

THE MAKING OF WINCHESTER'S BLACK COMMUNITY

By Ellen Knight

Following the Civil War, a community of African-Americans developed in Winchester which reached its height in the 1920s and 1930s.

State and federal censuses suggest that the first blacks in Winchester were few and transient. None were enumerated in Winchester in 1850 when the town was incorporated. For about the next 25 to 30 years, those who lived in Winchester stayed less than five or 10 years. In 1860, two women, born in New England and working as domestics, were listed in the census. Five years later they were gone. Instead, a Virginia man married to an Irish woman and another woman domestic from Maryland were listed. In 1870, twelve new names were listed, six from Virginia. These worked mostly as servants or laborers and, with the exception of one couple, had all moved by the 1880 census. The number rose in 1880 to 19 (including a family of ten whose parents were born in Canada).

By 1900, the number of African-Americans had gone up over seven fold to 136, including 20 families and about three dozen individuals. Most of them came from Virginia, a few from North Carolina, Tennessee, or Maryland, and some from Canada. As more settled, a community developed in The Plains¹ at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1893, they organized their own church and in 1921, when the black population numbered about 235, bought a building for their church. By 1930, the population had grown to about 350 and was at its height.

MOVING TO WINCHESTER



*Former slave Stephen Roberts
photographed with children of the
Washington School*

Oppressed in the South by enforced segregation and by the restriction and denial of civil rights and liberties, many blacks tried moving north to look for better living conditions. In Massachusetts their opportunities were still limited. Those who found work in Winchester were usually farm and factory laborers, domestic servants, janitors, coachmen, curriers, and odd-jobbers.²

Some were freed slaves. Stephen Roberts (1842-1924) was one. A native of Maryland, during or shortly after the Civil War, he became an orderly to Winchester native Nathaniel Richardson. Appointed Commissary of Subsistence in 1863, Richardson traveled through the South, including Shreveport, Louisiana, where he may have met Roberts. The two traveled together, and when Richardson came home in 1866, Roberts came with him.

In Winchester, Roberts worked for the Richardson family and others. When he died, it was written that “Mr. Roberts was for many years a janitor in the Winchester schools and will be remembered by most of the older graduates for his cheerful disposition and willingness to serve.... Of a splendid upright character, ‘Stephen,’ as he was known to many, was universally respected and beloved. His cheery disposition endeared the man to all with whom he came in contact and his passing is a source of regret to his many friends.”³



Another family that moved in from Halifax County, Virginia, was that of Apollodora Russell, father of six, including baseball player Branch Russell.

Others who had been born into slavery also moved to Winchester. Some had large families. James and Winifred Hunt, born in Halifax County, Virginia, in the 1850s, were the parents of ten. Bettie Powell (b. 1850) widow of Emmanuel Richardson and wife of Emanuel Powell (b 1824) (all native Virginians), was the mother of 18 or 20 children of whom only six survived her.

Jacob Russell (1856-1934), one of the pastors of the community’s New Hope Baptist Church, also came from Virginia. Born of slave parents, according to his obituary, “Russell’s struggle for improvement and education was a hard one. Through his own efforts he was graduated from Petersburg Seminary near Richmond and for some years was both a minister and school teacher in the rural districts of that state.” Coming to Winchester in 1897, in addition to being a pastor, Russell was employed by the McKay Metallic Fastener Company until it merged into the United Shoe Machinery Company (1899) and moved to Beverly (1905).⁴

Veterans of the Civil War also moved to Winchester. A couple listed in the 1870 census who settled in the town were John William and Mary Jane (Anderson) Price. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1839, John Price served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War. Afterward, he moved to Boston and married a Massachusetts native in 1867. During the 1870s he moved his business, one of the first barber shops in town, from Boston’s Marlboro House to the Rice Block on Main Street in Winchester. Reportedly much liked and respected, he was accepted into the Grand Army of the Republic, Masons, and the Winchester Mutual Benefit Association.⁵ He made his home in Winchester until his death in 1903. After a residency of 45 years, his widow moved in 1914 from Winchester Place to Melrose. Since the couple had no children, it remained for others to establish families that spanned a few generations in Winchester.

THEIR OWN NEIGHBORHOOD & CHURCH

Once a few African-Americans like Roberts and the Prices found acceptance in the community, others joined them. In fact, many of Winchester’s black families were related and came from the same area, Halifax County, Virginia, and lived in the area of Harvard and Irving Streets. This was

one of the more affordable neighborhoods and one already having minority populations.



