

# THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY STORY

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Philip L. Cantelon  
President



Eleanor M. V. Cook  
Editor

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## BLACK BUILDERS IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY 1865-1940

by Eileen McGuckian

Montgomery County has always claimed a substantial black population, and prior to 1900 at least one in every three residents was black. For most of the seventy-five years covered by this study, the County was overwhelmingly rural. The majority of blacks lived in scattered kinship communities, where they worshipped, worked and attended school. When buildings were required, communities tapped talented members with construction skills.

Little is known about the black men who designed and built houses, churches, schoolhouses and other structures in Montgomery County. Those responsible for vernacular architecture, be they black or white, have a tendency toward anonymity. These local craftsmen designed as well as built. They produced their vernacular, practical architecture in a context of local and regional tradition, community experience and a knowledge of their clients' needs. For ideas, they relied heavily on buildings they had seen or already erected, and some used designs and techniques from builders' guides and catalogues.

To identify the men who designed and constructed for Montgomery County's evolving black communities and learn as much as possible about their lives, training and what they built, it is necessary to begin with their predecessors, the black artisans.

In the years between 1790 and 1860, slaves far outnumbered free blacks in the County.<sup>1</sup> There were at least four enclaves of free blacks by 1865: Big Woods near Dickerson, Mt. Ephraim near Sugarloaf Mountain, Sandy Spring, and Haiti in Rockville.

Maryland's laws did not discourage the training of skilled blacks, slave or free. Education of blacks was not forbidden by State law, and a 1796 law prohibiting manumission of slaves unable to support themselves also encouraged skilled blacks in certain circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The large numbers of

southern blacks in skilled crafts had deep roots in the colonial period, when free artisans were in chronically short supply. Slave artisans were more valuable and received better treatment from appreciative masters.<sup>3</sup>

In a rural area such as Montgomery County, skilled artisans were key to the building process. Slave and free craftsmen usually entered the building trades through apprenticeships, formal or informal. Specialization was rare, and individuals necessarily performed a broad range of services. During their careers, slave artisans would work on many building projects, at home or as hired out by their masters. Presumably, they built mostly domestic buildings, for their owners and for their own families.

Because of the pattern of limited slave ownership in Montgomery County, most slaves lived in loft quarters in the main house or an outbuilding, supplemented by single-unit slave houses located in the farm yard. Typically, the single-unit dwelling was constructed of logs with V notches, and had a gable roof, a chimney exterior to one gable end, one door centered in the long wall, one room and a fireplace on the first level and a sleeping loft above. It sat on stone piers or foundation, had wooden floors, and lacked built-in furniture and storage space.<sup>4</sup>

While our discussion covers some 75 years, it is useful to break the period into three generations: 1865 to 1890, 1890 to 1920, and 1920 to 1940. The first generation of freedmen and women after Emancipation bought land on which to establish their own homesteads. As a group they had little capital and could only claim small parcels in less desirable locations. They hoped to build a homestead, work free, and lay the foundation for a kinship community of dwellings and institutions. With control over their property and fortunes, the freedmen reveled in investing hard work for their own benefit, and were eager to assist one another with whatever tools and materials they possessed.<sup>5</sup>

Montgomery County's black population was 6973 in 1860, 7432 in 1870. These figures represent about 800 to 1000 houses for black families.<sup>6</sup> Some were already inhabited by free blacks, and some freed families remained in slave homes. However, after Emancipation (which in Maryland occurred on November 1, 1864), many freedmen settling into kinship and geographic communities needed new housing immediately. For their dwellings, the freedmen naturally turned to skilled builders and carpenters. These craftsmen, working with their kin and clients, looked to traditions developed by earlier artisans to construct their simple log and frame dwellings, churches, and a few schools.

These first-generation dwellings have become increasingly rare in Montgomery County, as they have been lost to fire, replacement homes, or other forms of "progress." However, the County retains a few multi-generational dwellings, constructed by and for Montgomery County black families. Two are located in established black communities: Haiti, a free black and slave kinship neighborhood dating to the 1830's, and Lincoln Park, a planned black neighborhood subdivided by a white storeowner in 1890.

