



Orange County African-American Historical Society

Freetown

Freetown was a community of eight families who settled on land near the village of Lahore in northeastern Orange County. According to George Lewis, the first landowner at Freetown was Robert Ellis, who was given 18 acres by Dr. Tate Mason, for whom he had been the carriage man before emancipation. George Lewis' grandparents, Chester and Lucindy Lewis, and Matthew and Jennie Lewis, were also among the original residents of Freetown.

The first school for African-Americans in the community was held at Chester Lewis' house, in an addition built specifically for the school. Chester's wife, Lucindy, prepared food for the 30 students. Each family paid \$1/month for the teacher. The first teacher was Robert Stubbs, from the West Indies. Mr. Stubbs and his wife Mamie had a small farm near Freetown. Later, the county hired Isabella Lightfoot, who was educated at Oberlin College and Hampton Institute. Mrs. Lightfoot devoted many years to teaching and also worked to make better school facilities available at a time when the county neglected the education of African-American children.

Although the original houses of Freetown are gone, the strong community spirit has endured, in part through the congregation of Bethel Baptist Church, which was founded by some of the same families. Descendants of the founders of this small but strong community include such exceptionally accomplished individuals as the famous chef, Edna Lewis, and the photographer Matthew Lewis, Jr., who has won a Pulitzer Prize for his work.



Lower left: Chester Lewis
Middle: Early members of Bethel Baptist Church
Upper right: Edna Lewis
Source: Homecoming and Centennial Celebration of Bethel Baptist Church



Source: Virginia Transportation Research Council

Building Our County

James B. and Mitchell Jackson of Jacksontown, whose parents had been slaves, were both accomplished builders. The bridge pictured was built by James Butler Jackson in 1911 for an entrance road leading into a private estate near Somerset. The Satchell's Funeral Home building, on Church Street in Orange, was built by Mitchell Jackson for the Orange Creamery in 1909.

Contributions to our built environment made by African-Americans since the Civil War are relatively well documented. But we also need to research the contributions made during slavery times, and try to bring forward some of the builders who helped create Orange County's antebellum architectural treasures, both refined and humble.



Gilmore Cabin

Not far from James Madison's Montpelier, there is a dilapidated log and frame house, known as the Gilmore Cabin. This house, now part of the Montpelier property, is a rare example of post-Civil War African-American housing. The oldest part of the house, made of chestnut logs, was built about 1870 for George Gilmore, who had been a Madison slave. At that time the land was owned by President Madison's nephew, Dr. James Ambrose Madison. Census records indicate that George Gilmore lived there with his wife, Polly Braxton Gilmore, and their three children. According to his great granddaughter, Rebecca Gilmore Coleman, George Gilmore was over 90 years old when he purchased the house and sixteen acres for \$560, after the death of Dr. James Ambrose Madison in 1901. Mrs. Coleman's father, Harry Gilmore, was born in the Gilmore Cabin to Phillip and George Washington Gilmore.

Source: Clara Colby

In the mid-1920s, the Gilmores lost the land through a chancery suit. William duPont bought it at auction and renovated it to house Montpelier employees. The frame addition may date from that era. The cabin was last used as a residence in the late 1960s, and was hidden for years in the underbrush. The Telephone Pioneers of America, a club comprised of former AT&T employees, became interested in the cabin in 1992, and in the spring of 1993 they devoted many hours to clearing the area around it.

Montpelier is currently conducting a study of the Gilmore Cabin, funded by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. The findings of the study will be presented in a Historic Structure Report, to be completed by the end of the year. The report will include measured drawings, building analysis, and oral and documentary history of the cabin. The report will provide a basis for determining the best course for restoration.

Slavery at Montpelier

Because the slavery that evolved in the U.S. did not respect marriage or other family ties, slaves lived under the cloud of possible separation from their loved ones. A poignant example of how real this possibility was comes from the end of the Madison era at Montpelier. Depressed agricultural prices had led to a general decline in the Madisons' finances. James Madison had died in 1836, and mismanagement of Montpelier by Dolley Madison's son, John Payne Todd, an alcoholic and inveterate gambler, further worsened the family's financial circumstances. On June 16, 1844, Mrs. Madison conveyed some of the slaves to her son, by the deed shown at right. A scant three weeks later, one of the Montpelier slaves, Sarah Stewart, sent this plea for help to Dolley Madison:

My Misstress

Orange July 5th 1844

I don't like to send you bad news but the condition of all of us your servants is very bad, and we do not know whether you are acquainted with it. The sheriff has taken all of us and says he will sell us at next court unless something is done before to prevent it. We are afraid we shall be bought by what are called negro buyers and sent away from our husbands and wives. If we are obliged to be sold perhaps you could get neighbors to buy us that have husbands and wives, so as to save us some misery which will in a greater or less degree be sure to fall upon us at being seperated from you as well as from one & another. We are very sure you are sorry for this state of things and we do not like to trouble you with it but think my dear misstress what our sorrow must be. The sale is only a fortnight from next monday but perhaps you could make some bargain with some body by which we could be kept together. I get a young lady to write in my name but it is intended for us all. The husband of Caty is with you what is to be done with her and her children. Your dutifull servant

Sarah



Source: The Dolley Madison Project

Later that year, Dolley Madison sold Montpelier, and those held in slavery there, to Henry W. Moncure.

The Orange County African-American Historical Society (OCAAHS) was founded to explore African-American contributions to the cultural and historical heritage of Orange County, Virginia. We also seek to enhance and promote awareness of the accomplishments and contributions of people of African descent as organic and essential components of our community, and of our nation, at large. Toward those ends, we endeavor to identify, research and preserve African-American legacies, lore, and historical sites.

Prospect Heights School

Prospect Heights was built in the mid-1950s as an elementary school for African-American students. It opened, with an enrollment of 350 students, on December 17, 1956, a year and a half after the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that "racial discrimination in public education is unconstitutional." The formal dedication ceremony, held the following October 27, featured talks by local dignitaries, musical performances by students, and a presentation of the building by the architect. The initial student body at Prospect Heights was formed by consolidation of three schools, a three-room school on Charles Street in Gordonsville, a two-room school on Route 20 in Barboursville, and a six-room school on Bowler Lane in Orange. Prospect was used as a black school until the Orange County Schools were finally integrated in 1968. Prior to integration of the county schools, after finishing seventh grade at Prospect Heights, African-American students continued their studies, not at the local high school in Orange, but at a regional school for blacks, the George Washington Carver High School in Culpeper County.



Blue Run Baptist Church

Blacks have been integral to the Baptist Church in Orange County ever since the denomination first put down roots here in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Blue Run Baptist Church was established as early as 1766, and included two blacks among the founding members. The congregation met at a couple of different locations before moving to the present site. The black membership grew steadily over the years, and by the late 1850s over 80% of the members were black. After the Civil War the congregation split into separate black and white congregations. The black congregation bought the old church building, which has evolved considerably over the years, but apparently incorporates part of the original 1769 building. Blue Run continues to be a vital part of the community.



Source: Clara Colby

Food Vendors at the Gordonsville Train Station

After the Civil War, African-American women began selling food to passengers on trains passing through Gordonsville. Their wares included fruits, pies, coffee, and sandwiches, but the most famous offering was their fried chicken. One enthusiast called Gordonsville "the chicken-leg centre of the universe." Their business was notable enough to be mentioned several times in books and articles published over the years. Although most accounts refer to women preparing and selling the food, one description mentions both men and children selling food as well. This enterprise continued until after World War I.



Source: Scribner's Monthly, December 1872

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Tentative layout of Street Festival display (Scale approx.: 2":1')