INTRODUCTION

Approximately five thousand black people, more than 97% of them enslaved, lived in Clark County, Kentucky in the years just before the Civil War. They accounted for nearly half of the county's population at the time.[1]

In the long decades prior to any organized effort to record their names, more than ten thousand, perhaps as many as fifteen thousand, African-Americans lived in the county for at least a portion of their lives.[2] As in so many other locales, the black people of Clark County provided the majority of the physical labor and much of the skilled knowledge that built and sustained the county in its opening decades. Despite this, and even while significant numbers have continued to live in the county up to the present day, African-Americans receive scant mention in the several existing general histories of Clark County.

So much of the early history of black people in this country is hidden from us today. This is scarcely accidental, a great deal of this obscuration results from deliberate actions by slave owners. Breaking apart of the families of those held as slaves, prevention of communication between enslaved people, prohibition of literacy by slaves, refusal to acknowledge surnames of slaves, and blocking the recording of the names of slaves in censuses were some of the components of this erasure of history. Ignoring or downplaying contributions by enslaved people across all forms of endeavor, from construction to the art of cooking, was commonplace. All of which was part of the larger effort to deny the humanity of those held in slavery, a legacy still very much with us.[3]

Veiled as early black history may be, what can still be learned about African-Americans in early Clark County is often fascinating. The fortitude of Aaron Abbott, the travails of Daniel (Bush), and the skills of Fannie Cole can be revealing, even though we don't have the benefit of hearing their voices directly.

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[1] In 1850, there were 141 free and 4,923 enslaved black people in Clark County, accounting for 40% of the county's population. In 1860, there were 127 free and 4,764 enslaved black people, consisting of 43% of the county's population (data sourced from ancestry.com). (In 2010, there were about eighteen hundred black people in the county, representing 5% of the population.)

[2] Despite the presence of black residents in such scale, not until 1870 was the first organized recording of the names of black residents undertaken, via the U.S. census.

[3] Arthur Butler of South Carolina and his supporters in the U.S. Senate in 1850 successfully barred the inclusion by name of enslaved people in the U.S. census, which the Census Office had planned to do. Because of this and similar actions on behalf of the slaveocracy, we presently have no over-arching way of learning some of the most basic information about enslaved people in the U.S.—starting with their names. As was so frequently the case, honoring the priorities of slave owners far outweighed any concerns for the people held in bondage. Although it was only one of the lesser chapters in the long saga of racist federal actions, this censorship has had a lasting impact on African-American genealogy and social history research.

The ability of African-Americans to persevere with their lives even while providing endless labor, and to resist their cruel oppression, isn't simply an object lesson in survival.[4] Their strengths and skills imbued forms of expression that still animate us today, with American popular music being only the most obvious example.

The early history of African-Americans is so often filled with pain, yet, if we keep looking away for that reason, we lose so much. These individuals are the family ancestors of a great many of us who are alive today. They're the cultural ancestors of us all. We owe it to ourselves, and to them, to know more about them.

Research. The stories written by me (Lyndon Comstock) that are included in this website consist of several of the narrative chapters from the forthcoming book: *Before Abolition: African-Americans in Early Clark County, Kentucky*.

About seven thousand African-Americans who lived in Clark County before abolition are included in the book.[5] However, relatively scant details have been uncovered about most of those individuals. Thus, much of the book is simply a compendium of information pertaining to them.[6] For a few people for whom it was possible to find out more, a narrative of their story was written. A list of the chapters in the book is included at the end of this introduction.

To understand the history of black people in early Clark County in fine grain, one wishes that we knew at least something about each black person who lived in the county. Their name, when and where they lived, their family members, the nature of their work, the triumphs and the abuses they experienced. It would be preferable, of course, to hear this in the words of the person her or himself, but I know of only one memoir by a black person who lived in early Clark County, Peter Bruner.

We're at a point, technologically speaking, where far more comprehensive projects to recover some of the early history of black people in the U.S. could be undertaken.[7] It would surely be feasible, albeit requiring a diligent effort, to name a majority of the nearly four million people enumerated in each of the 1850 and 1860 U.S. slave schedules. Ironically, the potential for recovering this lost history is due

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[4] Although no major slave rebellions were recorded in Clark County, surely there were thousands of instances, large and small, of resistance to slavery. Part of the effect of not hearing directly from more of the enslaved black people of Clark County is that we don't hear their stories of resistance.

[5] The overwhelming majority of the African-Americans who lived in Clark County in the decades before abolition were enslaved. Enslaved people weren't included by name in censuses or similar records, making it laborious to recover information about them now. Surnames were not used for slaves by their white owners. When self-identified surnames are not known for the African-Americans, I've used the surnames of slave owners for identification purposes, placed in parentheses.

