

African American Life in Wayne County, New York, 1789-1900

Many will be surprised to learn that African Americans were among the pioneer settlers of Wayne County, New York, and have been part of the fabric of the community throughout its history. The story of these pioneers and those that come after them has not been told in the traditional history books and it is hoped that this survey and report will provide an overview to the life and times of these county residents in the overall context of Wayne County history.



*Thought to be Job and Phebe Travice in the early 1850s.
Photos from the collection of Robert Chatfield, Wolcott, New York
Copies given to Wayne County Historian's Office, 1980*

The Pioneer Settlers: 1789 – 1820

Settlement of Wayne County began in 1789 with the arrival of the Stansell and Featherly families from the Mohawk Valley in what is now the vicinity of Lyons, New York. Within a year a few hearty souls led by John Swift had found their way to the Palmyra area. These first settlers mostly hailed mostly from eastern New York State and the New England states. With the arrival in 1792 of Charles Williamson, land agent for English investors, the market for the “Genesee Country” was expanded to include residents of Virginia and Maryland – specifically southerners with slaves. Williamson recognized that the southerners were as hungry for land as were the New Englanders and with a captive labor force it was thought these southerners would be more likely to purchase larger tracts of land than the pioneers who had to rely on family or a scant pool of local workers to clear the land.

Most of African Americans who arrived in Wayne County between 1789 and 1810 did not come as free persons of color, but as slaves of southerners who had been enticed to the area by the salesmanship of Charles Williamson. The three largest slaveholders of Wayne County - Capt. William Helm of Prince William County, Virginia; Daniel Dorsey of Frederick County Maryland, and Col. Peregrine Fitzhugh of Maryland, Virginia – brought between 120 and 180 enslaved persons with them. Those African Americans joined the ranks of the pioneers of Wayne County.

Much of this migration took place with the knowledge that the institution of slavery in New York State was under attack. In fact in 1799 the New York State Legislature passed a law insuring the gradual emancipation of slaves held within the state. The 1810 census recorded 52 slaves and 48 free persons of color in the towns of Sodus, Palmyra, Williamson, Wolcott, and Phelps in Ontario

County, New York. There were only two households headed by free persons of color containing a total of 5 persons.¹

In the 1820 census there was only one slave recorded in the towns that would make up Wayne County, New York when it was established in 1823. There were 102 free persons of color living in households headed by African Americans and another 34 in households headed by white people. These pioneer African American families were concentrated in three areas of Wayne County – Sodus, Palmyra and Lyons.² Within a ten year period the African American community of Wayne County had been firmly established and many of these families would remain members of the Wayne County community throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century.

The African Americans who joined the ranks of the pioneer families of Wayne County included Aaron and Betsey Brister of Palmyra; Shadrach and Mary Jenkins of Macedon; David and Polly Cooper, Abraham and Veny Bradington, William and Sarah Newport, Thomas and Rosetta Lloyd – all of Sodus; John and Patty Taylor and John and Sabra Young of Ontario.

The Growth Years: 1820 - 1860

Wayne County experienced its greatest growth spurt in population and prosperity in the years immediately before and after the construction of the Erie Canal. African Americans joined the new residents and by 1830 their total population increased to 178, up 30% over 1820 figures.³ Palmyra, Sodus and Lyons continued to be home to most of the African Americans, but the towns of Macedon, Galen, Huron, and Arcadia also experienced growth in this segment of the population. Figures from the 1860 census put the total African American population at 262 persons, located in thirteen of the fifteen towns of the county.

It was during this time period that the African American population became more economically diverse. Farm laborers, day laborers, and domestics were the main occupations of African Americans living in the county, yet these years saw the development of a small middle class among their ranks made up of farmers who owned or leased land, barbers and small business owners. The black barbers played a significant role in the African American life during this time period, being active participants in efforts to expand the economic, social and political status for African Americans.

