancock County and in Drakesboro and also gave private music lessons.

C.D. And Babe Davidson

The Davidsons, who lived at 728 Sycamore Street, were interviewed Feb. 11, 1982. Davidson was a retired business man. There were three businessmen in Owensboro and the surrounding area.... A gentleman named Amos Moorman, operated a grocery store in the Mechanicsville area about 50 years ago (circa 1932). The second was a fellow we called Mr. Priest. He operated a restaurant on the corner of 5th and Poplar Streets for some time. He was the cook and prepared delicious meals. His refrigerator was unique. It was a black and white GE refrigerator that had a motor on top. He was the first person in the area to have that kind of equipment. The third gentleman was named Gordon. He had a grocery store in Maceo, located on a gravel highway across from the railroad, between Maceo and Yelvington.

Mrs. Babe Davidson grew up on her grandfather John Wells's farm in Stanley. The family consisted of her parents, three children, grandmother and grandfather, who was a noted farmer in the area. He owned 200 acres of fertile, prime land. Near by was another black farmer, Will Crump.

Both men raised big gardens and chickens. Other black fanners in the area were Will and Albert Winstead.

Babe stayed on the farm until she was about seven years old when her family moved to Gary, Indiana, but they moved back to the farm when she was 11. Though she was considered too young to actually work on the farm, she had chores to do.

She said that women played a major role on the farm They tended the gardens, gathered food, canned, cooked and prepared vegetables to eat and to put up for winter. Her grandmother raised hogs, grew tobacco, and raised chickens for eggs. The food was stored in a cellar to keep it cold. The meats came from fishing and hunting—rabbits, birds—mostly quail.

Babe remembered hardships during the years—money was not abundant and made it difficult to feed the animals as well, and the most dependable money crop was tobacco. Around 1918, she remembered that farming was considered by the black community as the source of life. Most farmers owned their farms although there were also some sharecroppers.

Her school was one room and was about half a mile from her home. Although they traveled by buggy and wagon, Babe walked to school. School was in session until March. Teachers she remembered were Miss Bradley, Ms. Leslie Clark, Ms. Mattie Davis, and Ms. Clara Taylor. The school in Stanley was located in the church yard but is today farm land.

She felt that black and white farmers worked together and had similar goals, helped where needed and watched out for each other. Sorgho area black farmers were Thrustons, Wilhites, and Winsteads. In Utica were Dave Hill, Joe Crow, Curt Crowe, Jack Johnson and Willie Hayden.

James R. Crump

Mr. Crump grew up ten miles west of Owensboro in the neighborhood of Birk City. He attended a one-room school in Sorgho. In 1923 there were 35 students in his class. His teachers were Ms. Olevie Blandford, Mr. Willie West, and Ms. Clara Wimsatt. He attended this school for 8 years. Because there was no lunchroom, students took their lunch to school in a dinner bucket. There were no discipline problems as students were disciplined at home and there was zero tolerance for bad reports from school.

Many students had to walk to school, often as far as three miles. Churches and schools were often located together and families often moved near the schools. Mr. Crump became a teacher and taught in a segregated black school in Owensboro in a career spanning 31 years.

He remembered that it was difficult because students of various levels would be within a classroom and trying to meet individual needs was challenging. Among his students were Larry Lewis, Michael Gibson, Whaylon Coleman, James Curry, and Walter Mayes. Mr. Crump commented, "There is no greater work than teaching and preaching, because in each case you influence the lives of others."

Georgia Thruston

She grew up between Sorgho and Stanley in Birk City. Because she lived two miles from school, which she had to walk, she was not able to attend school until she was 7 years old. All the schools were one-room schools at that time and they were all alike with 10 to 20 students at one time. The teacher was responsible for everything that involved the school. In addition to teaching, she must make the fire in the coal stove and clean the facility. The curriculum was set by the County School Board and the teachers had no input into what they taught—it was a universal

curriculum for all the schools. Subjects required each day were reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and geography. School supplies were very limited.

Teachers were paid $30 per month. In order to become a teacher, it was necessary to pass an examination after completing 8th grade or attending normal school and completing the requirements. Prospective teachers were allowed to retake the exam until they passed it.

School consolidation made life easier and delighted the parents because by combining schools a better education could be offered. Stanley and Birk City schools were consolidated into the Sorgho School where Mrs. Thurston taught for five years. Seven schools were consolidated to make the George Washington Carver School in Owensboro. They were Sorgho, Whitesville, Pettit, Maceo, Utica, Yelvington, and Pleasant Ridge. Historical black schools in Owensboro were Dunbar and Western. Western was an elementary and high school combined.

