

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Lisletown, A Black Hamlet

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Following the Civil War, the freed slaves faced daunting challenges. According to one historian, "After emancipation on December 18, 1865, Kentucky's 225,000 former slaves were on their own. Literally overnight, tens of thousands of black Kentuckians were scrambling for the basics of life in an often hostile environment." Most had no money, no housing, no land and no job. So many moved to the cities to find work that there was soon a shortage of farm labor on post-bellum estates.

To attract workers, large landowners in the Bluegrass set aside tracts of 10 to 20 acres and gave away, rented or sold lots to those willing to work on their farms. Examples include Pricetown, Maddoxtown, Fort Spring and Little Georgetown. These small villages were called "black hamlets," or Freetowns. Each lot had space for a house, garden, chicken coop and hog pen. These Freetowns were most numerous in Fayette County, which had a high concentration of horse farms. As a result, blacks came to play a key role in the development of the horse industry. All Freetowns were not established by white owners, however. Lisletown, the best known black hamlet in Clark County, had a different origin.

Lisletown is located near the Kentucky River and the mouth of Lower Howard's Creek. If you are driving to Hall's Restaurant from Winchester on Athens-Boonesboro Road, you will pass a large abandoned rock quarry on your right. Lisletown is on the plateau above, between the quarry and the restaurant. Its founder was Fielding Lisle, a former slave.

In the year 1850, Fielding Lisle was one of seventeen slaves belonging to Henry Lisle of Madison County. In 1864, Fielding and his brother John enlisted in the Union Army. Their regiment, the 114th U.S. Colored Infantry, was sent to Virginia where they participated in the siege of Petersburg and Richmond. After the fall of Petersburg, they were engaged in the pursuit of Robert E. Lee's army and his surrender at Appomattox Court House. In official records, Fielding was described as 5 feet 7 inches tall with a copper complexion. He later received a government pension for his service.

Following the war, Fielding returned briefly to Madison County. He was listed in the 1870 census living near White Hall with his wife Annie and daughters Mary and Mariah. He soon moved to Clark County and settled on 20 acres of land he purchased from Richmond Martin in 1874. The tract was described as "part of the old [John] Lisle Farm" and being mostly "in timber or wood land and has no buildings thereon." Fielding paid for the land with \$200 in cash (at the time, he had \$200 on record in an account at the Freedman's Bank in Louisville that he may have received in connection with his military service) and a promise to pay another \$100, which he soon made good on.

Fielding sold off several 1- to 3-acre tracts to other former slaves: George Bell, Sam Williams and Frank Smith. He also sold or gave tracts to his future wife Emily George, son John Lisle, daughter Lidia Woodford and her husband Thomas, daughter Sarah Gentry and her husband Jerry. All these men found work as farm laborers in the area. We don't know the particular farms, but the large estates nearby at the time were held by the Dykes family to the north and east, S. A. B. Woodford to the north and H. L. Stevens to

the west.



Lisletown residents, Sam and Jane Williams, are buried at the Old Stone Church on Lower Howard's Creek.

By the turn of the century, there was a well-established black community at Lisletown. From the 1900 census, we can identify the following families living there: Green and Savannah Woodford, Fielding and (fourth wife) Pauline Lisle, Jerry and Sarah Gentry, Lewis and Harriet Woodford, James and Susan Bell, John and Mary McCord, George and Demarius Bell, Jackson and Ella Williams, Sam and Jane Williams. All the men were farm workers except Sam Williams who worked at a sawmill and John McCord who was listed as a “stationary fireman.”

Fielding Lisle died on December 22, 1916, following an attack of acute bronchitis. His death certificate states that he was buried at “Howard’s Creek,” which probably means he was laid to rest in Lisletown, the black hamlet that he founded.

