

# **In Search of Lebanon County's African-American Heritage**

**Dr. Leroy Hopkins, remarks at the Friends of Old Annville Annual Dinner**

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In 2005 I had the opportunity to present a short essay at Lebanon's HACC campus titled "Researching Lebanon County's African American History." Tonight I would like to share with you what I have learned since 2005. In the few weeks since I received this invitation to talk I have been able to use two important tools which were not at my disposal in 2005: Ancestry.com and Newspapers.com. These two apps have given me access to topics which I hope some earnest researcher in Lebanon County will seize upon.

As elsewhere in the Commonwealth, African American history here in Lebanon begins in slavery. Who those slaveholders were can be gleaned from the tax lists and especially the returns to the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 and its amended version of 1788. Most likely out of fear of slave insurrection Pennsylvania authorities decided to supplant chattel slavery with a system of indenture servitude which would not harm the economic interests of the slave owning elites. Africans born before 1780 were slaves for life; their children born after March 1, 1780 were to be registered at the county courthouses or in Philadelphia as indentured servants, i.e. persons liable to serve until they reached 28 years of age. Thus a significant source of labor was secured.

A loophole in the law allowed slave masters to transport pregnant slaves to nearby slave states (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey) and bring mother and child back as slaves for life. In York County this loophole reportedly led to a doubling of the number of enslaved Africans by 1783. The amended law closed that loophole but did not address one aspect not considered by the law. Not only the children of enslaved Africans were made indentured servants but also their grandchildren. As a consequence the State Supreme Court intervened in 1830 to end the practice noting that it was not the intent of the original law to create a class of servants in perpetuity.

Back in 2005 I consulted a brochure published by the Lebanon County Commissioners and the Lebanon County Historical Society entitled **Three Hundred Years of Pennsylvania 1683-1983. Lebanon County . In Old Words and Pictures**. As I noted then the 96- page booklet had beautiful illustrations but no information on Lebanon's African American residents. No reference was made to slavery or to important African American institutions such as the church. One picture of the Boy Scout Drum & Bugle Corps on Armistice Day, November 12, 1928 shows one black face: in the front row carrying an oversize drum is Andrew "Boots" Johnson.

An article in June 13, 1934 issue of The **Lebanon Daily News** reports the following:

#### **Boots Johnson Returns to Cornwall Home**

Andrew R. "Boots" Johnson, former Cornwall high school colored athletic star, has returned home from his studies at Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland. A member of this year's graduating class, he carried off scholastic as well as athletic and campus honors. Graduating as president of his class and president of the college Y.M.C.A. , the Cornwall youth also was prominent in football and track at the Baltimore Institution.

Prominent (sic) associated with the Boy Scout movement in this county, the young college grad will act as cooking expert at Camp Strause during the summer encampment and expects to assume a teaching position in Maryland this fall.

This newspaper report provides some hints about race relations before World War II in Lebanon. "Boots" Johnson was both an athlete and an academic scholar both in Lebanon and at today's Morgan University. It is likely the novelty of his achievement is what attracted the newspaper's attention to him. He was clearly different from the other African Americans living in Lebanon. Before turning to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Andrew R. "Boots" Johnson can open a page to Lebanon's 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history.

He was born in Virginia in 1912. His parents, Louie and Katie Johnson, probably came to Lebanon either during or just after World War I. It is likely they were members of the movement of the "Great Migration," the outflow of African Americans from the South to escape Jim Crow and daily threats of violence. In Cornwall's Goosetown, Louie Johnson is identified variously as a brakeman or as a laborer. Andrew graduated from Cornwall high school

in 1929 and his dream of teaching in Maryland apparently evaporated. On November 28, 1935 he married Georgette Elizabeth Johnson. Like her parents, Louie and Katie Johnson, Georgette was born in South Carolina. I have found little about their married life but Andrew was the founder and director of the Adult School in Cornwall, an institution created by the WPA to provide literary and citizenship training to local African Americans and foreign born residents. Started in 1932, 32 adults, women and men, were enrolled.