Mrs. Thruston discussed what black history during the time of the 1930's reveals to us. Many black professionals were in top positions in the 1930's which shows that blacks had necessities in services in their communities which were vibrant with businesses and professions. The black church was the nucleus for all. There were black doctors—Dr. P.G. Walker, Dr. Cunningham, and Dr. W.H. Smith one of two dentists. In Owensboro, there was a black drugstore operated by Dr. R.B. White. After his death, Dr. M.R. Coffield continued the business.

Mrs. Thruston's husband, Sam Thruston, operated a car garage, Eurica Motor Company, on Elm Street for 23 years.

There was a black used clothing store on Third Street and there was one black grocery. Bill Thruston and Willie Dean are two well-known black farmers whom she remembered. She also recalled a black blacksmith in Stanley and one in Owensboro, located on West 5th Street.

The Church and education were the two main ingredients of black survival, progress, and accomplishments, according to Mrs. Thruston.

George West, Sr.

Mr. West was born in the western part of Kentucky as a slave on May 3, 1853. He knew of one brother, Lewis, who ran away during slavery and the last heard was that he had made it to Canada and was a free man. George West was owned by a Mr. McKinley in Stanley. He was brought to the area on a slave boat and married Belle McFarland, with their master's permission which was necessary at that time. When the Civil War was over and West was emancipated he purchased 200 acres of land for $200. Although he had never learned to read or write, he stressed the importance of education to his seven children. His son, George Jr. completed his education and became a teacher and taught his father to read and write.

In 1893, West was qualified to become a mail carrier to deliver mail by horseback. He was purportedly the first black man to attain this status. He resigned on Oct. 20 1919 and soon after, on December 3, 1919, he died.

Mrs. Carrie Lewis

My family lived on a 42 acre farm in the Yelvington area growing tobacco, hay, corn and other vegetable crops. We also had cattle, hogs, chickens and horses. The horses were used to cultivate the land. We barely made expenses, but those who were sharecroppers didn't get much at all.

At one time there were about 25 or 30 families working in the area, but better jobs and opportunities caused many to move away.

Mr. William Norris

We lived on a farm on the edge of Whitesville. We grew wheat, corn, and tobacco. Although some owned their own farms, most worked as sharecroppers, keeping so much and giving the owner so much.

If you had your own team of horses, you got two-thirds, and if you used the owner's team of horses, you got half. There wasn't much money in the business, nobody made a lot of profit. Most sharecroppers stayed three to five years on a property. If someone owned their own land, they might work it for ten years. There were a lot of people who cheated themselves because they weren't sure how much they were entitled to. It wasn't a frequent thing, to my knowledge, for someone to be deliberately taken advantage of. Most of the families who lived in the area and sharecropped didn't have any problems. But once tractors and other machinery became available, fewer men were needed to do the job. Mr. Ayers remembered a black farmer named Henry Moorman who owned about 1000 acres from Old Livermore Road to Harmon Ferry Road. In addition to sharecroppers there were many tenant farmers growing tobacco and corn.

He remembered enjoying his time in one-room school houses and taking the train to Owensboro for high school. When the train quit running, students had to take the bus—they had to pay their own way on both modes of transportation.

Martine Hicks

Mrs. Hicks grew up in Maceo and remembered that there were many farmers in the area. Mr. Larry Smith, farmer, also worked on the river. The Shauntees farmed 20 to 25 acres and raised cattle, horses, and tobacco. They used horse-drawn equipment. She recounted that Round Shauntee and Grant Woodbarker were the first two blacks in Maceo to have cars. Her school had neither running water nor lights. There was a coal-burning stove, kerosene lamps used when it was dark, and for drinking water, there was a bucket and dipper provided by the Board of Education. Each student provided a cup or can for drinking the water. After finishing 8th grade, three students took the examination at the Courthouse to become teachers. Others went to Kentucky State College, which was Kentucky Normal Industrial Institute at the time. After two years, they received a diploma—you only had to have 64 semester hours then. Most of the teachers were trained to teach elementary school.

Mrs. Hicks wanted to go to eastern Kentucky to teach, but her parents were opposed, so she started teaching in Livermore and stayed there for two years. Her salary was $60 a month. In 1928 she came to Daviess County to teach and lived with her parents for two years until she married and moved to Owensboro. Teachers had to pay for extra supplies for their classroom. There were no snow days and there was a break in March which allowed children to be home during the spring weeks when crops were being planted. They also had "Spring School" during this period which was for children who could not get to school during bad weather or needed to bring up their grades. Parents had to pay for their children to attend and teachers were expected to meet all the needs during this short term.