The Alfred Ross house on Martin's Lane in Rockville is the earlier of the two, having been built about 1860. Ross was listed as a slave in the 1851 inventory of the estate of Jane Beall, widow of Upton Beall, second

Clerk of the Circuit Court, and was probably manumitted in early 1864. He appeared on the 1870 census as age 35, a carpenter born in Maryland, owning \$100 worth of personal property, unable to read or write. His wife Jane kept house, and most of their children attended school.

In 1871, Alfred Ross purchased "the use and occupation of the house and lot ... now occupied by him" from Margaret J. Beall, daughter of Upton Beall, for \$5.00. The deed specified that "the said Margaret J. Beall during her life shall supervise and control the management of said house and lot;" the clause was removed in 1893 after Alfred's death when Margaret Beall joined to pass the land to Jane Ross and her children.<sup>7</sup>

The log and timber framed dwelling which slave carpenter Alfred Ross constructed for his family was one room, about 17 by 16 feet, with loft, a shallow fieldstone foundation surmounted by huge log sills, exterior weatherboards, central chimney, and a gable roof. He probably shaped his building materials by hand, obtaining most locally from their natural state. He would also have made the furniture for his home - a modest bedstead, table and chairs, maybe a dresser, and pegs or nails on a wall for hanging clothing not being worn.

The Ross family soon raised the roof to two stories, and added a summer kitchen, stable, barn, well, vineyard, fruit trees, and gardens. During daughter Maria's tenure, a sizeable two-story addition was constructed, joining the two sections with a full-length front porch and fancy siding. The house is still owned by Alfred and Jane Ross' great-great-grandson and contains in the attic a tongue and groove milled board on which is written "A. Ross Rockville."<sup>8</sup>



Alfred Ross House on Martin's Lane in Rockville

A contemporary of Alfred Ross was Reuben Hill. Known as a carpenter, he appeared on the 1870 census as a 40-year-old mulatto farm laborer. Owned by the Stonestreet family of Rockville until his mid-30s, Hill married a free mulatto named Rachel. In 1880 they purchased from Simeon Berry approximately one acre adjacent to what would become "Lincoln Park." That same year, Berry, an illiterate white former Confederate soldier and fence builder, willed his dwelling house, horse and wagon, post machine, tools and house furniture to Reuben Hill.<sup>9</sup> As both Simeon Berry and Reuben Hill were skilled with their hands, likely they had collaborated in constructing Berry's dwelling. The house may originally have been one story with loft, but was soon enlarged to the I-house common to the late 19th century.

In addition to his work as a carpenter, Reuben Hill was employed at the Kleindienst Hotel in Rockville for years. As sexton of Jerusalem Church, he often officiated at weddings and funerals. He built or helped build a brick dwelling across the street from his home in 1897. When he died at age 92 in 1915, he was described as having been "owned by S. T. Stonestreet where he acquired traits of character which gave him distinction among his race...."<sup>10</sup>

Reuben Hill's son, Reuben Thomas Hill, was also a skilled carpenter, and long-time sexton of Christ Episcopal Church. Soon after his father's death he enlarged the house with two rooms to the east, a kitchen and pantry off the back porch, and a full-width front porch with decorative cornice. By this time, most of the  $\frac{1}{4}$ -acre lots in Lincoln Park had been sold to blacks and some 30 homes constructed, many presumably by local black builders, with Reuben Hill Sr. and Jr. among them. The Reuben Hill house, enlarged and modernized, remains in the family.

George McDaniel in his 1979 study of northwestern Montgomery County found near-contemporaries of the Ross and Hill houses in Mt. Ephraim, Big Woods, and Jerusalem (Poolesville), all in ruins, and in the Albert Thompson house in Martinsburg. Everett Fly's 1983 study of the northeastern county noted master carpenter Remus Q. Hill, a founder of Cincinnati Village, who was listed in Boyd's 1879 directory as a carpenter in Sandy Spring.<sup>11</sup>