Andrew Johnson was an active participant in scouting. Camp Strause was a Boys Scout camp and Andrew had been a member of Troop 15, an apparently integrated group. In 1936 he moved to Baltimore to become the first field executive in charge of the Colored Scout Division that consisted of 7 troops with 126 scouts. During his term (1936-1949) Andrew Johnson was able to grow the Colored Division to 123 Cub Scout, Scout, and Senior Units with a total of 1,706 members. In 1949 he accepted the position of District Executive and Consultant on Minority Group Relations for the Chicago Council, Boy Scouts of American. By 1956, according to the Chicago press, he was responsible for 2,760 South Side boys. The trail of Andrew R. Johnson ends there. Strangely enough Georgette Johnson died on April 19, 2008 in Lebanon County. Her obituary makes no reference to her husband. It is stated that she was formerly of Baltimore, MD and Chicago, ILL, where she lived the majority of her adult life. She was a seamstress and a church organist before moving to Lebanon to be with her family. She has family probably still living in Lebanon, Lancaster, and Hagerstown.

Using both of these lives we can make a thumbnail sketch of Black life after World War I. Both families came from the South. Both were involved in the church in Lebanon County. In 1931 Cornwall's First Baptist Church ran a fundraiser in March to benefit Andrew R. Johnson, probably to defray the costs of his education. Georgette Johnson's obituary states that she was a member of St. John's A.M.E. Church. Aside from the Boy Scouts, one has to wonder what other organizations were a part of Black life in Lebanon. Again let us turn to the newspapers.

Lebanon's newspapers are similar to those in Lancaster in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Racial epithets are common. One reference to Andrew R. Johnson stated that he was a "husky colored" lad. In 1912 the graduating class of Lebanon Valley College presented two dramas: "Nigger in a Woodpile" and "Klu Klux-Klan". It was also reported from Fredericksburg

on March 11 of that year that “the Klu Klux Klan Club will hold their weekly meeting at the home of Mrs. John Sherk on Wednesday evening March 13, a fine program will be rendered.” On January 24, 25, and 26, 1916 with matinees on Tuesday and Wednesday D.W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation” was presented at the Academy of Music in Lebanon. On October 1, 1923 one hundred and twenty-five men and women attended a Klan meeting in the Red Men’s Building at Ninth and Wilbur Streets. On September 3, 1924 the South Lebanon Literary Society debated whether the Klan is 100% American. Finally, Rev. Charles Hartranft of Harrisburg, a Kleagle of his district, spoke to a large audience in Jonestown at the Sons of America Hall.

These troubling announcements are juxtaposed with an almost fawning attention paid to individual members of the Black community. For James Milberrie I found 121 matches in Lebanon newspapers between 1900-1940. Everything from the death of his daughter in 1917 to the handsome gifts and dinner he received on his 64<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1915 as well as his activity in St. John’s A.M.E. Church and the Lebanon Heights Lodge No. 8944 of Grand United Order of Odd Fellows was dutifully reported in the newspapers.

James Milberrie (also spelled Milberie or Milbury) was born in Maryland in 1852. His parents were William Milberrie and Mary Hopkins. When he died on January 8, 1926 he was buried in Mt. Lebanon Cemetery. Besides the Odd Fellows of which he was a founding member, he was also a founding member of St. John’s A.M.E. The church’s first pastor Rev. Charles Morton was also a member of the Lebanon Heights Lodge. Rev. Morton’s successor was Rev. William White who coincidentally replaced Andrew Johnson in 1936 as the head of the Adult School. Some of Rev. White’s descendants are members of my church in Lancaster. His daughter Edith married Rev. Donald Ming who became a bishop of the A.M.E. Church in Africa. Since she had graduated from Temple University with a degree in Music, while serving in Africa with her husband Edith Ming transcribed or arranged 23 hymns which now appear in the A.M.E. Hymnal originally composed by Hendrik Wittboi, possibly the great-grandson of the famous Nama leader against German aggression in 1904/05.

St. John’s A.M.E. Church was organized during World War I but it was not the oldest Black church in the County. On September 2, 1886 it was reported the search for a colored church was reported in the newspaper. This may be a reference to the eventual A.M.E. Zion

Church reported in Lebanon in 1886. On June 6, 1891 Rev. Mrs. Harriet A. Baker of Lebanon erected a church which was to be dedicated at the end of the month. In Allentown there is a marker for Rev. Baker who was responsible for St. James A.M. E. Church there. Her husband was William Baker who was seized as a fugitive slave in Columbia, PA in 1851 and whose freedom was purchased with the help of some friends. We also find in 1891 the Gospel Union Mission at Pleasant Hill was to be dedicated on June 28 of that year.