Most schools were associated with or connected to a church. Some mentioned in the interviews were Greens Chapel, Maceo, Upper District, Ensor, and Whitesville, and Pleasant Ridge, which with Stanley were Rosenwald Schools. Mr. Rosenwald had left money to help fund black schools in the south. Another was the Reid School, located on property owned by the Reids who employed many blacks in the area to work at the orchard.

Theodora Smith

Theodora Smith remembered that children had to walk many miles in the cold, rain, sleet, snow and heat to get to school. For some students, the distance was so great that they had to leave their home before day break to arrive at school in time. Often children cut across fields to shorten the walk. Most farmers did not mind, but one farmer named Snodgrass stood each morning with rifle in hand ready to shoot anyone who crossed his field.

Some teachers who taught at Pleasant Ridge were: Madalyn Crump, Elliot Taylor, Emma Edwards, Lena Arletta George, Desemona Johnson, and Mattie Jean Johnson. Teachers were held in high esteem and most had a lasting impact on the students because they encouraged them to go on to high school. In Kentucky at that time, black children only had school grades 1 through 8. Teachers also encouraged their students to travel and they set an example emulated by their students.

Theodora Smith taught 14 years in one room schools in the Utica, Pettit, and Pleasant Ridge areas. The number of students ranged from 25 to 40, grades one through eight in one room.

Prior to the 1900's and even many years into the 20th century, teachers had to complete grade 8. For those who had additional education, but not a high school diploma, they must take an exam from the State Board of Education. Those tests took two days and those who scored well were placed in a second category. Persons who failed, were allowed to retake the test. Those who had completed high school and had a diploma as well as those who had taken some college courses or graduated from college were not required to take the tests.

One room school teachers were required to teach students in grades one through eight in reading, math, science, social studies, English, penmanship, spelling, history and geography. Primary students were taught individually early in the day. Since there were no black boards, black paint was applied to a section of the wall. Theodora Smith supplemented the scant supply of books by bringing in newspapers, cross word puzzles, and games.

The school day began at 8 am. With a ten minute devotional period. From 8:10 until 10 am., younger children were instructed in individual or small groups while older students were involved in seat work. At 10 am there was morning recess during which children would play outside, weather permitting. After recess, classes resumed and younger children did seat work while teacher moved from grade to grade giving instruction. School was in session until 4 pm.

Jackson & Shively Families

The stories of two families especially represent accomplishment and success after Emancipation. One of the earliest accounts of an African American, who had once been enslaved, purchasing a farm is that of Judy Jackson. She and her husband had been enslaved by Tim Jackson—Judy was the housekeeper and Charles was in charge of the fields and crops.

In addition to their work for Mr. Jackson, they were allowed to raise some tobacco and keep the profits they earned. To keep that money safe,. Charles chose a tree in the nearby woods, removed a piece of bark and chiseled out a space large enough to house a tin can. Once the can was inserted, he carefully tacked the bark back to the tree and from then on, any money he earned and saved was placed in his make-shift bank. When the Civil War broke out, he decided to enlist, but left the savings in the tree, where only he knew the location. He showed the spot to his friend Stephen Simmons and said that if he did not return from the war, would Simmons give it to his wife Judy with instructions to use it to keep shoes on the children until they could purchase their

own shoes. He did not return as he died of pneumonia in the military hospital in De Vall's Bluff, Arkansas on April 10, 1866.

When the war ended and enslaved people were emancipated, Judy decided to continue working for Mr. Tim Jackson. After several years, she decided to purchase a farm of her own in Masonville. They lived there until she decided to sell the farm and move to Pleasant Ridge where her children would be able to attend school and they could worship at an African American church.

She purchased another farm in Pleasant Ridge and continued to live there until her death when the estate was divided. She had kept the tin can which had contained the money and other things in a trunk. Among the other items stored there was the original document from the U.S. Interior Department awarding her an $8 a month widow's pension for her husband's service to the military. The benefits became effective in April 1866, the year after the Presidents assassination and Lee's surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox. Theodora Smith was Jackson's grand daughter and remembered her as "a regal lady who went from being a slave of a Daviess County landowner to becoming a landowner herself." Judy Jackson lived to be about 100 years old.

