

## **Mt. Pleasant Library: Reading among African Americans in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rush County, Indiana**

On the last Sunday of August, people gather every year from all parts of Indiana, and beyond, at a little church in a grove of trees in northwest Rush County. The church is called the “Old Beech Church,” although its original name was Mt. Pleasant, and still stands in what was known as the Beech Settlement. <sup>1</sup>

This settlement was a neighborhood of free African Americans and mixed race people, most of whom came to Indiana from North Carolina and Virginia beginning in the 1820’s. Like other settlements of free African Americans in Ohio and Indiana, the Beech settlers located their community near a Quaker village, in this case Carthage. The people who now gather every year in August at the Old Beech are descendants of those early Beech settlers. The founders of the church organized their congregation in 1832 , and decided to affiliate with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in 1840, marking the founding of the denomination in Indiana.<sup>2</sup> The Old Beech is, therefore, of great historical significance because of its importance in the history of the A.M.E. church in Indiana. However, it is significant in another way as well: in the church was a library that was organized, used, and maintained by the Beech settlers from 1842-1869. <sup>3</sup>

In 1832 the Beech residents held a meeting to organize their church. This meeting was recorded in a manuscript, a photocopy of which is included in the Roberts Settlement Collection in the Indiana State Library. It reads:

We the Coulored people of this Neighbourhood being desirous to unite and build a Meeting House to the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church and we think on the Land

of James Roberts near the large spring to be a suitable and convenient place to build one  
[.]

Therefore we the under signers do bind ourselves to pay the sums next to our  
names in getting lumber for the building or otherwise in Cash. July the 18<sup>th</sup> 1832 [.]

Below these paragraphs are listed the names of the subscribers and the sums that they  
paid, ranging from 12/2 to 25 cents.<sup>4</sup>

The organizational meeting of the library, ten years later, followed a similar  
procedure: the intent was stated in the opening paragraphs, followed by Articles of the  
Constitution, after which were listed the names of subscribers and sums paid. The  
William Henry Smith Library at the Indiana Historical Society holds two manuscript  
notebooks that contain the records of the Mount Pleasant Library.<sup>5</sup> One notebook records  
the meeting minutes of the first and subsequent annual meetings. The other contains the  
circulation records from 1842 to 1869, listing each name, the accession number of the  
book that was checked out, the date it was checked out, the date it was returned, any  
relevant notes pertaining to the condition of the book after its return, and fees that were  
paid for overdue returns or injury. Unfortunately, the names of the books are not  
recorded in the manuscript notebook.

The minutes notebook records a meeting that was held (presumably before April  
30, 1842, the date of the organizational meeting of the Board of Managers) at which a  
constitution for the library was written, officers and trustees were named, and the names  
of subscribers, with the respective amounts in dues paid, were entered. The articles of the  
constitution consisted of the official name of the library, the subscription fee (25 cents),

the date of the annual meeting, the duties of the board of managers, secretary, and librarian, the proportion of library members required to amend the constitution, and a restriction against “novels, romances, or writings favourable to infidelity.”<sup>6</sup> This short phrase says much about the purpose of the library and the intention of the founders. “Infidelity” at this time meant unfaithfulness to Christian doctrine. This restriction, then, against novels, romances, and unfaithful writings suggests that the library was intended for moral as well as intellectual and educational development.<sup>7</sup>

The same manuscript notebook records the proceedings of the first meeting of the board of managers. At that meeting, held on April 30, 1842, the books were “received, numbered, and placed in the Library”, and by-laws (which were listed) were adopted. The by-laws were concerned with circulation rules, fines for overdue or damaged books, specific procedures for regularly examining the condition of the books and the Librarian’s “register” (circulation and fee records), and evaluation of the Librarian’s work. Finally, two persons were appointed to “assess the Librarian according to the 4<sup>th</sup> Article of the by-laws and report to the next annual meeting.”<sup>8</sup> These bylaws echo those of the Friends Library in the nearby Walnut Ridge Friends Meetinghouse, many of whose members were involved with the organization of the Mt. Pleasant Library. Annual meetings were normally held on the second Saturday in August.<sup>9</sup> The minutes reflect careful attention to rules of order.