Back briefly to James Milberrie. Two of his sons were in the military. Charles served with the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Buffalo Soldiers) in Mexico in the Spring of 1917 (my uncle also served in that regiment). Leonard Milberrie was in Co. E, No. 3 Stevedore Battalion in France. Black residents of Lebanon also served in the Civil War, Robert B. Cook who had served in Co. E of the 32<sup>nd</sup> USCT died at the almshouse on April 4, 1900 at the age of 78 and was buried in the Soldiers Block of Mt. Lebanon Cemetery by Sedgewick Post No. 42 G.A.R. Besides the military, church, and civic organizations Black residents of Lebanon County were also engaged in fun pursuits.

As elsewhere baseball was a fan favorite among the Black resident of Lebanon County. On May 17, 1916 a team called the Lebanon Colts was organized. A year later the Lebanon Valley Colored Giants was also organized. In 1922 a colored baseball league was formed and perennial opponent was the Royal Blue Giants of New York with African American and Cuban players. This was from the beginning of the golden age of the Negro Baseball League and deserves further research.

As should be obvious from the myriad information which I have already offered it is impossible to present a history of African Americans in Lebanon in 30 minutes or even 30 days. Two items which I mentioned in 2005 I would like to use to conclude my talk. In "Stories of old Stumptown" published by the Lebanon County Historical Society reference is made to Billy Downey, who worked with the merchant Levi Bickel and in John Light's tannery. Downey was a faith healer and probably conversant in Pennsylvania German. In other words he was probably a pow wow doctor. His modus operandi was so special that the narrator had to mention it:

As Sampson's strength lay in his long hair, so Billy's occult powers were supposed to be inherent in the blackness of his African complexion. There was no surer cure for The whooping cough than Bill Downey's kiss implanted full on the mouth of the sufferer.

The patent nonsense of this statement has surprising historical precedence. In 1793 when Yellow Fever ravaged Philadelphia Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, leaders of Black Philadelphia were hired to treat the patients. It was widely believed that Africans being from a tropical climate were immune to the diseases of that region. Apparently it was forgotten that African genes had probably changed after several centuries of forced residence in the moderate climates. Yet, in the Spanish American War of 1897/98 so called immune units of Southern Blacks were recruited for combat in Cuba.

Despite the barely concealed racist ennuendoes of descriptions such as that of Billy Downey, the close proximity of whites and blacks in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lebanon County should be researched. Of special interest to me as a retired professor of German is the interaction of Pennsylvania Germans and Africans in our region. And that leads me to my final comments on African Americans in Lebanon.

Cornwall was founded by Iron master Curtis Grubb in 1734. Like other businessmen of that era, Grubb purchased Africans to use as laborers. He eventually sold his holdings to Robert Coleman. Coleman's son William had a waiter named Edward Millen who lived with him in 1860. Millen was born on December 2, 1836 and according to his death certificate reported by his son Edward, Jr. , his parents were John Millen and Charlotte Butler, German natives. That was probably untrue since in 1850 John Millen lived in South Lebanon and both he and his wife Charlotte are identified as natives of Maryland. John was a hostler and that profession would should be taken up his son Edward who in 1870 lived in Lancaster's 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward. His profession was coachman. The **Pennsylvania Negro Business Directory** of 1910 identifies him as:

A native of Lebanon County, being one of the only colored families that for many years lived at Cornwall. Mr. Millin (sic) lived with one family in Lancaster as a coachman for twenty eight years. He now lives a retired life and is the largest individual property owner of the colored race in Lancaster County.

From my own research I can augment the information with the following. Edward Millen was likely a pall bearer of Lydia Hamilton Smith. His son, Edward Clarence Millen, was the first

African American hired by the Lancaster Police department. He was their chauffeur. Edward, Sr. was a member of Lancaster's Bethel A.M.E. Church. When the church's cemetery reached its limit in 1905/06, Millen help organize Stevens Greenland Memorial Cemetery, the last cemetery created solely for the internment of African Americans in Lancaster County. My grandparents and maternal uncle are buried there. Edward Millen's son, John, married Mary Stumpf my grandmother's sister. Their son Herbert E. Millen was Pennsylvania's 1<sup>st</sup> African American Superior Court judge and only the 13<sup>th</sup> in the country. Edward Millen's daughter, Susan, married George Patterson. Their son, George, married my mother's sister, Edna Lucy Peaco. So I have a personal interest in the Millen family.

In conclusion, Lebanon's has a rich and varied African American history that requires some effort to unearth but the search is definitely worthwhile and also very interesting.