Another African American woman who helped achieve her family's dream of buying a home was Octavia Shively. The day she learned she was a free woman, she took her two sons, Lester and Tom, and started walking. As they walked, not knowing where they would end up, they were welcomed by some families who asked them to come in and get warm and quench their thirst. At one of the homes where they stopped, Lester who was eight. became so impressed with the house which had windows and floors that he remarked, "this is the most beautiful house I have ever seen and one day I am going to own it." The sight of a house with windows and floor was amazing to the young boy because the cabin in which they lived during enslavement had neither.

During the next 40 years, both Lester and Tom worked diligently saving every penny they earned to put toward their goal. Though Tom chose to stay home on the farm where his mom lived and worked, he earned money from the crops he raised, while his brother Lester hired himself out on another farm where he was paid wages. These wages he sent home for his mom to save. After 40 years, they had enough savings to purchase the house they had seen as they walked with their mother on the first day of their freedom. Lester Shively was the father of Leslie Shively Smith. He personified the many newly freed persons who worked hard to fulfill their dreams.

The Mary Harding Home

The Mary Harding Home, founded in January 1910, started out as a residence for wayward children and those who were orphaned, living on the streets of Owensboro. It was started by the civic-minded Mary Harding for whom the home was later named. After serving many children in the community, Mary Harding saw the need for a facility for the elderly in Owensboro. At the time, there was nowhere for elderly African Americans without family or money to go. The mission of the Mary Harding Home changed course to fill a larger need in the community. She and her forward-thinking friends, Molly Edwards, and her daughter Emma Edwards, Molly Cable, Kelly Barker, Betty Price, Nettie Clark, Mary Jane MacMickens, Elsie Robinson, Nannie Locke, Ella Valentine, Georgia Merriweather, Mary Bell Foster, Hattie Cornelius, S.R. Guthrie, and Amilia Wheatley became the charter members of the Mary Harding Home which later evolved into a board of directors. Those women through their hard work and kind hearts had such a positive effect on the community as they strove to meet the needs of elderly housing in the city.

What started out as a two room house, grew and changed over the years. As needs arose and finances permitted, the home grew into a two-story building occupying two lots on 7th Street. The Mary Harding Home first housed only women, but added space for men when the need arose.

Many of the materials such as lumber and brick came from older homes that were torn down in the Owensboro area. The home was also financed by contributions from local churches and fund-raisers by the Board. Later, Emma Edwards was able to get financial help from the local and state governments, as well as through United Way which was still the United Fund at the time. A local resident, Samuel Rone, left his house on Poplar Street to the Mary Harding Home. That home was rented to tenants and the proceeds were used to help finance the needs of the Mary Harding Home and its residents. No resident was ever charged and no one was ever turned away.

One of the volunteers, Mattie Scott, later became the first paid matron of the home, doing all the cooking and cleaning for the meager sum of $25 a month. Later, she was given a room at the home as part of her salary. All of the other work was done by volunteers.

With the financial support of many white churches and with most of the volunteers and board members being from the black community, the Mary Harding Home served as one of the early institutions that helped to integrate Owensboro. The Home brought both races together to work for the common good of those in need. Because of declining residents, the Mary Harding Home closed its doors in June 1988.

The H.L. Neblett Center

In 1929, Hattie Neblett, a Tennessee State University student and an extension worker, came to Owensboro to join her husband, Dr. R.C. Neblett, a medical physician. She became increasingly concerned with the plight of the youth and the high crime rate of juvenile delinquency. In 1936, she met with concerned citizens and they agreed to help her form the Community Recreation Council. The original council members were Mr. and Mrs. Junius Valentine, Mrs. Sallie Griffith, Mrs. Laura Doss, Mrs. Eula Danzy. Dr. and Mrs. Neblett were co-chairs of the Council. Later members, were Mrs. Gertrude Talbott and Mrs. Estelle Moss. The Council members functions were (1) to raise funds and (2) to provide activities for the youth and adults. Social activities were held in Mrs. Neblett's home and meetings were held in different citizen's homes. The community recital was one of the largest community activities held. A community chorus was formed and it practiced all year, culminating in a community recital in the Western High School gymnasium. Mrs. Neblett led practices herself and eventually brought in a special choral director to finalize the program. The event was advertised and people from all over the area came for the event. Mr. C.D. Davidson and his wife participated as singers and musicians.

