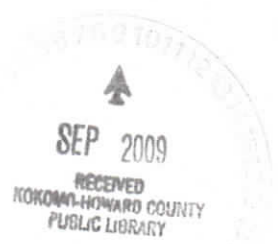


HOOSIER FREEMEN



"Harboring Negroes" in Antebellum Parke County, Indiana

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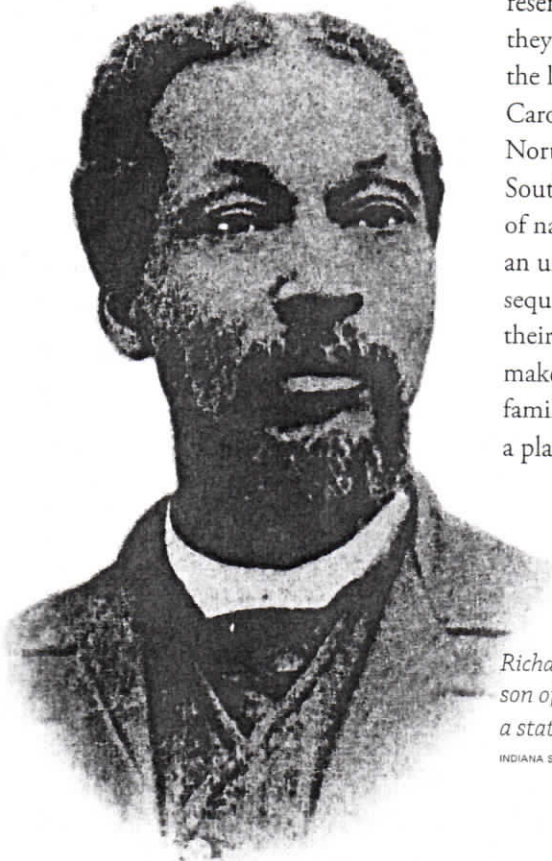
Like many free African Americans living in North Carolina in the 1830s, Britton Bassett and his grown sons did not fit into the well-established social order of a slave state. In North Carolina there was room for the rich planter, the poor white farmer, and even the slave, but the freeman's place was hard to define. The existence of the freeman was contrary to the image that most white Carolinians had of their society. To many slave-owning southerners, the "benevolent" institution of slavery provided guidance and stability to a savage race. A freeman, living on his or her own, without the benefit of a mas-

ter, was contrary to that belief. To others, the freeman was a bad influence on slaves because slaves might decide to seek a life without a master.

Bassett and his sons were skilled craftsmen. Britton was a tailor by trade, and three of his sons were carpenters. This fact made them good targets for white anger during times of community stress, such as after the publication of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829 and Nat Turner's slave rebellion in 1831. Both events were partially attributed to freemen or slaves given too much freedom. Many whites, especially those in the lower economic classes, were resentful of free and successful blacks who they believed competed with them for the lowest-paying positions in the North Carolina economy. As a result, freemen in North Carolina and in other parts of the South learned to navigate in a quagmire of nasty public opinion, unfair laws, and an unfriendly economic climate. Consequently, many freemen chose to leave their homes and migrate to the North to make a better life for themselves and their families. Parke County, Indiana, was such a place.

Parke County offered the freeman a number of advantages. First and foremost, Indiana was a free state where slavery was banned by Article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and reinforced by the 1816 Indiana Constitution. In addition, land was rich, plentiful, and inexpensive. The coming of the Wabash and Erie Canal and Indiana's mammoth internal improvement projects for new roads and bridges made Indiana a favorite destination for many moving west. Lastly and most importantly, Parke County offered a small but helpful Quaker community named Bloomfield (the community changed its name to Bloomington in 1860).