There are 60 names on the list of charter members in the Library’s minutes, six of whom were white residents of Carthage.<sup>10</sup> Many lived on farms within a mile or two of the meeting house, while others lived in Carthage and the surrounding area.<sup>11</sup> Not all of the names on the list of charter members appear in the circulation records. However,

they may have used the library without checking out books. Several were involved as officers or trustees, a few of them continuously serving in some capacity every year for which records are extant.<sup>12</sup>

Every charter member paid at least 25 cents to join the Library. Some paid more: two of the white members paid \$1.50. James D. Roberts (on whose land the building was located) paid \$1.00. Daniel Watkins, one of the largest landowners, also paid \$1.00. Wright and Macklin Jeffries, who figure prominently in the history of the library as well as the community, paid \$.50, as did Uriah Bass (a shoemaker in Carthage,) and two others.<sup>13</sup>

From the dates in the circulation records, it appears that the Library was open one day every two weeks or so – not always on the same day. Of the 53 charter members listed, 22 checked out a book on the first day the Library was open; 21 others checked out books within the first two months; and 20 checked out books with some regularity over a period of time, such as a year, two years, or several months. Several patrons, especially from the Roberts, Jeffries, and Winburn families, checked out books every two weeks or every four weeks, with few gaps, which were often in the summer months. Some books were checked out repeatedly by the same person. For example, book number 129 was checked out at least eighteen times in the first two years, and nearly everyone who borrowed it did so at least twice. William Roberts borrowed it fourteen times between May of 1844 and May of 1846. He was almost the exclusive borrower of number 129 between November of 1845 and May of 1846, renewing it every four weeks.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that many of the subscribers to the church congregation were the same as, or closely related to, the library subscribers. This suggests that the same families who were interested in organizing a church congregation were also interested in literacy and education.<sup>15</sup> Many of these families played active roles in its organization, maintenance, and use. Those families included the Roberts, Jeffries, Watkins, Winborn, and Brooks families, as well as others. Many of the descendants of these families have been prominent in education, the A.M.E. Church, politics, and medicine. This article will look at particular members of the Roberts and Jeffries families and their importance in the library and the community, and the legacy of the Beech community as discovered in the lives of their descendants.

Brothers Anthony, James D., John Sr., and Elijah Roberts came to Rush County around 1831 from Northampton County, NC. Anthony was a charter member of the library. He served as secretary to the library in 1844, 1845, and 1849; as assistant librarian in 1848; as librarian in 1850 and 1852; and as trustee in 1867, when the library's collection was relocated. In addition, Anthony was one of ten who in 1853 contributed to pay the library's debt of \$1.88.<sup>16</sup> Two of Anthony's ten children, Abner and Dudley, became A.M.E. ministers.<sup>17</sup> Anthony owned an 80-acre farm approximately a mile from that of James D. Roberts, and, consequently, also from the library and A.M.E. Church. Anthony taught school sessions in the Beech neighborhood.<sup>18</sup>

Anthony's eldest son William was also a charter member of the library and one of the heaviest users of the library. Like his father, he also played a leadership role, serving as secretary in 1843 and 1850; librarian in 1844 and 1845; and assessor of damages in 1848.<sup>19</sup>

James D. Roberts, Anthony's brother, owned the land on which the Mt. Pleasant Meeting House was built, as stated above. He was the first librarian, appointed at the first meeting, and served also as President in 1843, as treasurer in 1844, and as assessor of damages in 1845.<sup>20</sup> He died May 29, 1849, leaving three orphaned children: Robert R., Jonathan, and Frances. Although he died early in the life of the library, his children and their descendants passed on the Roberts legacy of education.<sup>21</sup>

After James D.'s death in 1849, guardianship of his children was given to Macklin Jeffries, another founding member of both church and library and prominent community member, about whom more is written below.<sup>22</sup> The circulation records show that Macklin Jeffries and Jonathan Roberts, age 14, visited the library and checked out books on June 5, 1849, one week after the death of Jonathon's father. Frances Roberts, James D.'s surviving daughter, married Irving Jeffries, a teacher and son of Walker Jeffries, a large landowner – an example of the many connections between these two families so active in education.<sup>23</sup>