From 1936 to 1942 the council met at local churches to plan its recreation programs. They launched a fund drive in 1940 and raised money to purchase an old, dilapidated tobacco warehouse at 5th and Elm Streets. The building served a variety of purposes: a meeting place for civic committees, a site for conventions, church meetings, business meetings, NAACP conferences, and youth activities such as games of checkers, ping-pong, volleyball and skating. The center became an active place and safe place to give children recreation, entertainment, education, and culture, and pride in their community. In 1967 the first floor was converted into the West End Day Care Center run by Estelle Moss.

In 1974 the building was renovated to bring it up to code and provide more services. These efforts were supported by Mayor Waitman Taylor and local businesses and industries. In 1981 the facility was awarded a youth services award for its career program and programs were offered for children four and up. There were senior citizen activities, arts and crafts, drama and field trips offered. A new multi-purpose building was added in 2006 which allowed expansion of offerings and computer access to more young people and to continue the goal of motivating children to set

and achieve goals and to build self esteem. The center is open to the public, regardless of age group, race, or culture.

When the new 2,400 square foot addition to the Neblett Center was opened in 2006, one of the speakers was Denise Griffith, retired Regional Vice President for Pepsico's Frito Lay division. She recalled spending time at the Center, and later as a high school student she worked there and mentored other children. She called the new building with its increased programing, the "first step in changing many lives."

Griffith was the first black woman in Kentucky to be named All-American and one of the first to play in the USA Professional Women's Basketball League. She had been on the girl's basketball team as a student at OHS and graduated from the University of Louisville.

She was named by *Ebony Magazine* as one of the top ten African-American women in Corporate America with their "Women at the Top in Corporate America award.

She exemplifies the influence of Hattie Neblett, Addie Talbott and others who had a dream for the community building.

Black Chautauqua

By the turn of the 20th century, many of the 5,554 African-Americans in Daviess County struggled to earn a living as domestics, porters, tobacco stemmers, servants and sharecroppers. But there was a vibrant middle class made up of shop owners, teachers and professional men such as doctors and lawyers, including at least four grocers, a shoemaker, druggist, saloon owners and more. Dick Jackson owned a restaurant and a movie theatre. John Abner Agnew was the first African American to practice dentistry, but when he moved to Owensboro he became an undertaker. He was the only black coroner in the area for many years. Black women owned businesses like Madame Della Simmons who operated a beauty shop on Poplar St. There was also a black newspaper, the *Kentucky Reporter*. Outstanding educators were S.L. Barker, H.E. Goodloe, and Emma Edwards among others.

Because education was so important, the educated, community-minded middle class black men formed the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua in 1907. It began at the Odd Fellows Hall but because of the crowds moved to the fairgrounds which were located in an area south of 18th Street to Old Hartford Road between Triplett and Breckinridge Streets. One of the unique features was the rotunda which was attached to the grandstands where the programs took place. The rotunda provided an opportunity for recreation on the grounds and sleeping quarters for the families who camped out there during the two-week sessions.

Among the founders of the Chautauqua were Rev. J. Scott Erwin, S.L. Barker, Dr. P.G. Walker, Prince Walker, Robert Jackson, Dr. J.A. Agnew and Dr. R.L. Washington.

The Chautauqua provided a carnival-like atmosphere with concession stands, various games, slides, rides, baseball, and a merry-go-round. Activities included dances, oratorical contests, concerts, and cake baking contests. Well-known speakers were brought in from around the country. Among them were Hallie Q. Brown, a black educator and lecturer who founded the first British chautauqua in London; George Washington Carver, pioneering agricultural scientists; W.E.B. DuBois, NAACP co-founder; Dr. W.W. Shepherd, nationally-known missionary; Rev. A.D. Hurt, pastor of Fourth St. Baptist Church; Judge W.W. Harrison of Chicago; Ida B. Wells, journalist and anti-lynching activist; and Roscoe C. Simmons, well-known speaker and Presidential advisor. Speaker H.M. Mickens pointed out that although blacks had not accomplished

all they might, "history does not give an account of a people under similar conditions who have done so much in so short a time."

In the second year more than 500 season tickets were sold which, according to the *Inquirer*, was perhaps "the only colored chautauqua in the United States." Each year the crowds became larger with more exciting programs. Speakers urged advancement in character, education, property ownership and church life. In 1910, the newspaper had nothing but praise for the Chautauqua and called it a great success. By the 1920's, champion baseball teams played exhibition games drawing enthusiastic crowds. Owensboro Milling Company sponsored a popular cake baking contest which was won in 1922 by Lummie Glenn, Emma Edwards, Janie Slaughter, and Elizabeth George.