The first institution to be established by free blacks after Emancipation was the church. A few houses of worship were constructed by free Negroes before the Civil War, and many blacks continued to worship in the biracial congregations they knew, but the vast majority of black congregations were formed by freedmen and women shortly after the War. When newly-formed congregations outgrew the parlors of private homes, parishioners with building skills joined to construct larger houses of worship. As an example, in 1867, 16 black members of the Rockville Methodist Episcopal Church withdrew to form a church, at first meeting in Alfred and Jane Ross' home in Haiti. Later, the men of Clinton African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Rev. Charles E. Pipkins cut lumber from Hal Dawson's woods nearby, had the lumber sawn, and built a small frame church on Middle Lane.<sup>12</sup> Carpenter Alfred Ross was probably involved in both projects.

Montgomery County's black churches generally followed the same generational patterns as the dwellinghouses, with perhaps a decade-long time lag. The first freedmen's churches, of log or frame, were similar in

design and construction to the dwellings. When repairs became burdensome, or the congregation grew in numbers or prosperity, these early chapels were replaced by a second and often later a third generation, of grander proportion and materials. In between each generation were multiple renovations, additions, and improvements inside and out, most often accomplished by craftsmen of the congregation given a small budget from funds collected for that purpose.

In her 1983 book, Nina Clarke assembled names of blacks credited with constructing local black churches: the Howard Brothers who built Pleasant View Methodist Episcopal Church in 1888, Joseph and Henry Mobley of Poplar Grove Baptist Church near Quince Orchard, 1893, and George Dorsey, "community carpenter," who built a two-story frame church with balcony at Jerusalem in 1874.

A few schools for black children were built in this era. In 1872, Montgomery County established a public school system for Negroes, but few communities other than Rockville with its large black population or Sandy Spring with Quaker assistance were able to build schoolhouses until later in the century. Generally, the School Board would allocate funds to purchase a lot on which the patrons would erect a schoolhouse. Using (alas, anonymous) local talent, a one-room frame building would be erected. As an example, minutes of the Board of School Commissioners in 1878 noted that \$50 had been allocated to buy a lot for a colored school on the road from Neelsville to Clarksburg, the patrons to erect the building. From this point on, local trustees appointed by the Board would be responsible for maintenance, operations, and convincing the Board of local needs. In Quince Orchard, former slave Gary Green sold property to the County in 1874 for a schoolhouse. No doubt Green, a carpenter-builder in the Darnestown-Germantown area and father of 12, helped build the schoolhouse.<sup>13</sup>



Gary Green, Carpenter-Builder

By 1890, the first generation of freedmen had planted solid roots. Building homes on family land and inheriting the values and skills of their parents, the younger generation remained, encouraged by economics and kinship. This second generation, 1890 to 1920, characteristically built new or replacement two-story frame homes, small frame churches, one- and later two-room frame schoolhouses, commercial buildings (often in dwellings), and some lodge halls.<sup>14</sup>

More than 30 black rural enclaves became well established in the County before 1900. The construction techniques and design of the homes built in the second generation were in keeping with the mainstream of folk houses in Maryland, similar to those built by neighboring white families of moderate means. Beginning in the 1880s, and especially after 1900, the two-story frame house gradually replaced the log house. The floor plans were similar, two rooms down and two up, except that the frame house had a central hallway. Later in this period, the roofline was accented with a cross gable and the windows held two-over-two or six-over-six panes. Increasingly, these frame houses came to be made of commercially manufactured materials, and were more likely to be constructed by professional carpenters than by owners or volunteer community labor.<sup>15</sup>

In some of the black communities, carpenters and builders have been identified: Henry Hackett and Arthur Gibson in Clarksburg; Elmer Jones, carpenter, stone mason, and bricklayer of Jonesville; Remus Q. Hill of Sandy Spring; George Lee Bowen of Spencerville; Teat Clagett, plasterer of Barnesville; Henry Boston, carpenter of Good Hope; and Singleton Bellows, minister, carpenter, and fence maker from Sandy Spring. Bene Hallman of Mount Ephraim was a jack of all trades, working as a stonecutter at Dickerson quarry, as a farm laborer, broommaker, and traditional housewright. Probably none of these men were formally trained, as this was beyond the reach of most of Montgomery County's black youth until a high school was established in 1927, although the Sandy Spring Industrial School operated briefly 1909-1911. Despite the hopes of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, rural Montgomery County areas saw only the traditional builder-designer through the mid-20th century.<sup>16</sup>

Two black builders left their mark on Rockville. S. Leonard Gray, originally from Aldie, Virginia, married Sarah Johnson, from Rockville. He went into partnership with James Boswell, a builder who lived in Arlington, Virginia, near the Grays. Sarah's sisters purchased lots in Haiti on Martin's Lane and contracted with Gray to build there. In 1916 Nora and Arthur Johnson hired Gray to construct their home at 11 Martin's Lane, a "certain two story house 22 by 28 in accordance with plan of two story House in Alex. Co. Rowe Subdivision with an addition of 2 windows and flues...." The Johnsons would furnish all materials for the house and pay Gray \$1300. Gray and his partner Boswell were building three other houses in the area at the same time: another in Haiti, one in Lincoln Park, and one on Washington Street in Rockville. Gray also built a house with two parlors at 13 Martin's Lane for Nora's sister Evelyn Johnson. A house at 12 Martin's Lane, built for another sister, Daisy Webster, and her husband Nathaniel, may be attributed to either Gray or his nephew, Raymond Leroy Baker, or both. The Webster house is almost identical to "The Virginia" in the Aladdin Homes catalog, a typical "foursquare" (four rooms on each floor),

common to nearly every neighborhood established in the first quarter of the 20th century.<sup>17</sup>

Raymond Leroy Baker, born in 1898, studied building construction at Armstrong High School in Washington, apprenticed under his uncle, then opened his own contracting business. He constructed homes on Martin's Lane, Bickford Lane (one for his daughter Helen), North Washington Street, and Rockville Pike. One particularly handsome house built by Baker is located at 203 Martin's Lane, built in 1924-25 for Alfonzo Lee, mail carrier and lifelong civil rights leader. According to tradition, Lee's daughter selected the design from a magazine. Baker closed his contracting business in 1926, but he is credited with the design and construction of Asbury Methodist Church on Black Rock Road, Germantown, 1959-62.<sup>18</sup>

When Montgomery County blacks prospered, they improved their houses of worship almost as quickly as they upgraded their homes, for the churches were centers of religious, educational, and social life in each community. Black churches were more slowly replaced than white ones, and are only slightly more "race-identifiable" than the dwellings. Both races relied on local skilled craftsmen to design as well as to construct their churches.

One particularly fine complex of black institutional buildings stands in Martinsburg. It may be the only rural black community in Maryland to retain the three principal institutions of the historical community: church, school, and benefit society. Oral tradition credits the 1903 construction of Warren Methodist Episcopal Church in Martinsburg to Scott Bell, a local white carpenter from Poolesville, who nine years later built the adjacent Loving Charity Hall and also built St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church on Sugarland Road.<sup>19</sup>

This second generation opened as a period of expansive school construction. By the close of the 19th century, Montgomery County had 32 public schools for black children. All were frame, and the majority held one room and one teacher. The expansive years did not last long, and the Presbyterian Church reported in 1912 that "Nearly all of the colored schools are in a more or less dilapidated condition."<sup>20</sup> By 1920 times were more austere; black parents and teachers had to fight for every allocation. In all probability the construction, frequent relocation, repairs, maintenance, and additions to the schoolhouses were accomplished by local black craftsmen.

This period of maturation also saw the birth of fraternal, social, and charitable institutions in many Montgomery County black communities. Few institutions or the structures housing them remain in more than memory. Two extant structures are Loving Charity Hall in Martinsburg (in precarious condition) and Oddfellows Hall in Sandy Spring.

The third generation, 1920 to 1940, found Washington's middle class whites moving to suburban Montgomery County as rural blacks moved to Washington in search of job opportunities, so that the percentage of blacks in the County decreased. The 1930 Census showed 134 Montgomery County Negro workers in the building industry (three of whom were female), as compared to 1152 agricultural laborers and 1219 in domestic and personal service. Much of the construction by County blacks occurred on lots within existing

communities and included new bungalows and catalog houses as well as additions to older homes. This third generation of local black builders was a mix of young men trained at carpenters' knees and those with more formal schooling.