Robert R. Roberts, the youngest of James D.'s children, was an important member of the community and the church, and his children and later descendants exemplify the strong drive for educational achievement that is characteristic of the Roberts family. It was said of Robert R. that "in early life he was very strong, agile with his ax doing much in clearing and rail splitting in the early settlement of this county.... He was orphaned in his youth and had but little chance in the public schools, but being a great reader he was well informed and his knowledge was above that of the average man. He always attended old Mt. Pleasant Church and was attached to it as a child to its mother and in the last years of his life worked very hard to make it a comfortable place in which to

worship.”<sup>24</sup> Although Macklin Jeffries held legal guardianship of Robert R. when he was orphaned, the U.S. Census of 1850 for Rush County shows Robert living in the home of Wright Jeffries, who was a prominent school teacher in the Beech.<sup>25</sup> One wonders how much influence Wright Jeffries may have had on his interest in reading, and how he might have used the library.

Robert R. married Martha Watkins, daughter of Daniel and Frances Watkins, among the largest landowners in the neighborhood, and also users of the library.<sup>26</sup> Among their children were Robert Alpheus, teacher, and Daniel, physician. Robert Alpheus became a successful educator, beginning his teaching career at age 16 in the Beech school, ending with a 22-year stint as principal of the Lincoln High School in Quincy, Illinois. The obituary in the Knightstown (Indiana) Banner, December 2, 1938, provides some enlightening details on Robert Alpheus’s life:

...He attended school in The Beech, then taught this school at the age of 16, for seven years. He then taught two years each in Cambridge City and Greenfield, and was principal of the Shelbyville colored schools for nine years. He had been a student at Spiceland Academy and graduated in June of 1901. He held the highest grade Rush county teacher’s license for 16 years and acquired a state license. Mr. Roberts also taught at Bloomington and attended Indiana University about 1902. After teaching at New Albany he left for Terre Haute to attend and graduate from State Normal, and there he was married to Stella L. Horner. He was a brilliant scholar and instructor throughout life. The deceased won a pronouncing contest at the Shelby County Teachers’ Institute, and on May 17, 1901 he won the state inter-Academic Oratorical contest. He became an Odd Fellow in 1886 ... For 22 years he was principal of the Lincoln School at Quincy,

and was a member of the A.M.E. Church there, also acting as a treasurer of the board of trustees and superintendent of the Sunday school.” Many descendants of several of the children of Robert Alpheus Roberts became teachers.<sup>27</sup>

Daniel Roberts was a noted physician in St. Augustine, Florida, whose work during the 1918 influenza epidemic in the St. Augustine area made him a local hero. He lost none of his patients, and was asked by physicians in Jacksonville, Daytona, and other cities to share his expertise. He died the following year, probably from overwork and exhaustion. After his death, a group of doctors, both white and African American, organized an effort to raise money for a monument to his memory. Their goal of \$1000 was soon met, and donors included bishops in African American churches, doctors, a bank president, and hundreds of residents. George Leapheart, a Florida sculptor who was commissioned to create the monument, made a hand-carved, marble baptism font for St. Paul’s A.M.E. Church, of which Roberts had been an active member.<sup>28</sup> The font and memorial to Dr. Daniel Roberts are still in St. Paul’s Church in St. Augustine.

Macklin, Walker, and Wright Jeffries were brothers who migrated to Rush County from Greensville County, Virginia, by way of Ohio, around 1831. They were descendants of Andrew and Mary Dole Jeffries, who were mixed blood Occaneechi Indians. Although there was little African ancestry in the Jeffries family, they were usually labeled as mulattoes or free Negroes in tax and census records. Other Jeffries family members settled in Ohio and other parts of Indiana. Macklin and other Jeffries went to court to prove that they were white after they were denied their right to vote. Some of the Jeffries descendants married white partners and moved away from Rush

County. Robinson Jeffries, son of Walker, however, became a minister in the A.M.E. church and served circuits and congregations in Indiana and Michigan.<sup>29</sup>

Macklin, the eldest of the three brothers, was a charter member of both the A.M.E. church and the library. Later, he was a founding member of the Christian Church in Charlottesville. With the exception of the 1843 meeting, every library meeting for which there are records lists Macklin as a trustee. In addition, he helped to pay the \$1.88 debt in 1853, and in 1867 when the collection was relocated, he and Anthony Roberts selected pamphlets from the collection to be given to its members. Macklin owned a large farm on two parcels, one adjacent to the James D. Roberts farm, the other on the western edge of the settlement.<sup>30</sup>