Although the 1925 season was called one of the most successful ever, it seems to have been the last year. A strong middle class continued for many years and churches and benevolent lodges continued in popularity. Perhaps the death of P.G. Walker in 1925 and the aging of some of the founders had an effect. Perhaps it was that the Ku Klux Klan had renewed activity across the nation, or the fact that after WWI, many blacks left for better jobs in the northern cities, or that new forms of entertainment were becoming popular. But the Chautauqua had been a high point in cultural unity and pride in the African-American community. It brought music, speakers, and inspiration. According to Mrs. Perkins, the Chautauqua offered a combination of recreation, entertainment and cultural activities to the community. "At that time, the black community did not have access to anything of this sort due to discrimination and segregation. This event was the only thing we had to look forward to. We simply would not have had such a caliber of speakers and performers in Owensboro in the early 1900's without..." the Chautauqua.

Bethlehem Baptist Church

There are many black churches in Daviess County, but Bethlehem Baptist Church stands out as an historic example of the transition from African-Americans sharing white churches to the liberation of having their own church space not only for worship. but to reinforce family and cultural ties as well. According to the *History of Green Brier Baptist Church from 1820 to 1970*, written by Wendell Rone, Green Brier Baptist Church is the second oldest Baptist Church in Daviess County. The church was organized at a meeting of the Tanner's Meeting House Church (now Buck Creek Church) on October 29, 1820. There were 25 members, of these nine were black and 16 were white. The nine black members consisted of five women and four men. They belonged to the Howard family and other slave owners who were charter members. For more than 40 years the black members were treated as a part of the church until 1851 when a committee was appointed to divide the building into an area for blacks as their own. On August 1, 1868. five years after the Emancipation Proclamation (which did not in fact free slaves in Kentucky, but they believed they were free), the official records of Green Briar Baptist Church stated: "On motion granted the entire colored membership of our church, letters of dismission to go into an independent organization."

The separation of black members from Green Brier and Oak Grove churches (Utica) gave the black members the opportunity to form a congregation of their own at Bethlehem Baptist Church. It is located about one mile east of Utica and is about three miles from Green Brier. When the building was constructed, its members sometimes walked miles from households and farms to attend church on Sundays. Before the war, enslaved families were often separated and the church was the only time some were able to visit with spouses, siblings, and even children.

Surviving pages from the Bethlehem Baptist Church's membership books in January 1906 lists names of families, their members and tithes. Copies of pages from the original church record books reveal names of many prominent families who were active church members.

Ministers who preached at Bethlehem between 1898 and 1990's include Rev. Young, Rev. P.S. Majors, Rev. G. Shrewsberry, Rev. H. Pope, Nelson Nichols, Rev. Cookie, Rev. Handy Watson, Rev. Gilbert, Rev. C.L. Jones, Rev. B.J. Green, Rev. R.L McFarland, Sr., James Hocker, Kyle Johnson, Larry Lewis, and Rev. Bruce Robinson.

In January 1906, approximately 210 people were members of the church. From the beginning of Bethlehem Baptist Church and even earlier, African- Americans lived, labored and died in Utica. Their existence, as members and generations of families that attended the church is poorly represented in the historical record. Most of the church and cemetery papers, ledgers, journals, and other documents pertaining to the church and cemetery no longer exist. It is located at 321 KY 140, east of Utica, just across from the church. There are unknown numbers of unmarked graves and the exact history of the cemetery is simply not known due to lack of documentation. Some of the burials were marked inscribed stones, though a few simple fieldstone head and foot markers are associated with some of the graves. Of the unknown. there are 69 head stones. We know that some Civil War soldiers are buried in this place. It became neglected, forgotten and overgrown and it was difficult to locate and identify burial sites. I 2002, members of the Utica and Owensboro communities, under the leadership of Wesley Acton and Ollie Crowe Purcell, began a clean up and restoration effort. Volunteers in small groups, were able to clear out all of the overgrowth and took great care to restore marked graves and headstones.

Although by 2015, the church was abandoned, it is still standing as testament to those early families who recognized the importance of having a church and cemetery of their own. There was a fire in 1932 causing extensive damage and that building constructed in 1883 was replaced with the existing structure. By the late 1980's, the few members who still attended services there began to drift away to other churches. Bethlehem Baptist Church provided a shelter and sense of community to the blacks of Utica. It was a refuge and safe haven for worship and expression and culture.