Members of the Lloyd family of Sodus Point were among the first to test their entrepreneurial skills. In 1833 Lancaster Lloyd and John Logan advertised that were taking over the shop of Dr. Jones in the Rice Building in the Village of Lyons, offering shaving, hair dressing, clothes dressed and cleaned.⁴ Lancaster was followed into the barber business by his brothers, Luther A. B. Lloyd and William T. Lloyd. Luther worked in Lyons and Mentz, Cayuga County in the mid 1850s. William set up shop in Palmyra in the late 1840s. In 1850 African American barbers were working in all the Erie Canal villages of Wayne County – James Huso, Clyde; George Thompson, Lyons; Charles Duffin, Newark; Perry B. Lee and William T. Lloyd, Palmyra; and Redding Gibbs, Macedon. The 1855 census for Wayne County listed nine African American barbers in those communities. In 1860 Sodus Point and Wolcott were added to the list of villages with barber shops run by African Americans.

The 1850 Agricultural Census for Wayne County provides a glimpse at the lives of several African American farmers. George Cooper of Sodus only farmed 6 acres, but he reportedly

¹ 1810 Federal Census, Ontario County, New York. NOTE: It is said that there was a group of fugitive slaves who had settled in the Palmyra area before 1810, but it is possible that they did not wish to be counted in any census.

² 1820 Federal Census, Ontario County, New York

³ 1830 Federal Census, Wayne County, New York.

⁴ *Western Argus*, Lyons, New York, April 3, 1833 (date of ad); www.fultonhistory.com

produced 50 bushels of Indian corn; 50 bushels of Irish Potatoes, 200 pounds of butter and 3 tons of hay.⁵ Lewis Sampson of Savannah worked 27 acres and his crops included wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, Irish potatoes, Buckwheat and hay. In addition Mr. Sampson raised sheep, producing close to 30 pounds of wool that year.⁶ In the town of Ontario, John Young's farm included 30 acres of improved land on which he grew wheat, Indian corn, Irish potatoes and hay. Two hundred pounds of butter, 30 pounds of wool and handmade manufacture valued at \$20 rounded out the farm activity. The largest, and probably most successful, African American farmer in Wayne County was Job Travice of Galen. By 1850 Mr. Travice had been on his 85 acre farm for 6 years. That year his farm was valued at \$4000 and his livestock included 8 horses, 5 milk cows and 35 sheep, valued at \$720.⁷

The issues of slavery and civil rights for African Americans were part of the national discourse during the years leading up to the Civil War and residents of Wayne County, including African Americans, were active participants in this discussion. Perry B. Lee, a barber in Palmyra, was listed among those attending an Anti-Slavery Convention held in Rochester, New York in January 1838.⁸ In 1839 the editor of *The Colored American* called upon Mr. Lee and others to help organize the first New York State Colored Men's Convention to be held in September 1840.⁹ The same newspaper reported that Lee and Samuel Ringgold Ward of South Butler had been appointed Wayne County committee at the Colored Men's Convention held in Troy, New York in August of 1841.¹⁰ John Young of Ontario and Shadrick Jenkins of Macedon were included in list of donors at the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society meeting held in Palmyra in February 1841.¹¹ Unnamed colored citizens of Wayne County even sent a petition to the New York State Legislature asserting that those who had been held in slavery up to 1827 should be paid for their services.¹² It is doubtful the petition was ever given consideration by the state legislators, but the fact that the African American community of Wayne County was so politically active provides a new dimension to their life in Wayne County.

It has been demonstrated that the African American community of Wayne County participated in the efforts to assist escaping slaves seeking freedom in Canada or perhaps within the county. In 1834 black residents of both Palmyra and Rochester combined efforts to assist in the apparently unsuccessful escape of a female slave who had been brought to Palmyra by her owner.¹³ An established African American settlement near the shores of Lake Ontario and between the ports of Pultneyville and Sodus Point was perfectly placed to provide succor to freedom seekers. It is possible that Richard McKinney, formerly of Virginia, may have met his future wife Polly Ann Newport of Sodus while stopping off at this settlement. Richard and Polly Ann were married about 1860 and their oldest son Dennis was born in Canada in 1861. Samuel Cheney and Daniel Robinson, both freedom seekers settled in the Lyons area about 1860 after a stop in Oswego, New York.¹⁴

The Civil War and After: 1860 – 1900

The Civil War erupted in 1861 and would have a major impact on the fabric of Wayne County life for years to come. Close to 5000 men served in the Union forces from Wayne County during the

⁵ 1850 Federal Census, Sodus, Wayne County, New York, Agricultural Schedule, pp 125-126

⁶ 1850 Federal Census, Savannah, Wayne County, New York, Agricultural Schedule, pp. 49-50

⁷ 1850 Federal Census, Galen, Wayne County, New York, Agricultural Schedule

⁸ *Friend of Man*, January 24, 1838.