Wright Jeffries, the youngest of the three Jeffries brothers, was a teacher, as well as founding member and frequent officer and user of the library. His wife was Atlanta Winburn, daughter of Lewis Winburn, who, along with his brothers, was another frequent user of the library. None of the children born to Wright and Atlanta lived to adult age. However, the censuses of 1850 and 1860 show other children living in their home. As stated above, Robert R. Roberts, age 10, was living with them in 1850.<sup>31</sup>

Wright was living in the home of his nephew Thaddeus Jeffries, one of Macklin's sons, when he died in 1911.<sup>32</sup> He had kept his school books, the remaining library books, and the manuscript records of the library meetings and circulation until his death. These were donated to the Indiana Historical Society by Thaddeus's daughter, Mary Jeffries Strong, in 1954. More about these items is written below.<sup>33</sup>

Mary was only thirteen years old when Wright died, but her granddaughter, who knew her well, tells of her close relationship with, and admiration for, him. Mary

attended Butler University in Indianapolis, became a teacher, and was an avid reader. Wright told her about his teaching career and about the library, which, he told her, only included “classics.” He obviously had a strong influence on her, which is exemplified in the fact that Mary preserved the books and records of the library for half a century after Wright died, and then donated them to the Indiana Historical Society.<sup>34</sup>

Of the books that Mary Jeffries Strong donated to the Indiana Historical Society, only one appears to be still in the collection: David Miller, *The Practical Horse Farrier: Containing a Treatise on the Different Diseases of Horses, and Cures for the Same* (Rushville, Ind.: For J.M. Taylor [by] George W. Hargitt, printer, 1851.) (This book was apparently not used in either the library or Wright Jeffries’ school, but was in his personal collection). The only evidence of what books may have been donated is the list of books recorded at the time of her gift to the Indiana Historical Society, and reference to two books that were recorded as damaged: Goodrich’s *United States*, and Leigh’s *Dictionary*. (See Appendix for a list of books donated.) The provenance record in the Indiana Historical Society Library states that Wright Jeffries “kept the books after the library ceased to function . . . The record and remaining books had been kept together by the donor,” Mary Jeffries Strong. The books that Mrs. Strong had in her possession until 1954 included several song books; histories of the world, the United States, and New York; theology works; *Arator*, by John Taylor (a collection of essays on agriculture); a textbook on hydrostatics and pneumatics; textbooks on arithmetic, grammar, rhetoric, geography, and penmanship; Byron’s works; Plutarch; Thomas a Kempis; and a travel book by Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*. The provenance record states that the books “were in the Mount Pleasant Library, or were used in school taught

by uncle Wright Jeffries.” Only seven of the 36 books on the list identify a call number. Therefore, it is difficult, or impossible, to ascertain exactly what was in the Library.<sup>35</sup>

Steven Vincent, in his book *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, points out that most adult Beech residents of the first generation (that of the Jeffries brothers) were largely illiterate. The 1850 census bears that out, with the exceptions of the Jeffries and Roberts families, and a few others. However, nearly every one of those families sent all of their children to school. In 1850, 23.7% of Beech residents aged 40 and over were literate, while 36.8% of those aged 21-30 were literate. From these statistics, it appears that children who grew up in the Beech were more likely to be educated than their parents and grandparents. Vincent writes that the teachers in the Beech schools came largely from among the Beech residents themselves, with Quakers assisting as necessary. He states further that the need for teachers from outside the neighborhood decreased as the pioneer period came to a close. During the 1840s and 1850s, the new teachers, who were in their late teens and early 20s, began teaching.<sup>36</sup> They had learned to read in the frontier, and also, very likely, used the library during those two decades.