[6] As incomplete as my book is, I know of nothing else comparable for Clark County. Much more could be done, however, to continue the research about black people in early Clark County. Surely there are many descendants of Clark County black people, beyond the handful whom I was able to contact, who know valuable information about their ancestors. Civil court case records are a crucial repository, one where I've only scratched the surface. Property records, such as deeds and mortgages, may be instructive. Although property tax records don't include enslaved people by name, they could be a helpful form of cross-reference. Digging further into the back stories of people's histories before they arrived in Clark County could be fascinating. If any of the people included in the book were born in Africa, or their parents were born in Africa, I don't have that information, yet it would provide more insight, even more so if the region of Africa was known.

[7] Access to digitized databases and the potential for internet crowdsourcing create the potential for far more sweeping projects to recover lost history. As DNA interpretation becomes more sophisticated, that will also become a crucial tool. While we're at it, we ought to recover more of the missing information about everyone else who wasn't a propertied white male. White women weren't included in early censuses either, unless they were head of a household.

in significant part to the slave owners themselves, who wanted to record the dispositions of their highly valuable human property. Hence the inclusion of slaves by name in probate records or in property records or in lawsuits about property. Military records (especially from the Civil War) and church records are among the other important sources. Especially helpful are accounts passed down through families.

My research started while investigating my own family's roots. In the course of that research, I began learning the story of Daniel (Bush) from civil court records. Daniel was recorded as a slave owned by one of my ancestors, also named Lyndon Comstock, although that would have come as news to Lyndon. As much as I now know of Daniel's story is included in the chapter about him.

Also, while reading the unpublished records of the Providence Baptist Church (to which that early Lyndon's wife, Nancy Julia nee Bush, belonged) at the Winchester public library, I was surprised to see that several hundred people held as slaves were members of the church and were mentioned in the records.[8] Realizing that this was an unknown resource about early black people in Clark County, I transcribed the mentions of African-Americans at Providence Baptist and put them online.[9]

My research expanded as I tried to learn more about the African-Americans in the Providence Baptist records from other types of records. As I looked at more documents, such as old marriage records and Civil War enlistments, it seemed that abstracted information from those records about black people from Clark County ought to be published, irrespective of whether the individuals had any connection to Providence Baptist Church. Eventually, I took the plunge into the Clark County probate records, and looked through thousands of pages of those probate documents.[10]

Thank you to all of those who helped with my research. Historian Harry Enoch, descendants of the Murray and Abbott families, Andy Gary of the Winchester public library, and a number of other people provided very helpful assistance.

If you have any additional information to contribute relative to my research, or spot any errors, large or small, I'd appreciate it if you would let me know. I can be reached at lyndon.comstock@gmail.com. Thank you.

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[8] In saying that I was surprised to find significant numbers of African-Americans who belonged to the Providence Baptist Church during slavery times, it's in the following sense. I knew, of course, that the great majority, 97% or more, of African-Americans in Clark County prior to abolition were held as slaves. Accordingly, most of the African-Americans at Providence Baptist prior to abolition were enslaved. I knew that slaves sometimes attended church and I wouldn't have been surprised to find a handful of slave owners who brought their slaves to church. But I would have guessed that the majority of slave owners would prefer to not be faced with the contradiction of belonging to the same church as their chattel slaves. I did not expect to see records for several hundred enslaved people who were admitted as members of the Providence Baptist Church. However, slave owners were nothing if not adept at rationalization. So far as one can tell, the sale of people, even the separate sale of children, as if they were cattle, was no more psychologically difficult just because that family was a member of one's own church congregation. And perhaps the slave owners thought that teaching a doctrine of obedience would be a useful reason to bring slaves to church, as some slave narratives, including Peter Bruner's, have described.

[9] I use the terms "black" and "African-American" interchangeably. In the records of the time, African-Americans were sometimes (and often inconsistently) classified according to their skin color and presumed racial background, using terms such as "mulatto." I've ignored those distinctions unless I've so noted.

[10] Harry Enoch, who's helped my research effort in many ways, provided me with a copy of a seventeen hundred page abstract of Clark County probate court orders, which further complemented my reading of probate records.

About Lyndon Comstock. The paternal (Comstock) side of my family moved from Rhode Island to central Kentucky in the 1790s. Our branch of Comstocks continued living in the area for several decades before moving on to other Midwestern states. It was deeply disturbing to learn several years ago that one of my ancestors, Brown Comstock, enslaved people in Madison County; I have been trying to learn about those who were victimized by him. Five generations down the line, I was born on the west side of Chicago and grew up in Michigan. I now live in California. After retiring from my work in community development finance, I now spend much of my time on history research.

In case it's of interest, here are the chapters from my forthcoming book: