

EX-SLAVES IN BUCKINGHAM

Paper read at the Buckingham Women's Club, April 18, 1923,

By Sarah H. Gilbert.

When we remember that it is more than fifty years since a few penstrokes of the great Lincoln caused the shackles to fall away from every slave in our country, we realize that the story of ex-slaves anywhere in the United States to-day must look for its material in the past. I have been able to find very little information recorded on my subject and have had to rely on what a few friends have told me and on my own recollections.

There was a time in Buckingham when a few slaves were held. General Davis, in his history of Bucks County, states that, following the Act of November 1, 1782, requiring that all slaves in the state be registered, two owners of Buckingham have the number of their slaves as four each. "Mathew Hughes, born in Buckingham in 1733," we are told on the same authority, "has the credit of being the first person to move a law in the Assembly, while he was a member for Bucks, for the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania. He died at nearly a hundred and was buried in Buckingham graveyard."

Long after slavery had died out in Pennsylvania, many negroes naturally came into this great state bordering on the slave land yet for the most part friendly disposed towards the freedom of the black man. Some of these had probably been freed by their Southern masters, but felt secure from kidnapping at a distance from the slave-dealers of the South; more of them were run-a-ways, who had made a successful dash for freedom. In many instances they had come along the line of the so-called "Underground Railroad," that system of relay help from post to post by friendly sympathizers, which carried them along toward remote and safer districts in states farther north and in Canada. One branch of this mythical railroad ran through Buckingham, and among the stations were one at William Johnson's, Valley Farm, and another at Edward Williams's place, now occupied by Joseph Stover. Edward's daughter, Mary Williams Atkinson, (Mrs. Howard Atkinson) said that she could remember, when on going down stairs in the morning, she might find a strange negro by the fire-place. Then he would be gone, and whence he came or whither he went she did not know and naturally, as a child, thought little or nothing of it. Later of course she knew that it meant that her home had been a station on the Underground Railroad. Not a few of the passengers carried dropped off at stations all along the route, as greater distance from "Old Master" made them feel more secure. Buckingham had its full share of them.

One of whom we used to hear a great deal from the older persons in the neighborhood was "Big Ben." He had been living peacefully somewhere around the end of the mountain for some time when his old master unexpectedly came up from the South to reclaim him. Big Ben fought valiantly for his liberty, ax in hand, and a number of sympathizing friends and neighbors gathered around to help him. The matter was finally settled by raising a purse for him to buy off

his master's claim. It is said that he was afterwards so elated and self-important over having been the hero of this notable occasion that he was inclined to lie down on his fancied laurels and work no more. We know that he spent the last years of his life in the county alms-house and died there. He was well named Big Ben as he measured seven feet tall in height and was otherwise of huge proportions. For years a favorite expression all through the valley for describing a garment especially large was "big enough for Big Ben." Perhaps the comparison is yet extant.

Thomas and Eliza Yorke were esteemable colored people living up in the neighborhood of "Honey Hollow," near the Cadwallader place. Thomas Yorke was not the real name of the husband, but poor Tommy lived in such constant fear of being apprehended and carried back to slavery that he never breathed his real name or the location of his old home to any one. He had a decided taste for big words without due regard to their meaning. For example, he related with gusto that when he assisted his wife Eliza to alight at the end of their wedding drive, "she made a flying discovery." Eliza long outlived her spouse. She had a taste for art which she indulged along with her religious zeal by making a remarkable picture and a most ingenious bedquilt depicting passages from the book of Revelations. The beasts, candlesticks, dragons, stars, angels,—all the elements of those great inspired visions that came to the saint on the Isle of Patmos—Eliza faithfully portrayed according to her ideas, and she sailed through their explanation with a readiness and a sureness that might well have surprised many a learned Doctor of Divinity. Eliza used to have oyster suppers as a financial device for paying for the winter's coal. Only the so-called "quality" were invited to these functions; she had strict ideas concerning the "Buckingham Four Hundred," and no colored person and no "poor white trash" enjoyed these culinary feasts, even at the rather high price. On these occasions Eliza, armed with a long rod would point to and explain the various designs in the quilt, which for the time was hung over a stair railing at a convenient height for all to see.

There was a Yorke son-in-law named Perry Brown, a lame man, who had had an interesting ride northward on the Underground Railroad. Robert Ash, who lived many years at the present Rand home, Shadow Brook Farm, said that he had brought Perry in a barrel from Darby to Philadelphia. (Robert had moved from Darby to Buckingham.) The barrel containing Perry was carefully covered, and similar barrels containing apples and likewise covered, were piled in the farm wagon all around the one containing human freight. Later Perry came to Buckingham, perhaps following his deliverer Robert. He married a daughter of the Yorkes and lived with them. A pretty little daughter of the Browns, Alice—full name, Alice Henrietta Miriam DuBois Brown,—used to attend Buckingham Friends First-Day School. For one of the closing days of the school Robert Ash prepared some verses reciting the romantic adventure of Perry's rescue. Would that the lines were still in existence! All of the family have gone now. Tommy Yorke passed long ago by nature's way; Elizabeth Slotter thinks that Eliza went to Troy, and of course she would take her prize possessions, the picture and the bed-quilt, with her along with some really fine old furniture that she had. Perry got into a colored home near Philadelphia where he probably ended his days.

Speaking of Buckingham First-Day School reminds one to say that a colored man, one Robert Morris, was once a member of Buckingham Friends Meeting. Fanny J. Broadhurst can remember when a very nice-looking colored woman, wearing a Quaker bonnet and with a Quaker kerchief around her neck, came to call on her grandmother, Jane Atkinson, at Valley Farm. She may have been Robert's wife as her name was Rachel Morris. Rachel was not a member of meeting, however, and Robert Morris' membership seems to have lapsed after a time.

Billy Toller was an old ex-slave in the neighborhood, who lived up at The Hollow, back of Woodlawn, now occupied by the Sotters. He had had a cruel overseer, and wicked looking stripes and welts on his back bore mute evidence of the inhuman treatment he had received.

Samuel Russell, who was an ex-slave living at one time at the mountain, used to say that he had had a good master in the South. He may have been good to his slaves, but he was a drinker and a gambler. One morning after a carouse he came to Russell and a fellow slave and said, with feeling, "Boys, I'll have to sell one of you." Sammy made answer, "I'm your man," and was himself present at a bargain with a neighboring planter for the sale of his time and work. The slave kept no record of the days and months, but one morning when he was eating his breakfast he found that the time of service had expired for in rushed his old master, shouting, "You are your own man to-day." Sammy left at once, went to Cuba, lived through an attack of small-pox, that dread scourge of those days, and drifted to Philadelphia and to Buckingham. He bought land at the end of the mountain where he lived out a clean honorable life. The house is still standing, Joseph Watson says, the first one on the hill above Buckingham station. Samuel Russell had a most excellent garden of his own, and he worked for Charles Watson's, not far away, a friendly haven for colored folks. One of Russell's neighbors was Philip Grier, also a former slave.

William Giles, who resided so long on the mountain where his son of the same name still lives, farms a little, and makes and sells his Maplewood Liniment, emerged here first probably at Johnson's Underground Railroad Station, Valley Farm. He was brought up at Rebecca Ely's Place, now Lindenhurst, the country home of her grandson, Edward Paxson.

Some ex-slaves came into the neighborhood through the kindly offices of Sallie Cadwallader, a Friend from about Horsham, who taught for a while at a Freedmen's School, at Bladensburg, Maryland. Among them was Louisa, who came to Michael Haines's, at the Barley Sheaf Farm, the present Force place. She seems always afterwards to have lived in Buckingham. She married Charles Piatt, an ex-slave, and lived in various places about Holicong—in the cottage at the corner of Mrs. Walbank's place, in the dwelling back of Wayside—and finally next to the shops in Holicong where she died not long ago. She was a good cleaner and laundress and was much respected in the community. Susan Wilson Wells was another of the group; she lived to an extreme old age; her death was noted in the newspapers but recently.

A third of the same party of girls was Lucy, whom many of us most kindly remember as Lucy Lloyd, living later with her husband and family on the Holicong-Mechanicsville road, in a neat stone cottage remodeled from the former Tyro Hall school house. Lucy would narrate that her master used to send her to dance for his guests as they sat at wine. She must have been an

attractive child and her dancing and amusing tricks and lively ways pleased them. Her master would show his appreciation by not draining his glass, and the child was allowed to have the leavings as her reward. She became free at thirteen, probably through the Emancipation Proclamation. She had always been a house servant and well treated.

Not so with her mother, Jane Barnes, who had been “sold south”—dread phrase—and been a field hand under the overseer’s lash. When opportunity permitted after the war Lucy, with pure filial devotion, went down from Buckingham, found her mother, and brought her back here, where she lived to an advanced age outliving her daughter. Not that she knew what that age was for her invariable answer when questioned, “How old is thee, Jane?” was, “Dunno; wisht I did.” She was one of the last around here to continue the picturesque Southern style of wrapping her head in a bandanna handkerchief. She always wore a blue one and I bought her a red one as more becoming, only to find that she didn’t like it. “Too niggery,” was her explanation. She lived in our family for some time and was a most devoted and loyal servant, though she had many limitations. She could not read or write and never learned, at least not while with us, to tell the time of day from the clock, though she seemed to have some secret means of her own of knowing when to put on the “taters” to boil, etc. One harmless little vice she had was her indulgence in “baccy,” but she was above the fashionable lady of to-day in using an honest pipe instead of the harmful cigarette. She had many Southern expressions that she had brought North. The bars at the meadow pasture were the “cow-gap.” She would ask, “Shall I spill these yere beans on this yere dish?” I once made out a conjunction of the verb do, as Jane used it. The synopsis was about the like of this—

Present - I dun (it)

Imperfect - I bin dun (it)

Perfect - I dun dun (it)

Pluperfect - I gone dun (it)

Pluperfect Emphatic - I bin gone dun (it)

They said that scars from torturing whippings were on Jane’s dark body; there seemed singularly few marks on her white soul. Some touching tales could be told of her loyalty and devotion to those whom she served, leading her over into real self-sacrifice, which was none the less sacrifice because it was not necessary. Her grave is on the sunny slope of the mountain in the graveyard of the Mount Gilead church, marked with a neat headstone. At least one person turns aside in the summer to stand by it and think kindly of faithful Jane.

Some Underground passengers that came to Buckingham had dropped off at the Jonathan Magill station in Solebury and among these were Solomon and Caroline Pollard. Edward Hopkins came to Benjamin Smith’s, at Valley Farm, and Dick Hopkins to Albert Paxson’s, on the opposite side of the road.

A few of us can remember when Henson Wilson and his wife Fanny lived in Buckingham. They lived around the end of the mountain and, the latest that I can remember them, in the little stone house along Bycot Avenue, made over from the old lime-kiln once standing in the same place. Henson was very happy one autumn to be permitted to “blade,” in the

old-fashioned Southern way, the fine crop of corn between his home and the schoolhouse. He admitted frankly that he had worked without pay in slavery for so long that he thought white people owed it to him now to keep him without work. He could not read or calculate, but he had some way of his own of recognizing a one-dollar bill. The sweet strains of his banjo used to float on the evening air as far as Holicong when Henson rested from his labors in the cool of a summer evening. Perhaps his thoughts were going back to gay scenes in the old slave-quarters at such an hour. Henson had a grand-daughter Mattie, who always seemed a kind of Topsy to some of us, with her cute appearance, ways and talk. As she grew older a light-colored negro lad looked her way sometimes, at whom Mattie would toss her little dark head scornfully and to whom she would refer to as "that molasses-candy feller." While she was living with us she rushed in from school one afternoon to announce a coming holiday, Washington's Birthday. She listened with but a polite perfunctory show of interest, while mother explained to her who Washington was and why people stopped their usual work to celebrate his birthday. Then she had an interesting thought and her face lighted up with real interest as she demanded, "Well, who was that Linkum feller?" My little sister said to her one day with the unconscious cruelty of childhood, "Mattie, does thee ever wish thee was white?" "Taint no use, Miss Emma, 'taint no use," she answered with an admirable philosophy. I have thought of that answer many times in the years since, in moments of grieving over encounters such as we are all likely to have with insuperable obstacles, getting a little grim satisfaction from the application of the little black girl's philosophy.