Robert H. Hill<sup>21</sup> is a living representative of this third generation of black builders. He was born on a farm in Sandy Spring in 1904. His parents, Samuel T. and Mary Hill, were prosperous and raised not only 18 children, but hogs, cattle, corn, wheat, hay, and all manner of vegetables which were regularly driven to the District of Columbia markets.

Bob Hill says he always knew about building things. His carpentry skills were honed at Sharp Street Colored School by teaching principal A. D. Owens, one of the school's four teachers. Illness prevented Hill from attending a vocational school in New Jersey with his friends, which he claims was fortuitous, as they "learned paper stuff but couldn't build a thing." Instead, Hill worked different jobs, including a year of teaching at Sharp Street school. At one time, he worked with three older Sandy Spring carpenters on construction jobs, one at Howard University.

When his father retired from farming and began distributing land to his children, Bob Hill requested a scoop and two horses. He had uncles and cousins in the building business and "I just wanted to build my own house." He operated the scoop, a large, sharp metal spoon-shaped implement pulled by two horses and guided manually by two handles, to dig the foundation of the house. Relatives and friends came to advise and show him what to do. Robert Awkard, a local carpenter, helped design the second floor, and young Hill learned to square a building up, how to lay block, and to frame.

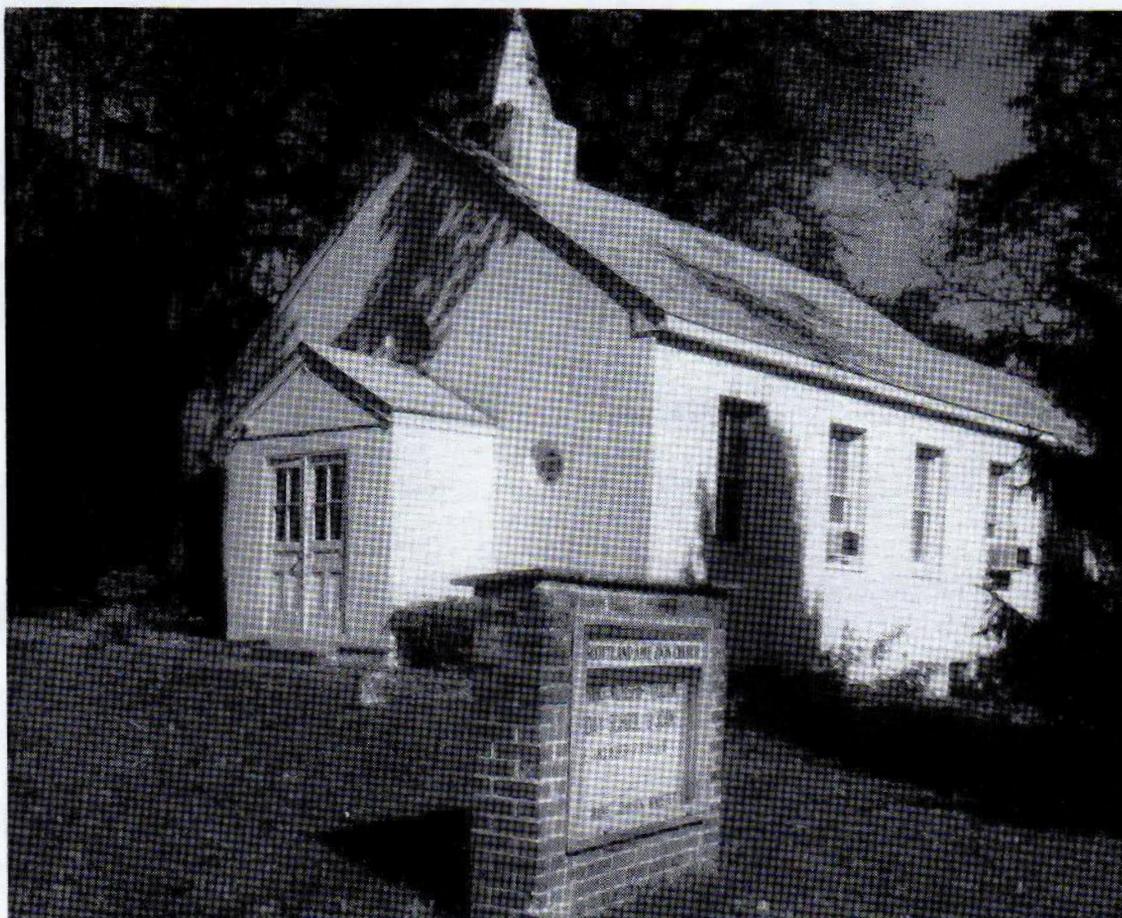
When complete, Bob Hill had a modern frame two-story house with cinderblock foundation, running water and inside plumbing, septic tank system, bay window, big fireplace, radiator heat, a basement, and an office. In his words: "I thought the house was right nice so I put an 'open' sign on it. People began ordering homes from me."