Freemen and slaves often turned to the Quaker Church for protection and support. When the price of slaves in the South had made the kidnapping of freemen a lucrative underground business, Quakers offered money and legal support in order to regain the freedom of blacks who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery. Quakers also established a system where people could will their slaves to the Quaker Yearly Meeting in North Carolina, who in turn treated them as freemen. The Quakers continued this practice until it was ended by the North Carolina Supreme Court. The court ruled in *Contentnea vs. Dickerson* (1827) and *Redmond vs. Coffin* (1831) that Quakers treating slaves as virtually free was a violation of North Carolina law. Perhaps in anticipation of the coming difficulties, the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Quakers in 1826 encouraged migrating members to take freemen with them who wished to leave the state. This



Richard Bassett, the eldest son of Britton Bassett and a state legislator.

INDIANA STATE LIBRARY

Richard Bassett

was done to ease the financial burden on freemen, to provide safety for them as they traveled, and to aid them in establishing new homes.

The small community of Bloomfield was heavily populated by Quakers from North Carolina, including Quakers from Guilford and Wayne counties. Members of the Bloomfield monthly meeting, including members of the Hadley family, ran an Underground Railroad operation with a number of safe houses in the area. By the time Bassett, his sons, and their families arrived in Parke County in the early 1840s, there was already a small black community established that numbered some sixty-three individuals. The family also chose to go by the name of Bass, which was a name they often used in North Carolina. By 1850 the number of African Americans in the community had grown to 228. The center of the black population in Parke County was in and around Penn Township, which by no coincidence was in close proximity to the Quaker community.

Most African Americans lived near the town of Annapolis, a small industrial community just two miles north of Bloomfield. Annapolis boasted a number of businesses, including a pump factory, hotel, hat shop, blacksmith shop, and after Britton's arrival, a tailor shop. There were also African Americans living in Adams, Jackson, and Washington townships. One family, John Hartwood and his wife Salina, was a mixed-race couple living on a farm in Adams Township, away from other African Americans.

During the 1840s the black population of Parke County grew by more than 300 percent due to migration into the county. Parke County reflected the attitude of most Hoosiers about the newcomers. Some welcomed the new arrivals, while others professed a strong hatred for slavery but showed no love for the freed slaves and



Seventh Judicial Circuit prosecutor James Cameron Allen took action against white Parke County citizens for helping former slaves and other African Americans in the county. Allen later moved to Illinois, where he won election to Congress as a Democrat and also served as a judge. He died in 1912.

did not want them living anywhere nearby. Another segment of the population supported the rights of the slave owner and did not support the end of slavery. Black settlements, in Parke and other counties, could often be found near Quaker settlements.

The tipping point in Parke County for those who chose not to tolerate blacks moving into their community was an incident that brought several blacks to the area. During 1845 Thomas Woodard, a Quaker from North Carolina, received word that the family had inherited approximately fifty slaves from a relative of his first wife, Zilpha. Thomas had married Zilpha Cook in 1815, and, according to records in the Guilford College archives,

he was disowned by the Quaker church because she was not a Quaker and had brought slaves into the marriage. After Zilpha's death, Woodard married Sarah Mayo in 1828 and migrated with his slaves to Indiana. Upon arrival, he freed his slaves according to Indiana law and rejoined the Quaker Church in Bloomfield.

The opening of Indian-owned lands in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi during the antebellum period was a boon to entrepreneurs. Anyone owning slaves could establish themselves as a successful plantation owner in a very short time. Sometime in the mid-1840s, Zilpha's Alabama relative died, and Woodard and the couple's five living children inherited the plantation and its human property.

Upon hearing of this bequest, Woodard approached his fellow Quakers of the Bloomfield Monthly Meeting as to what course to take. It was decided that the plantation would be liquidated and its human property brought north to freedom. Doctor Horace Cannon and Washington Hadley, a young merchant, were selected to travel to Alabama and bring the slaves to Parke County.