If Mattie typified Topsy, there was also a kind of Uncle Tom among us. He came along in this wise. During the Civil War he had gone with this master to the Confederate army as part of his master's body-guard. One time when the boys in blue were lying encamped just across the river, Charlie made a grand coup and appeared the next morning in the midst of the Union army... They finally passed him on to Washington where he duly enlisted in a negro regiment and went down to the front again. I believe that he fought through the rest of the war, then drifted northward and finally landed in Buckingham. He lived for a time at Edward Williams's, and afterwards came into father's employ and worked in the tannery. He had a great desire for an education and sometimes in the winter went to the public school at Holicong, where I think he never got beyond the class of beginners. I can remember seeing the great stalwart fellow standing up in the class line with the smallest children, poor Charlie regularly going down to the foot of the class each day as, in "trapping," the others passed above him, and smiling cheerfully over it. My little sister tried to teach him in the evening sometimes when he lived with us. They sat at the table in the kitchen with the book before them, little white finger and big black finger following patiently along the line of one-syllable words. She was a slight fair child with light hair, and the picture they made could not but suggest Little Eva and Uncle Tom. She came rushing in to the assembled family in the living room one evening and burst into tears. "I just can't make Charlie learn." It probably was an almost hopeless task. His teachers did not succeed much better with him at Howard University, Washington, where a few years later he wasted some of his hard-earned money in a further attempt. He was reckless in expenditure when he came north and

for the first time had money of his very own to spend. One time his wardrobe contained thirteen hats by actual count and other things in proportion. In his older years he went quite to the other extreme of parsimony, going in rags and apparently suspicious of designs upon his little savings. He bought a small lot of land above the village of Buckingham and lived and died there under distressing circumstances some years later. The old shack is still standing, and a number of people in the neighborhood remember Charlie Sellers.

The old conditions have passed away. It is probable that there is not a person in Buckingham to-day, to whom the caption of this little paper, "Ex-Slave," applies. We all agree that slavery was most deplorable, yes, iniquitous, and the greatest blot on our country's history. Years ago we in Buckingham most sincerely befriended the slave, risking the stern rigors of the nation's laws to help him secure his liberty. But we can lay too much flattering unction to our souls and assume that all the benefits were and always have been on one side. There must have been a positive zest of adventure satisfied in our old Quaker worthies who indulged in the dangerous, treasonable activities of the Underground Railroad. What field of adventure to-day here in Buckingham offers anything like it in interest! The leaders were influenced by humanitarian impulses that carried them along, but there must have been no little reward too in the glow of putting across the dangerous enterprise.

The slaves that came to us and stayed with us shared in the development of our community—felled trees, made roads and fences, planted and gathered crops, helped in the housework, cared for the children—became an integral part of the community. Into the somewhat humdrum life of the neighborhood they injected many an element of picturesqueness and interest. They brought love of color, they brought music, they brought their folk-lore, some of it perhaps passed down from far-away forebears in Africa, they brought their strange superstitions, they brought their happy-heartedness, they brought their zest of living, their power of casting away responsibilities for the future—they brought much for which we may well look back with feelings of interest and appreciation. For all these things and greater considerations, it may well be considered a just part of our "white man's burden" to help their descendants, as now are thrust upon them, not too well prepared, the responsibilities that freedom and education and the franchise bring.

With the passing of the years and the generations, there has sprung up, even in many places in the North, in place of the sympathy that used to exist for an oppressed race, a strong race prejudice; in some parts of the country have been fierce inter-racial riots and wars, a stain on our national reputation. Since the negro has found out that he did his part in the World War and did it well, he is less likely to submit to injustice and wrong from authority. It would seem not to be too much to hope that Buckingham, once the refuge of the slave, may be kept remote from the sinister influences that tend to set the two races at enmity, and that there may continue to prevail the old tradition of mutual good-will and helpfulness that have come down to use from the time when there were ex-slaves in Buckingham.

Transcription Note:

Three versions of this paper have been preserved in the Sarah H. Gilbert papers at the Mercer Museum library, consisting of a handwritten version that seems to be an earlier draft, a typescript version that seems to be the final draft, and a version that was printed in the *Bucks County Daily News*, which contains some errors and is not a faithful copy. This transcription was made from the typescript version, which seemed to be the most definitive. Transcribed by Jesse Crooks, 2024.

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