*The Bethany Society chapel
on Cross Street*

Prior to 1893, some African-Americans may have been meeting with the Highlands Bethany Society (a charitable group which took its name from its first meeting place, the Highlands train station), given that Stephen Roberts was the one who broke the ground for their chapel on Cross Street. But many of Winchester's black residents were Baptists. They came not only from the same area of Virginia but also the same church, the Baptist Church of White Oak, Virginia. By 1893, the African-Americans were meeting with Rev. Oliver Barksdale, who had been a deacon of the White Oak church in Virginia. They used the vestry of the Congregational Church and then Waterfield Hall.⁶ The meetings were recognized in 1896 as a mission of the Baptist church. The Second Baptist Church was then formed with Rev. A. O. Smith as its first minister.



*The old Washington School, built in
1851, above, was remodeled into the
New Hope Baptist Church in 1922.*

After a new Washington School was built on Cross Street in 1894, the old one next to it became vacant. The Town gave the Second Baptist Society permission to use it for their church. They incorporated in 1905 and named their church New Hope. That year, the Church purchased a lot for a new building on Washington Street, and in 1916 plans were filed for a new building. However, through Town Meeting action in 1921, the New Hope Baptist Church traded its lot and \$500 for the old school building and lot. After a thorough remodeling, the church was dedicated in 1922.



Along with the property, the church acquired a \$3,500 mortgage. During the Great Depression, the church fell behind in its payments. In 1940, philanthropist Lewis Parkhurst secured an agreement from the mortgage holder that \$1,600 would pay it off, and appealed to other churches to "help a brother in distress."⁷ A benefit concert raised about \$74, but the rest was contributed by church-goers, the Rotary Club, and 37 "public spirited men and women."

At that time Parkhurst noted that the black population had been dwindling, due to the need to go elsewhere to find work during the Depression. That trend continued

after WWII. By 1975, the church had not been used for years and was offered for sale. In 1980, it was purchased and converted into a residence.

COMMUNITY WITHIN A COMMUNITY

There is a sense that the black community lived peaceably and friendly within the larger community of Winchester because they lived in a distinct neighborhood where they had a sense of belonging.

In his public appeal for help to pay off New Hope's mortgage, Parkhurst wrote, "Now, if this church were to be discontinued it would not only be a misfortune to these people, but a real asset of the town would be lost. For while the doors of all our churches would be open to these folks if they wished to attend, the chances are that very few of them would take advantage of this opportunity, for they would feel that they might not be welcome, and would much prefer to worship and keep by themselves."

When the School Committee was looking for lots on which to building new school houses in 1922, one resident appealed that land not be taken from the black neighborhood, saying that "there are just certain portions of this town we are allowed to settle."⁸ Those African-Americans who did live outside the neighborhood were live-in help.

CIVIC MINDED

By 1910, the African-American population numbered about 280. In 1916, they formed a Civic League whose purpose was "to look out for the interests of the colored people of Middlesex County, with the help of other clubs in the county." County-wide they represented about 2,000 voters. "We do not ask for any special favors," President George Jackson wrote. "All we ask is an opportunity to earn a living, as all other American people do. We will know what class legislation means and we shall do all we can to eliminate it... A united effort is being made to organize a colored vote throughout the United States."⁹ The Civic League was involved in a controversy with the School Committee in 1922 (see related article) but otherwise there were no reported conflicts arising around this group.

As patriotic as any of their neighbors, the African-American community joined in the great July 4, 1919 welcome-home festivities to honor the men and women who had served during World War I. African-American veterans marched with the Army or Navy contingents, while a large group from the community marched or rode in the citizens' section, preceded by a triple float proclaiming "Liberty and Justice for All."¹⁰



Newspaper photographs of the great July 4, 1919 parade include the "Colored People's Float," upper left, with its banner proclaiming "Liberty and Justice for All"

When the tercentenary of the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was celebrated in 1930, Winchester's African Americans joined in with a Colored Militia, Colored Band, and Colored Grand Army Veterans.¹¹ Other marchers included the Community Improvement League, George Jackson, president; Colored Nurses in Uniform; Colored Children in Costume; and Jacob Russell as Uncle Remus.

They also had two floats. Represented on the first float, which portrayed, to use terms of the time, the outstanding Negro characters from the Revolutionary days, were Crispus Attucks, victim of the Boston Massacre, poet Phyllis Wheatley, soldier Peter Salem, and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. William Carney.

The second float, titled "Progress of Colored People from 1630 to 1930," included simply a teacher, six pupils, and a graduate. While in later years Uncle Remus would not be viewed as a symbol of progress, the African-American contingent did showcase achievement. The group apparently joined in a community celebration on the same footing as everyone else. And, when the nine float awards were announced, "Progress" was number six. Still, individual blacks were not interspersed among the community groups but rather formed their own separate groups.