Pleasant Point Baptist Church

Another church that deserves note is Pleasant Point Baptist Church at Pleasant Ridge. Like African-Americans who founded Bethlehem Church and others throughout the country, there was a strong desire to feel complete and express their own cultural differences and provide their own spiritual and religious training among their people.

There were 15 African-American members of Bells Run Baptist Church between 1852 and 1871. In April 1871, six of the remaining eight of those black members left to form Pleasant Point church. The organizing members were Sarah Taylor, Harriett Taylor, Washington Wilhite, Mary Wilhite, Fanny Wilhite and Levi Wilhite. In 1874 with the congregation fully organized, others who joined were Thomas Richardson, Nellie Bryant, Dudley Brannon, Emma Brannon, Edmong Murray, Lucy Murray, Daniel Taylor, Brown Jackson, Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Jackson, Judith Jackson, Jerry Jackson, Sally and Mass Mason, and Bob and Jessie Wilson.

Pleasant Point's first meeting place was a log school building and services were held there until fire destroyed the structure. The congregation quickly rebuilt and in 1878, the present building was completed and is still in use. In 2014, a historical marker was placed at the church to commemorate its history, the adjacent cemetery, and a significant event in 1909. Dr. George Washington Carver who was a speaker at the Negro Chautauqua that summer visited the church and toured some area farms explaining and demonstrating his scientific work on agriculture, such as crop rotation. The Pleasant Point Church served not only for worship but as a community gathering place where Carver shared his knowledge.

Churches have always been an important part of African American life. They have served as the community centers, the touch stones for the people. Recent history has been made by Rev. Rhondalyn Randolph, who in 2007 became the first and only black woman to be a Baptist pastor in the Commonwealth and perhaps the first woman Baptist pastor in Daviess County. She is pastor of Pleasant Point Baptist church in Pleasant Ridge. Another black woman, a member of Pleasant Point Church, Dova Tinsley also made history in 2014 as the first black woman in Daviess County to become a deacon. This is not a position to be taken lightly, it requires study, an oral exam, and questions concerning qualifications for deaconhood and other church doctrine. Only one of the 50 churches that make up the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association has women as deacons and none have women pastors. These two women are among the many in our community who exhibit strong leadership and character.

Other recent black leaders include Johnny Williams who, in the 1960's, was the first black to run for City Commission. Later that decade Charles Brown ran unsuccessfully as did his brother Richard who ran twice in the early '70's. Finally R.L. McFarland was the first black elected to public office in Daviess county with election as City Commissioner. Daisy James was the first black woman to run for office and was narrowly defeated. She did go on to become the first black and first female to serve on the Owensboro Municipal Utilities board. Olive Burroughs was the first black woman City Commissioner, and Pam Smith Wright, only the second black woman and third African American, to be elected to the Owensboro City commission. She was Mayor Pro Tern in her first term, meaning she received the highest number of votes for the office. Alma Randolph ran for County Commissioner in 2014 but was defeated—to date there have been no women and no blacks elected to that body. Jean Higgs was appointed in 1979 to fill a vacancy on the Owensboro School Board and was then elected to a one year term in the next election.

And although there have been numerous black-owned businesses, the first black-woman owned business in downtown Owensboro is Nona's, owned by Maria Kelley. Fannie Dorsey, a champion for women and the elderly, was named by President Carter to the Federal Council on Aging.

The only Daviess County native to ever win the Pulitzer Prize was Moneta Sleet, photographer with *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. The first Daviess County black to be a member of the Kentucky General Assembly from Daviess County was Jim Glenn.

This has been a brief and very incomplete history of African Americans in Daviess County, only skimming the highlights. For more interviews see the three volumes "*Born with a Purpose...*" by the workers in the Job Training Partnership Summer Challenge programs from 1997-1999 and interviews done as part of the Daviess County Bicentennial project which are housed at the Kentucky History Center/Oral History Commission in Frankfort, the Kentucky Room of the Public Library and the Owensboro Museum of Science and History.