Of all the Lisletown residents, the Bell family had by far the longest tenure. George Bell was the first; he purchased a two-acre lot there in 1884. He was followed by succeeding generations until his great-great-grandchildren left and moved to Winchester in the early 1960s. George, the son of Spencer Bell, was born in Jessamine County in 1839. After the Civil War, he resided for a time at Keene, where he and his son James were farm workers. Keene was an antebellum spa that became a black hamlet after the war. George and his wife Demarius came to Lisletown with son James and daughter Mary, who married John McCord. George died in 1917 and was buried in the Talbott Graveyard at Ford.

James and his wife Susan had a son, Richard O. Bell, who was born in Lisletown in about 1886. Richard O., known to his friends as “Sugar Dew,” lived to age 99. He spent most of his life at Lisletown but moved to Winchester in his later years. Richard O. married Mary “Mazie” Davis and their children were Raymond, Richard Hamilton, Stella, Amanda, St. Mark, Clarence and Annie. Richard H. and Raymond worked at Johnny Allman’s Restaurant, which was just below Lisletown on the Kentucky River. Richard H. married Fannie Nelson and they raised 13 children. Jean, Hannah, Fannie, Polly, Chester and Robert are still living; their brother Hamilton passed away in September.

I interviewed Jean Bell, hoping to learn what it was like growing up at Lisletown.

Jean is 72 years old now and has been working at Hall's Restaurant for 45 years. She keeps a spotless kitchen, cooks outstanding pork ribs and has no plans to retire. Jean recalls that life was hard at Lisletown. When I asked her what she liked about it, she replied, "Nothing." The family lived in a small cabin with no running water or electricity. They had a large garden and kept chickens, rabbits and pigs. One of her dreaded chores was fetching water when their well ran dry in the summer. The water had to be carried from the Coffee Springs, about a half mile away and uphill all the way back. Jean said by the time they got home half the water had sloshed out of the bucket, and they would have to go back for more. She still remembers it as the best tasting water in the world. Lisletown is covered with stone fences that served as property boundaries and animal enclosures. In addition to her other chores, Jean remembers she and her siblings spending many hours stacking rock on those fences.



Jean Bell stands beside the sign marking her reserved parking space at Hall's Restaurant.

Jean began her education at Howard's Creek School, located on Waterworks Road near the WMU plant. Called a "Rosenwald school," this was one of many built in Kentucky with support from the Julius Rosenwald Fund for the education of African American children during the era of segregation. Jean later attended Oliver Street School in Winchester and, after desegregation, Clark County High School. Going to school was her main getaway. She described how isolated they felt growing up in Lisletown. By then the community consisted of her immediate family, grandfather Richard, and uncles Raymond and St. Mark—all Bells. When her father was off at work, they had no way to get anywhere and little to do except chores. Jean said when they finally moved to Winchester she didn't

miss Lisletown one bit.

The most famous member of the Bell family is Yeremiah Neavius Bell, born March 3, 1978, in Winchester. Bell attended George Rogers Clark High School, where he lettered three years in football as a defensive back and wide receiver. He also lettered in basketball and baseball. Bell was not highly recruited while in high school, and after two years of working in a steel mill, he enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University where he was a walk-on for the Colonels' football team. He was named to the Division 1-AA All-American team in 2001. Bell was drafted in 2003 by the Miami and has played seven seasons with the Dolphins.

The Bluegrass Heritage Museum recently arranged a trolley tour to the Old Stone Church, presently home of the Providence Missionary Baptist Church. Our host was church member and neighbor Jimmy Gay, who is in charge of the building and grounds. The historic church on Lower Howard's Creek is still in excellent condition. While wandering the grounds that evening, I found a connection to Lisletown: A number of former residents attended church here and are buried in the churchyard. Lewis Woodford has a military gravestone honoring his service in the 109th U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War. Lewis was listed as a trustee when the Colored Baptist Church purchased the Old Stone Church from the white congregation in 1872. Among the other Lisletown residents buried there are members of the Gentry, Williams and McCord families, including several children of Mary McCord who was a daughter of the progenitor George Bell.

Sources

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