The Beech Settlement was a remarkable neighborhood. By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement had largely vanished. The Mt. Pleasant church building (the second one, built in 1865) remains and is used only for the annual reunion of the descendants. However, it is remembered by local residents and descendants of the settlers as a community of hard-working people, determined to raise their families in a stable and safe environment, free of racial discrimination, and who worked to provide education for themselves and their children. The Mt. Pleasant Library certainly played an important role in the lives of many of them.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For sources on settlements of free African Americans in Indiana and the Midwest, see Stephen A. Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Emma Lou Thronbrough, *The Negro in Indiana before 1900: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957); Xenia Cord, "Black Rural Settlements in Indiana before 1860," in Wilma Gibbs, ed., *Indiana's African-American Heritage: Essays from Black History News & Notes* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1993); Richard Wright, Jr., "Negro Rural Communities in Indiana," *Southern Workman* 37 (March 1908): 158-72); and W.E.B. DuBois, "Long in Darke," *Colored American Magazine* 17 (November 1909): 553-55.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, p. 70-71; Coy Robbins, *Ebony Lines*, "Sesquicentennial of the Indiana A.M.E. Church, 1840-1990," 2 (Fall and Winter, 1990): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, 75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Photocopy of Founding agreement, [Mount Pleasant] Methodist Church, 18 July 1832, Roberts Settlement Collection, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>5</sup> Mount Pleasant Library, (Rush County, Ind.), Records, 1842-1869, 2-volume manuscript (Circulation Book and Minutes Book), Indiana Historical Society Library, hereafter cited as Mount Pleasant Library Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, first three pages.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Jeffries Strong, niece of Wright Jeffries and donor of the Mount Pleasant Library Collection to the Indiana Historical Society, told her granddaughter, Anne Nesbitt, about Wright Jeffries teaching career and the library. According to Mrs. Strong, the library's collection consisted of "classics" only.

<sup>8</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, three pages at the back.

<sup>9</sup> *Brief History of Carthage Friends Meeting*, [Carthage, Ind.? : Carthage Friends Meeting], 1939.

<sup>10</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, second through fourth pages.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, Map 5 [p. 48]

<sup>12</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book.

<sup>13</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, second through fourth pages

<sup>14</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Circulation Book.

<sup>15</sup> Photocopy of Founding agreement, [Mount Pleasant] Methodist Church, 18 July 1832, Roberts Settlement Collection, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana; Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, first three pages. For more on the connections between religion, especially the A.M.E. denomination, and education, see Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "When I Can Read My Title Clear": *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion, in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South

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Carolina Press, 1991); Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, entries for organizational meeting, and for these dates: 26 August 1844, 6 September 1845, 1849 (day not specified), 31 August 1850, 21 August 1852, 15 October 1853, and 12 October 1867.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, p. 105; Lawrence Carter, unpublished notebooks on history of Beech Settlement, microfilm, Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.

<sup>18</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, ix, Map 5 [p. 48].

<sup>19</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, second through fourth pages, and Circulation Book, entries for these dates: 19 August 1843, 26 August, 1844, 6 September 1845, 21 April 1849, and 31 August 1850.

<sup>20</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, second through fourth pages, and Circulation Book, entries for 19 August 1843, 26 August 1844, and 6 September 1845.

<sup>21</sup> Transcription of Rush County Indiana Complete Rec. Probate, Book #1 1854-55, p. 369, Maurice Holmes, *Court Records, Rush County 1822-1847* [s.l, s.n.], 1975.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Circulation Book; Roberts family tree in Roberts Settlement Collection.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Carter unpublished notebooks.

<sup>25</sup> 1850 U.S. Census for Rush County, Indiana, on microfilm at the Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

<sup>26</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, 49; Letter and family tree from Martha Sanders Vincent, great-grand-daughter of Robert R. and Martha Watkins Roberts, sent to the author.

<sup>27</sup> Photocopy of obituary article from Knightstown Banner in Roberts Settlement Collection, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis; family tree of Martha Sanders Vincent.

<sup>28</sup> "Daniel W. Roberts," <http://www.rootsweb.com/~flsags/drdanielwroberts.htm>. Martha Sanders Vincent, in an email of June 22, 2004, alerted me to Daniel Roberts' work in St. Augustine.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Carter unpublished notebooks; Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, 23, 105, 148; 1850, 1860, and 1870 U.S. Censuses for Rush County, Indiana, on microfilm at the Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

<sup>30</sup> Photocopy of Founding agreement, [Mount Pleasant] Methodist Church, 18 July 1832; Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book, entries for all meetings except the 1843; *Atlas of Rush County, Indiana* (Chicago: Beers) 1870, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Minutes Book and Circulation Book; email from Cynthia Jeffries Long, May 17, 2004; U.S. Censuses, Rush County, Indiana, 1850 and 1860.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Census, Rush County, 1910.

<sup>33</sup> Provenance record for Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>34</sup> Phone conversation with Anne Nesbitt, December 2, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Provenance record for Mount Pleasant Library Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil*, 108-109.