Remembering Aunt Sarah White

by Mary Immogene Knott-McDaniel

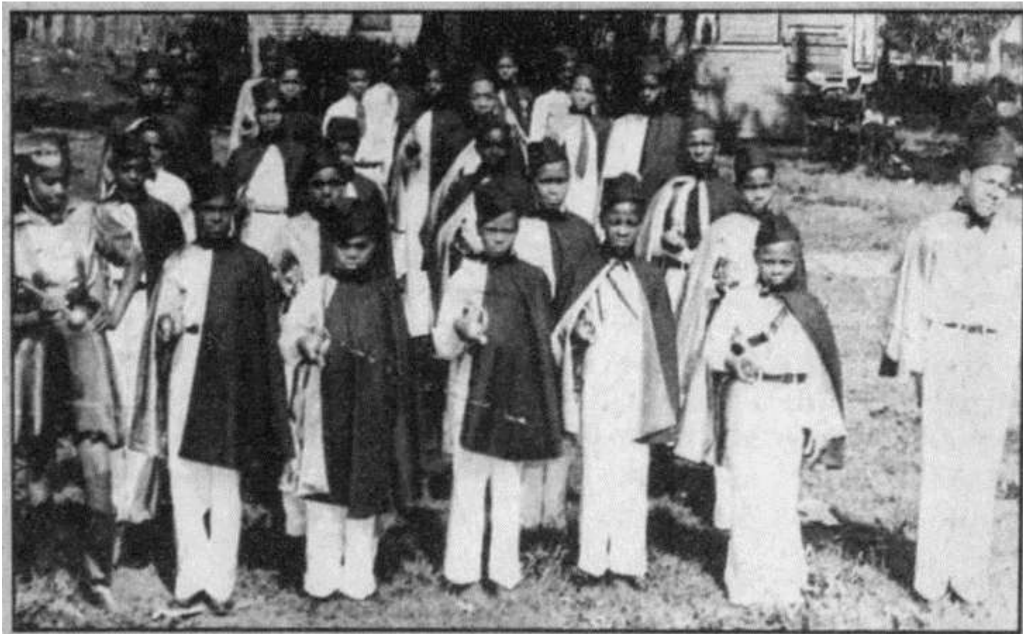
She came with the house. She had been there for years. When dad bought the little grocery and the big house (Brown's Valley, below St. Anthony's Church, by the railroad tracks), she went with it. She was part of it and without her it was not complete. No one knew how she had come to be in the house or how old she was (it was believed that she was more than 100 years old when she died in 1938). All that was known at the time was she went by the name of "Aunt Sarah". She wore a bandana tied under and over her hair, which weighed heavily on the nape of her neck. Her

dress of checked gingham hung to the floor, over several petticoats. Her dress almost hid her shoes, which she had made of rags, the soles of which were quilted, and the toes cut moccasin style stood 3 inches high. A rosette of gingham was visible when she walked. Over her dress, hung the straight gingham apron which was gathered at the top and tied about her waist. This or similar dresses, she wore until she died. All were made by hand and were kept spotless....

About 1932 a man came to the store to see Aunt Sarah and asked, "Sarah, don't you remember me from down in Mississippi? It's Dave, Old Dave, don't you remember going down on the barge with me to Mississippi?" Apparently she had been sold down the river as a slave, three times... where she was auctioned on the block. How she got back up the river and back to Kentucky, we never knew.

What I remember best about "Aunt Sarah".. .was the corn bread and beans she cooked for us and her very special pie which she called sugar pie that crunched when you bit into it. It was something like "chess" but not quite.

Finally Aunt Sarah was no longer able to do her work and was in great pain so she was taken to the Mary Harding Home, and the Knott family continued to visit her and arranged for funeral and burial when she died three years later. As she left the house for the last time "she went to the kitchen to bid the old "Home Comfort Range" goodbye. She went out the side door to the family car. It was her first ride in an automobile, her first time to go to the city, her first time to see a street car and no telling how many more first."



The Community Drum and Bugle Corps was sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930's. Moneta Sleet, Jr., far right, went on to become the only Pulitzer Prize winner from the Daviess County area.

Pleasant Ridge Rosenwald one-room school, Pioneer Village, Yellow Creek Park

Between 1914 and 1932, Julius Rosenwald, an American businessman, philanthropist, and president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, contributed $4.4 million toward construction of more than 5,000 schools and associated facilities for African American students and teachers in fifteen southern states. Pleasant Ridge, Utica, and Whitesville were selected as Daviess County sites.

In the early fall of 1919, African-American students enrolled in grades 1-8 at Pleasant Ridge. More than 1,000 rural Daviess County students graduated to ultimately became community leaders in Daviess County. The school closed in 1936–37 as students enrolled in consolidated African-American schools in Owensboro.

In 1992, the school was moved to Yellow Creek Park and restoration was completed in 1996 through the efforts of Daviess County Fiscal Court, Kentucky Bicentennial Commission, Kentucky African American Commission, Green River Area Development District, Preservation Alliance of Owensboro-Daviess County, and former Rosenwald students and teachers, as well as special friends.