Hill spent the next half century building an estimated 250 homes, churches, a brick funeral home, and other structures. He became known locally as a "custom" or "master" builder, forming Sandy Spring Construction Co. in the 1940's. He constructed more houses for whites than for blacks, as he believes his predecessors in the community had done. Over the years, Hill developed a constituency, building for young families, wealthy socialites, and national figures such as Ralph Bunche, all over Maryland and in Washington.

Sandy Spring Construction Co. prospered through the years. Hill's reputation as a good but affordable builder grew. He employed some of his brothers and other family members in the business, and sometimes financed mortgages for his clients.

Other black men known to have been building in the County in these years include Alvin "Buff" Wims of Germantown, William Motley of Rockville, and the Davis brothers of Lincoln Park.<sup>22</sup>

The third generation of church-building for the most part was one of replacement when earlier structures burned or could no longer be repaired, or when the congregation raised sufficient funds to build a new one. Jerusalem Baptist Church in Poolesville had been built in 1874, and from its ashes in 1923 the congregation rebuilt the church used today. Sharp Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Sandy Spring, the oldest in the County, burned in 1920, to be replaced by the present building three years later. Scotland African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church built its church in 1924, and John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church, organized at Rocky Hill in Clarksburg soon after the Civil War, constructed a stylish new building in 1925.<sup>23</sup>



Scotland A.M.E. Zion Church

The period 1920 to 1940 brought change to educational facilities for black children in Montgomery County. Between 1926 and 1928, 15 black schools were constructed - 9 of two rooms, 5 of one room, and 1 (in Sandy Spring) of three rooms - made possible by the Rosenwald Fund, created by Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck to construct school buildings in southern states. To match Rosenwald grants, trustees in black communities raised cash and contributed labor and materials; much of the labor undoubtedly was that of black builders and carpenters. A high school for black students opened in Rockville in 1927, making education and minimal shop facilities available beyond eighth grade so higher building skills could be taught.<sup>24</sup>



Sharp Street School, Sandy Spring, 1910

Too little information is available to venture many generalizations about local black carpenters and builders, but most of the men mentioned herein received only basic schooling and were trained through some form of apprenticeship. They received and in turn handed down construction information by word of mouth, careful observation, and replication.

Montgomery County's historic black communities speak to us through their buildings. In them are the voices of hundreds of carpenters, masons, plasterers, roofers, and laborers who built structures about which they cared deeply - buildings in which to live, to worship, educate their children, and socialize. We need to research the lives and fortunes of these unknown men, verbalize building traditions and house forms, identify racial uniqueness within local traditions, and understand the community status of craftsmen.

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Eileen McGuckian's interest in the history of Montgomery County's black population began in Rockville, at Jerusalem Church and the community of Haiti, and continues through activities in historic preservation. She serves as executive director of Peerless Rockville and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree in American Studies at The George Washington University.

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**Photographs:**

Alfred Ross House by Eileen McGuckian

Gary Green from Montgomery County: A Pictorial History by Coleman and Lewis, 1984

Scotland A.M.E. Zion Church by Karlton Jackson

Sharp Street School, Sandy Spring, from A Rural Survey in Maryland, 1912

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