⁹ *The Colored American*, July 27, 1839 (www.accessiblearchives.com).

¹⁰ *The Colored American*, September 11, 1841 (www.accessiblearchives.com).

¹¹ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 18, 1841.

¹² *The Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, April 4, 1844, 2:4.

¹³ *Wayne Sentinel*, August 15, 1834, 3:1.

¹⁴ *Oswego Palladium Times*, January 23, 1888 (www.fultonhistory.com).

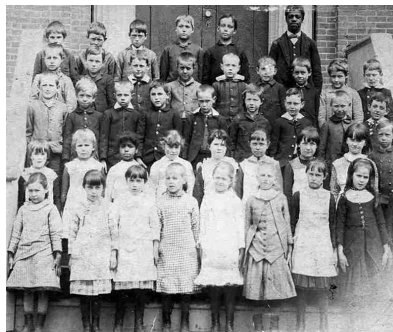
four-year conflict, among them almost 40 African Americans with their roots in the county. The family of James and Almira Gregor sent six sons to war; Prime Cortright of Huron and three of his sons joined the army; Porter and William Wooby of Lyons and their brother-in-law William Newport of Sodus served together in the 29th Connecticut; and the two sons of widow Lydia Bogart of Palmyra left home, but only one returned.

There was another shift in the African American population in Wayne County after 1860. In 1860 only 6% of the African American population was identified as having been born in the “south”, with 82% having been born in New York State and most of them in Wayne County. By 1870 the numbers of southern born African Americans enumerated in the census of Wayne County had jumped from 22 to 70, representing 20% of that population. Percentage of those born in New York State had dropped to 73%.¹⁵

Many of the newcomers to Wayne County married into the pioneer African American families. Henry Sims came north from Louisiana after the Civil War with returning soldiers of Company C of the 160th NY Regiment – the unit he has served with as a cook. He married Henrietta Wooby, youngest child of John and Clarissa (Jacobs) Wooby and settled in the hamlet of Marengo in the town of Galen. Children and grandchildren of Henry and Henrietta Sims continued to be residents of Wayne County well into the mid twentieth century. William Scott, formerly of Tennessee moved to Wayne County about 1865, where he met and married Nancy Sampson, only child of Lewis and Elizabeth (Briggs) Sampson. The couple inherited the Sampson farm in Huron which remained in the family until the twentieth century. William J. Washington, born in Alabama, married Priscilla Newport, daughter of Hiram and Sylvia (Taylor) Newport of Sodus Point. Mr. Washington worked as a barber in Sodus Point until his death in 1906. George Bacome (nephew of William Scott) from Tennessee married Clara Potter, daughter of James and Margaret (Newport) Potter. Hanson Waples married Ellen Wooby Grayson, daughter of John and Clarissa Wooby and widow of Isaac Grayson after the death of his wife Eliza.

After 1880 the African American population of Wayne County began to decline. That year the total population equaled 391 persons, the highest it would reach in the nineteenth century. By 1900 the numbers had been reduced to 225 and by 1925 there were only 89 persons living in the county who were identified as African American.¹⁶ It was during the last two decades of the nineteenth century that the younger generations of these pioneer families were beginning to move out of Wayne County and into more urban settings in search of more opportunities. Rochester, Syracuse, Ithaca, and Elmira were often the destinations for these young people. This exodus of African Americans altered the social dynamics within their Wayne County communities, but in many cases these young people seemed to regroup in the urban settings, continuing their close family and friendship ties – a fact that is still evident in the descendants of these pioneer families.

Marjory Allen Perez



Lyons Class, 1884-85. Note African American student and teacher

¹⁵ Analysis of census data, 1860 through 1925, Marjory Allen Perez.

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