

From Slavery at Harewood to Freedom on Potato Hill

By Linda Downing Ballard

This article is written to supplement the Spirit of Jefferson's column, *Improvement project on West Washington St. takes first steps*, in the February 17 to February 23, 2021 publication. The supporting photo for the article was taken at the fork of W. Washington St. extended and former Harewood Avenue leading to Route 51 on which the Harewood estate exists. (Harewood Avenue is now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard). The place of reference for this article begins near the fork.

Perhaps, few locals, if any, know or remember the origin of the African American community who lived on "Potato Hill". Potato Hill is the farthest west entrance gate to Charles Town from Route 51.

In June 1863, a confiscation inventory titled, "PROPERTY IMPRESSED FROM R. B. WASHINGTON OF JEFFERSON COUTNY BY UNITED STATES TROOPS", lists the names of 27 men, women, and children "liberated by the war". These individuals, ranging in ages from 10 to 50 years old, were enslaved at Harewood. Of whom, at least ten, namely the Nelson and Galloway families, began their newfound freedom on Potato Hill. (Reference exhibit 1).

Per deed dated June 1, 1867, lots situated in the angle formed by the intersection of the Charlestown and Smithfield Turnpike and the old Winchester road on "Potato Hill" (as written in the deed) were advertised in the Spirit of Jefferson to be sold at a public sale on the 11th day of April 1867 to the highest bidder. Richard B. Washington purchased property at the price of one hundred and twenty-two dollars per acre. Washington disposed of a portion of said lot to Dolly Nelson at the same price paid by Washington. Per separate deed dated June 1, 1867, Washington sold land to Charlotte Galloway at the same price per acre. Dolly Nelson, Charlotte Galloway, and their families were among the individuals freed from slavery on R. B. Washington's plantation in June 1863 by United States troops. (Reference exhibit 2, 1883 Charles Town Lots Map, intersecting point to Summit Point and to Middleway, bottom left on map).

The 1870 United States Federal Census lists David Nelson as head of household, occupation carpenter. Dolly Nelson is listed as wife. Seven children are listed by name and age, two of whom were born after the family was liberated: Fannie, 5, and Armstead, 2. Home is listed as Grant, Jefferson, West Virginia, Post Office Charles Town.

In 1870 Benjamin Galloway is recorded as head of household, occupation farm laborer. Lottie (Charlotte) Galloway is listed as wife. Their son, Samuel, and daughter, Lucy, are listed as age 19 and 17, respectively. The entire family was listed in the Property Impressed from R. B. Washington inventory.

Dollie Nelson and Charlotte Galloway are listed in the Jefferson County Court House Land Books 1872, 1873 and 1874 Table of Town Lots. The description of lot and location for Dolly Nelson is recorded as 1 acre, 1st Ward and building, combined value \$330. The property description for Charlotte Galloway is 1 ½ acre, 1st Ward and building, combined value \$550.

Edward and Maria Johnson are listed in the Property Impressed R. B. Washington inventory as blacksmith and accomplished cook, respectively. The death register for Edward Johnson records date of death April 4, 1874, age 76, spouse Maria Johnson, father F. Johnson, informant Dolly Nelson, sister.

Lucy Nelson Armstrong, eldest daughter of Dolly and David Nelson, and husband Abe, bore at least two children: Jenny Armstrong in 1873 and Mary Armstrong in 1875.

In the 1875, 1876, 1877 and 1878 Table of Town Lots, the property description for Dolly Nelson remains the same. In 1878 Sam Galloway is listed as heir to Charlotte Galloway, 1 ½ acre, 1st Ward and building. Property value remains unchanged. The death register for Charlotte Galloway lists her death date as December 3, 1874, reported by Dolly Nelson, neighbor. (Gradually, the Washingtons regain ownership of part of the Galloway property).

In 1884 Benjamin Nelson, oldest son of Dolly and David Nelson, is first recorded in the Table of Town Lots as paying taxes for 1/3 acre, 1st Ward. In 1885 a building is on the lot. Combined value is recorded as \$250. Nellie Nelson, Benjamin's wife, dies on August 22, 1885, recorded age 38. In 1888 the property description for Benjamin Nelson is 1/3 acre, 1st Ward and building, combined value \$500.

Birth, marriage and death records reveal Benjamin and Nellie Nelson bore at least four children: David in 1873, Dollie T. listed as age 20 on 1892 marriage record, and daughter N. Nelson who died at age 3 on July 17, 1885. Son Robert Benjamin Nelson is cited in Benjamin Nelson's Will.

From the 1880s to the 1900s, Benjamin (chairman) and Thomas Nelson were trustees of the Second Baptist church constructed near the fork of Harewood Ave. and W. Washington St. extended. (The church was destroyed by fire in 1919. A new church was completed in 1921 at the same location and named Zion Baptist Church. The church was built adjacent to the one-story brick school nearest the intersection. In 1867 the Charles Town District Board of Education purchased a lot at the intersection. Between 1867 and 1874, a school was built on this lot to serve the formerly enslaved. This school is now designated a Charles Town historical landmark).

Virginia Nelson married Miles R. Ranson in 1881. Her recorded age is 26 and his 35. Their daughter Anna Theodora Ranson was born March 28, 1883. In the 1870 census, Virginia Nelson is cited as daughter to Dolly and Benjamin Nelson, age 15. Virginia (Jenny on death record)) Nelson died on June 24, 1888. Recorded place of death is Charles Town. Burial site is recorded as near Charles Town. (In 1875 the Fairview Cemetery Corporation was established to purchase a burial place for their kinfolk. They secured land outside the city limits in Gibsontown. This cemetery is referred to as "near Charles Town" in many death records).

