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Homecoming



In-person attendees at the 2022 Lee-Walker family reunion

This family's 100 years of reunions provide connection—and genealogical details.

Rochelle McNorton descends from a group of families who migrated from Virginia to Ohio in 1844. Theirs was an unusual story. The 56 members weren't just finding a new home; they were also finding freedom.

Their enslaver, Virginian Thacker V. Webb, committed suicide in 1843. In his will, he named and emancipated each of the family members. "He gave them everything he owned," McNorton says.

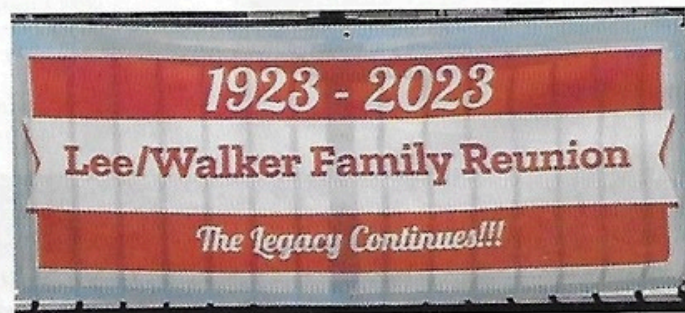


Rochelle McNorton

One woman, Judy, was the mother of five of Webb's children. She got the largest share of Webb's money, plus a horse and wagon. "Everyone else each got around \$50, which in those days was a lot of money," McNorton says. "Someone got the carpenter's tools: everything they would need to start a new life."

Webb's brother—who later emancipated people in his will, too—helped them arrange to go to southern Ohio. Many freed Virginian slaves left for the Buckeye State around that time.

Their inheritances enabled them to buy land, build homes and establish farms. The 1850 census lists their



surnames: Lee, Walker, Valentine, Carter, Ragland, Jones, Bell, Wingo, Gilmore, Hill, Tanner, Craddick, Harrison, Hall and Webb. Over time, many of these families intermarried.

In 1923, some Lee-Walker grandchildren began an annual reunion <www.leereunion.info>. The reunion has continued to meet every year.

McNorton has made it her quest to identify all the descendants of those listed in that 1850 census. Records kept about the reunion have helped, as has a transcript of a talk given in 1930 that named the first two generations. Minutes and directories from subsequent years identify attendees and their relatives. Some include birthdates, addresses and other helpful details.



Books like those that McNorton inherited slowly helped her piece together the families through the generations, as have censuses, vital records and obituaries.

For the 100th reunion in 2023, McNorton went to great lengths to invite descendants of the entire migratory group. Press releases, a website, and even a local television appearance helped get the word out.

This wasn't just a centennial anniversary: It was a homecoming. They met on one of their ancestral properties, where new owners have built a rental venue called Bell Manor.

"People attended from all the family lines, many who had never come before," says McNorton. "I think we hit over 100! We totally filled out Bell Manor."

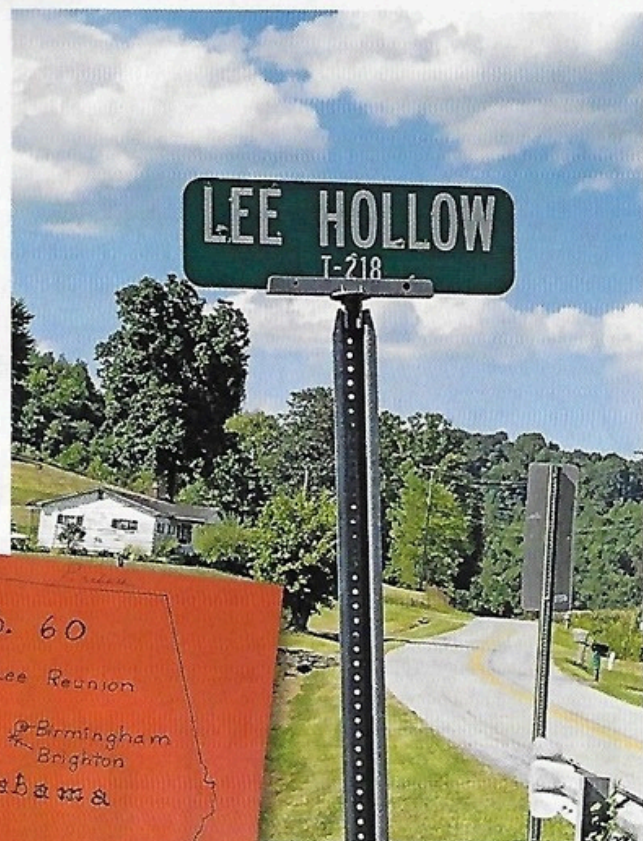
Attendees visited the David Nickens Heritage Center, which tells the stories of African Americans in southern Ohio. A local historian guided them to a family cemetery, properties where some of the descendants still live, and an old farm road that leads down the Scioto River where their ancestors once fished.

"We went to Lee Hollow, named after our family. I'd always heard about it," McNorton says. "My grandfather named that as his residence."

"People were overwhelmed, trying to figure out how they were related," she says. "We shared documents and told all the stories. Someone even suggested we make a documentary, since we have a cousin who is a filmmaker."

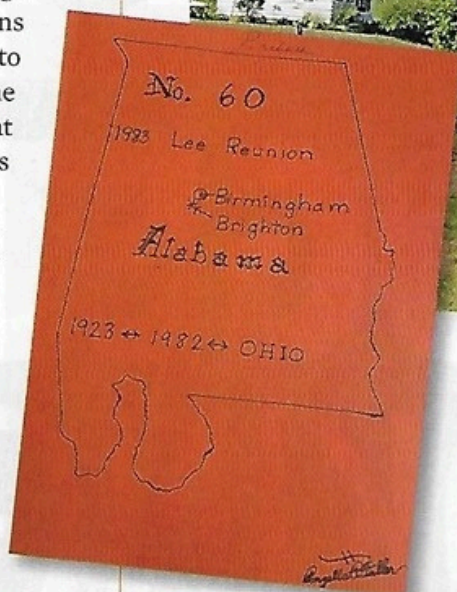
What's next? Writing down the families' stories in a book—and planning next year's reunion. "We've already started a plan for the next reunion, the 101st, now that we have reclaimed some of these families who haven't come from a couple of generations!" McNorton says. "We are still going—and they are going to come back." ●

Sunny Jane Morton



Top: The 1936 Lee family reunion in Chillicothe, Ohio

Above: Lee Hollow, a street named after McNorton's ancestral family



Left: The cover of a family history published for the 1983 Lee reunion