

Carroll Yesteryears  
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The Heroes of Early Black Education in Carroll County  
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

As Black History Month draws to a close, it is a good time to recognize the names of some of Carroll County's Black leaders who supported education during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although Maryland never passed a law prohibiting the education of its enslaved population as some states did, it discouraged the education of African Americans in general. Frederick Douglass recalled his owner forbade his wife to continue teaching young Frederick to read. He eventually turned for help to playmates on the streets of Baltimore who knew the basics of reading and writing. Lack of educational opportunities for free and enslaved Black children and adults prevailed across the entire state before the Civil War.

In his autobiography, former slave John Baptist Snowden recorded efforts to educate his free children in Carroll County. At one point he asked John Bowman, a white teacher, to give lessons to his sons at a neighboring schoolhouse. Unfortunately, the lessons came to an end when "bad young white men" locked the schoolhouse door on the outside and threw stones at it, terrorizing the Snowden children inside. John eventually sent them to school in Frederick County.

Evidence in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau (formally known as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands) shows that Singleton Hughes, a Black minister in Uniontown, was involved in running a school for "over 60 Day Scholars who were required to pay 50 cents for [a] month" of education. It was Carroll's only school in the early 1860s "for the Colored population" except for occasional instruction offered in private homes or Black churches.

After the Civil War, the federal government offered Freedmen's Bureau funds to build Black schools across the South, including Maryland. Two were ultimately built here – one in Westminster and another between Uniontown and Union Bridge. Other areas of the county hoped to have their own schools including Finksburg, Sam's Creek, and at Fairview Methodist Church on the Carroll-Frederick border, but those never materialized. The Westminster school was on Union Street and one of its early teachers was none other than Thomas B. Snowden, son of John, who had struggled years before to educate his children. The other school was in Muttontown where nine members of that community between Union Bridge and Uniontown bought the land to erect their school—Lloyd Coates, Jonah Key, William Walker, Joseph Hughes, Dennis Green, John Henry Thompson, Joseph Parker, Stephen Brooks, and Isaac Landzell. Descendants of some of those Muttontown residents still live nearby.

Isaiah and Simon Murdock, brothers who served in the United States Colored Troops during Civil War, came back to Carroll County anxious to promote education among those they left behind when they enlisted. Isaiah was paid for a school operating in his home in the area of Newport on the Carroll-Frederick border. Simon ultimately succeeded in having a school named White Oak Grove built for students in the New Windsor area.

In the 1870s, several other veterans of the Civil War returned to the McKinstry's Mill area and erected a school for children in that sizable Black community. The building was two stories high with space on the second floor for meetings of an African American fraternal order. Benjamin Harp and Benjamin Dunson, both members of the 4<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops, were active as school trustees along with Benjamin Washington, Thomas Harp, Calvin Dunson, and Benjamin Jones. Without this school, eventually called Priestland Colored School, children would have walked many miles to reach the only other colored school, the one in Muttontown. In most instances, the distance Black children walked to school was significantly greater than their white counterparts. Pity the few African American children who wanted an education who lived in the northern parts of the county where there were no schools whatsoever. The residents living around the Priestland Colored School were so supportive of the school they erected with their own funds that it rarely closed for low attendance, a problem encountered by many Black schools elsewhere.

Not every Black soldier who served in the Civil War learned to read and write while enlisted, but some of the lucky ones did and brought that valuable skill with them upon their return. They learned much during their years of military service and were anxious to bring the best of it home. Their commitment didn't end with championing education; they frequently became active participants in the religious life of their communities as well.

The Reverend David N. Brown spent much of his life in an area between Westminster and New Windsor along Western Chapel Road. Returning after the Civil War, he became a preacher at Western Chapel Methodist Church and a trustee of the school built there for his thriving community.

Undoubtedly there are other names associated with Carroll's early Black schools which should be recognized but have not come to light. By 1890 and 1891, about 20 Black schools existed in the central and southern part of Carroll with an enrollment of approximately 440 students.

Perhaps some of today's readers will recognize the names of ancestors who were educational heroes during the years from the 1840s through the 1880s.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



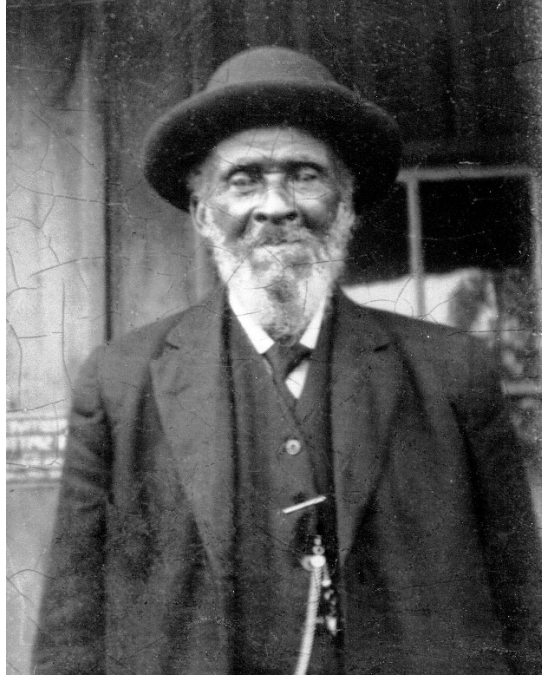
*Caption: An early 20<sup>th</sup> century picture of Priestland Colored School near McKinstry's Mill built in the early 1870s by the residents of that community known as "Priestland."*

*Credit: The Robert Moton Center*



*Caption: Simon Peter Murdock, seen here, and his brother, Isaiah, championed the education of Black children in the area of New Windsor and along the Carroll-Frederick border.*

*Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County*



*Caption: The Reverend David N. Brown served during the Civil War and returned home to support education in his Western Chapel neighborhood as well as preach at its church.*