Per deed dated 26th day of July 1888, Dolly Nelson gifted Thomas Nelson, second eldest son of Dolly and David Nelson, ¼ acre being part of the ground in deed dated June 1, 1867. In 1888 Thomas Nelson is listed in the Table of Town Lots owning a 1 acre lot, 1st Ward and building, combined value \$300. Dolly Nelson is recorded as paying taxes on land and a building until 1900.

Per Deed Book 98, page 54, the 18th day of August 1906, the Nelson siblings “Benjamin Nelson and his wife Nancy, Thomas Nelson and his wife Cora, Charles Armstead Nelson, Lucy Armstrong (widowed), of the first part and Hannah Wilson wife of Alexander Wilson of the second part . . . that for the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars paid by the party of the second to the parties of the first part do grant and convey with covenant of general warranty unto the said Hannah F. Wilson as her sole and separate property free from the control of her said husband and not liable for his debts” the same lot conveyed to Dolly Nelson, mother now deceased, on June 1, 1867, recorded in Deed Book 2, page 305.

Through purchases Benjamin Nelson amassed several properties, including an additional ¼ acre on Harewood Ave; Lot 22 Block 64; land on block between Charles and Lawrence streets; and Lot 2, southwest corner of the intersection of Lawrence St. and South Alley via wife Nancy D. Nelson’s inheritance. They built a house on Lot 2.

Documented in Will Book C, page 277, Benjamin F. Nelson bequeaths his house and lot on the corner of South Alley and Lawrence St. and all the household furnishings to his wife Nancy during her life, and at her death to his granddaughter, Nellie Miller, and grandson Reynolds Miller (children of his deceased daughter, Dollie T. Miller) and his son Robert Benjamin Nelson, sharing one-third to each, except the parlor furniture he has given his wife and the organ he has given his said granddaughter. He bequeaths his interest in the estate of his mother, Dolly Nelson, to his sister, Hannah Nelson. He appoints his brother, Thomas Nelson, as his executor. Will is dated September 4, 1906. (October 22, 1940, Nellie Miller sold Lot 2 to Cerelle Page Craven. This lot became part of the first Wright Denny School lot).

Thomas Nelson appears on various deeds, handling the sale of his brother Benjamin’s properties as executor, executing dealings for the church as trustee, and managing his own affairs.

The 1910 census shows Thomas H. Nelson married to Cora L. (Warner) Nelson living at 831 Harewood Ave. He is listed as head of household, occupation cast driver, home owned free of mortgage. Susie J., daughter, and Cora L., granddaughter, are listed as living in household.

Thomas Nelson, a towering man, is identified as a member of Star Lodge #1 Prince Hall Affiliated Free and Accepted Masons in a photo dated June 17, 1915. (Chartered in 1877, Star Lodge #1 became the first Prince Hall Affiliated Free and Accepted Masons Lodge in West Virginia).

The 1920 census lists Thomas Nelson as widowed living at 833 Harewood Ave. His wife, Cora, recorded age 55, died on January 4, 1920.

In 1920 Lucy Nelson Armstrong and Armstead Nelson, brother, live at 829 Harewood Ave. (829 Harewood is two doors west of the brick school. The next house west is 831 Harewood).

Per Will Book E, page 249, January 8, 1925, Lucy Ann Armstrong bequeaths to her niece, Anna Ranson, the principal part of her lot on Harewood Ave. and her belongings. Lucy Armstrong died on March 26, 1925, informant Thomas Nelson. Her recorded age is 82. Burial place is recorded as near Charles Town.

The 1930 census lists Thomas Nelson, boarder, Richard Stephenson head of household. In 1929 Thomas Nelson, Cora Nelson Edwards (daughter of deceased mother, Susie Nelson Churchill) and her husband William Edwards sold the property between the brick school and 829 Harewood Ave. to the Mason/Stephenson family.

Will Book F, page 500, Last Will and Testament of Thomas H. Nelson, in his own words:

I, Thomas H. Nelson, make this my last will and testament.

Whatever amount may be coming to me from the Masonic Lodge and Star of Bethlehem Lodge, I leave to my brother Armstead Nelson, my granddaughter, Cora Nelson Edwards, and my nephew Golden Baker Wilson to be equally divided between them.

My wife's picture, looking glass with drawer, water picture and glasses, silver lady's watch, blue cup and saucer, thimble and finger ring, I bequeath to said Cora Nelson Edwards.

All the rest and residue of my property, real and personal, including my house and lot . . . , I bequeath and devise absolutely to my sister, Hannah Wilson and my niece, Anna Ranson.

Thomas H. Nelson lived until May 18, 1934. Recorded age is 77. Father is recorded as David Nelson. Mother and informant are blank. Burial place is near Charles Town.

Their birthright to freedom was deferred.

Sources: Property Impressed from R. B. Washington of Jefferson County by United States Troops, courtesy of Walter Washington; 1883 Charles Town Lots Map; Jefferson County Deed Book 2, p. 305; United States Federal Census 1870, 1880, 1900-1940; Jefferson County Court House Land Books 1872-1900; Jefferson County Birth, Marriage, and Death Records; Calendar and Index to Recorded Survey Plats in Jefferson County, West Virginia (Virginia), Courthouse, 1801-1901, Jefferson County Historical Society, pp. 436, 437, 438 and 725; 1881 Zion Baptist Church History; Images of America African Americans of Jefferson County, p. 66; Deed Book R, p. 527; Deed Book S, p.220; Deed Book 90, p.528; Deed Book 98, p.54; Deed Book 99, p.132; Deed Book 105, p.120; Deed Book 133, p.120; Deed Book 153, p.; 44; Jefferson County Will Book C, E and F.

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