Traveling from Alabama to Indiana with about fifty former slaves was not an easy task. Railroads were almost nonexistent in Alabama and even good roads were few. It was likely Cannon and Hadley traveled by boat to New Orleans and brought the group up the Mississippi River by steamboat. Somewhere near the Wabash River the travelers transferred to two smaller steamboats and traveled to Montezuma in Parke County. In Montezuma they were met by a hostile crowd that refused to allow the party to disembark. The captain of one of the boats handed Cannon a pistol that he aimed at the hostile crowd. The sight of a Quaker with a gun seems to have had the desired effect; the crowd parted and allowed the party to leave the steamboats.

Published histories of the event report that the former slaves were given small farms purchased with the proceeds from the sale of the Alabama plantation. No evidence of these purchases, however, has been found. It is possible that the land was held in trust for them by individual Quakers. According to Joseph Cannon, Horace's son, many of the former slaves had skills as carpenters and masons. There is evidence that Parke County residents helped the new arrivals by finding them places to live and work.

Despite this evidence of community kindness, there were many who did not welcome the newcomers. Not long after their arrival, a new state prosecutor was appointed to the Seventh Judicial District. James Cameron Allen was a young twenty-two-year-old lawyer whose father had come to Parke County from Kentucky. As soon as he took office he took action against those who were providing aid to the newcomers.

In April 1847 Allen convinced a grand jury to indict seven individuals for the crime of "Harboring Negroes." Under the law, the seven men were accused of violating an 1831 Indiana law. The law stated that anyone bringing a black person into the state after September 1831 had to post a \$500 bond as a guarantee of good behavior and insurance that the person of color would not become a ward of the state. The law was hastily passed after the Nat Turner Rebellion to counteract fears that the South would "dump" troublesome and unwanted slaves into Indiana. After its passage, the law had limited use in court. Its real intent was to send a message to blacks and those who helped them that Indiana was not a friendly place to settle. Five hundred dollars was well beyond the ability of most newcomers to pay, and very few actually posted the bond.

Albert Coffin was indicted for harboring Henderson Curry, a nineteen-year-old

black man that he was training to be a blacksmith. James Siler was charged with harboring "a negro named Bass," which probably was Henry or Zachariah who, with their families, lived next door to Siler. George Steele, one of the richest men in the county, was accused of harboring Rachel Lawson, whom he employed as a domestic. William Morris was indicted for harboring "a negro named Jordan," who probably was Jordan Woodard, a common laborer. Jordan later played a significant role in a landmark Indiana Supreme Court case.

Cannon was charged for employing Ephraim Cook and his family on his farm just outside of Annapolis. Cannon and Hadley were originally indicted together, possibly because they had brought the former slaves from Alabama to Parke County. Unfortunately, the record of Hadley's case has been lost.

The last man to be indicted of the seven was Cyrus Garrigus. He was indicted for professional negligence for not collecting the bond required by the 1831 law. Garrigus, a local store owner, was the official Overseer of the Poor for Parke County. It was his job to collect the bond or secure the bond by having the violating African American "hired out" until the bond had been paid. Allen's indictment of Garrigus may have been to force him into action.

Looking at those who were indicted and those African Americans mentioned in the indictments many interesting facts are apparent. For the most part, Allen indicted individuals who had considerable standing in the community. Siler was a wealthy farmer who was one of the founders of the Quaker church in Bloomfield. Steele owned a number of mills in the area and a large farm, making him one of the richest men in the region. Morris was also wealthy and a member of an important Parke County family. Cannon was one of the

few doctors in the community and Hadley was a member of a significant local family. It is therefore possible that the indictments were politically motivated.

The African Americans mentioned in the indictments were mostly people who were established in the community. The only two mentioned that were probably part of the Alabama slave contingent were Woodard and Cook. Henry and Zachariah had been free in North Carolina. There is also evidence that Curry and Lawson were living in the county before the arrival of the former Alabama slaves.

After the handing out of the indictments, prosecutor Allen's first step was to strike a deal with Garrigus. In exchange for dropping the charges, Garrigus would take strong action to collect the bonds required by the 1831 law. Garrigus wasted no time and charged members of the Bass family for not posting their bond. He charged Henry and William Bass for failure to pay. The two cases were thrown out of court by the judge.