YOUNGER GENERATIONS

The majority of first-generation black residents were literate but not professionally skilled. Education and equitable treatment were important to their advancement. Many of the younger generations strove for professional advancement beyond the opportunities available in Winchester, which were generally positions of unskilled labor.

The quest for improvement often took them away from Winchester. For one example, Branch Russell (1896-1959) settled in St. Louis where he played professional baseball with the St. Louis Stars and was supervisor of recreation for the city.

Richard Barksdale, whose grandfather was born into slavery in Virginia and whose father was a Winchester gardener, carpenter, and painter, became a college English professor in Atlanta, Ga., and Urbana, Ill. An honor student and member of the WHS football team, he entered Bowdoin College on a scholarship from the Mother's Association. During World War II, when he served in the U.S. Army, Barksdale became Winchester High School's first black graduate to earn an officer's commission. (See related article for other veterans of World War II.)



Other opportunities and honors undreamed of by their parents and grandparents came to the younger generations. Chester Barksdale, who worked at the British Embassy in Washington as a chauffeur and courier, was twice given medals for faithful service, one presented by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth themselves on a U.S. visit.¹²

PREJUDICE

Though the African-American community dwindled, there was still a presence in the mid-20th century. Some residents' memories of that time exclude any thought of prejudice. "When I went to school, there were one or two blacks in the school," said Henry Edmands of Winthrop Street. "We didn't even think of them as black—they were just other kids. My daughter went to school here with some of the finest families up on Harvard Street. One of them is a paperhanger and his son is a Ph.D. We didn't say he's black, she's white. They were just students, kids. The same with the parents. We had a professor, a doctor, who lived in our neighborhood who was affiliated with Tufts University. He was black. He was one of the finest people who ever moved into the neighborhood."

On the other hand, Edmands continued to say, "There was one woman up there who owned property. She was not a leading white in town, but she was well respected and had a good job and was active in the church. Nevertheless she came to me when she heard the rumor that a black was going to move into the neighborhood and asked me to sign a petition, and I was shocked. She said, 'Do you know what is going to happen to your property?' I said, 'No.' I knew what she was driving at, but I wanted her to say it. She said it is going to destroy the neighborhood, having blacks around the corner. I don't believe it. He was probably more qualified to live here than we are."¹³

"I hung around with everybody," former selectman Harry Chefalo recalled. "It didn't make any difference who it was. I can remember one sad story. This Jim Hunt, who was a black man, we were sitting at Richardson's store on the front steps one day and he was trying to break his skin here to prove to me that under the skin, the blood was the same as mine. I said, 'Jim don't do that. I know it.' I thought that was just about the saddest thing."¹⁴

THE COMMUNITY DWINDLES

As the twentieth century advanced and blacks left Winchester for new and better work possibilities, the community gradually ceased to exist. During the post-war era, attention was focused on fair and equal treatment and on integration. The era of a separate black community within the larger Winchester community came to an end.

¹ The Plains was a section of Winchester north of the Town Center roughly bounded by Cross, Swanton, and Washington streets and the railroad.

² See the related article on Oliver Barksdale.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 7, 1924.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Oct 12, 1934.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 23 1903.

⁶ At the corner of Waterfield Road and Main Street.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 19, 1940.

⁸ Lottie Hall Dodson, letter to *The Winchester Star*, May 26, 1922.

⁹ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 6, 1916.

¹⁰ According to one report in *The Winchester Star* there were two floats, in another there were three. One carried Liberty, one carried the elderly who could not walk the 3.5 mile route. One hundred men and 75 children wearing red, white, and blue caps and sashes reportedly marched. It was also reported that their band played in the parade.

¹¹ All parade participants are listed in *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 17, 1930.

¹² An AP story reported on April 2, 1965, "Four hundred British Embassy staffers jammed the chancery rotunda to toast Chester H. Barksdale. 'Hear! Hear!' they shouted Wednesday when Counselor John E. Killick noted that as embassy courier for 42 years Barksdale has 'seen through, worn out and outlasted 11 British ambassadors and 18 foreign secretaries.' At 65, Barksdale was retiring to return to his native Massachusetts." Barksdale's *Winchester Star* obituary stated that he received the Royal Victorian Medal in 1939 and the British Empire Medal for length of service in 1966.

¹³ Henry Edmands interview with Randy Bairnsfather, November, 1979. The story may pertain to his later residence on Hillside Avenue.

¹⁴ Harry Chefalo interview with Randy Bairnsfather, November 12, 1999. He was probably speaking of James H. Hunt (b 11 Jun 1895 Winchester) son of James & Minnie (Barksdale) Hunt. Chefalo was the first resident of Italian parents to be elected a selectman.