The first to answer Allen's indictment was Steele and his team of lawyers. After a short discussion in front of the Parke County judge, the indictment was quashed. The next case to go before the judge was Siler. Siler's case went to trial and he was quickly found not guilty. Perhaps it was because he was a pillar in the Quaker community and he wanted to prove his innocence that he allowed his case to go to trial. As a result of Siler's trial, the cases against Coffin and Morris were dropped. Only the cases against Cannon and Hadley proceeded. There is some indication that this was because both Cannon and Hadley refused to answer to the charges against them, possibly a protest of what they believed to be an unfair law. Both men were eventually fined ten dollars and court costs. Cannon refused to pay the fine, which forced the sheriff of Parke County to seize some of his livestock.



Washington Hadley, accompanied by Doctor Horace Cannon, brought former slaves from Alabama to Parke County for Thomas Woodard.

Joseph Cannon believed his father was the true target of the prosecution because he was the leader in bringing the former slaves from Alabama.

Many of the black residents named in the indictments chose to leave Parke County. Curry moved to Wayne County, Indiana, where he married and started a family. One of his sons, Harry, migrated to Georgetown, Colorado, during a silver rush and became a barber in one of the hotels there. Woodard left his sister, Mahala, and her two sons, Ezekiel and William, in Parke County and moved to Indianapolis, where he was later accused of attempted murder of a white man. Indiana law at the time prohibited a black person from testifying in court when a white man was involved. At trial, Woodard was found guilty. His witnesses, who were black, were not allowed to testify on his behalf. His lawyer appealed to the Indiana Supreme Court and the conviction was reversed. Woodard later left Indianapolis and moved to Chicago. Cook stayed in Parke County and struggled to keep his family together. He seems to have moved about the county, going to where he could find work.

In 1849 Richard Bassett, the oldest son of Britton, was indicted for the crime of "forcing a mare to run." Richard had allowed his horse to be used in a horse race and was fined seventeen dollars. The white individuals, who bet on the race, rode the horses, and provided the other horses used in the race, were fined two dollars. Richard did not contest the fine nor appear in court. He directed his lawyer to pay the fine.

Sometime during the 1850s, members of the Bassett, Artis, and Ellis families left Parke County. They migrated as a large group to Howard County, where they founded what became the Bassett-Ellis Settlement. In 1892 Richard was elected to the Indiana legislature from Howard County.

Between 1850 and 1860, the black population in Parke County declined from 228 to 196 people. Statewide the black population remained almost constant for the same period. This was probably due to the adoption of a new constitution in 1851 that included the infamous Article 13. The constitution banned the immigration of African Americans into

the state and an 1852 enactment required that blacks register at their county courthouses. Like the 1831 law before it, the law was unevenly adhered to and enforced throughout the state.

Despite the fact that the law was not consistently enforced, its passage sent a clear message that blacks were not welcome in Indiana. Many decided to leave the state and find friendlier places in other states and Canada. In 1851 both Horace Cannon and Siler died. Cannon died while attempting to ford Sugar Creek on his visit to a sick family; Siler died while working on his farm. The deaths of Cannon and Siler, combined with many Parke County Quakers moving west and new economic opportunities in other places, may have encouraged the black citizens of Parke County to move elsewhere. The black population in the county continued to decline throughout the rest of the century.

Blacks who came to Parke County during the first half of the nineteenth century found a community that was both welcoming and hostile. It was in this environment that many were able to carve out a successful life for themselves and their families. The 2000 U.S. Census indicates that of the 17,241 residents living in Parke County, 370 are African American.

A former director of the Montgomery County Historical Society in Dayton, Ohio, Brian L. Hackett is currently working on his dissertation about freemen and Quakers for a doctorate in public history at Middle Tennessee State University. •

FOR FURTHER READING

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