

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"A Boy's Eye View of Westminster, Part I"

Carroll County Times article for 23 July 1995

By Jay A. Graybeal

Each year nearly every local 3rd grader visits the Historical Society for a tour of the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House. One of the questions I always ask the children is, "Do you think that what children did in the past is part of our local history?" Many children feel that history is only about the famous people and events and, therefore, do not think that what children did would be important. I try to teach them that everything that local people, including children, did is history.

One of the best written sources for learning about what local children did a century ago is "A Boy's Eye View of Westminster: Life and Reminiscences of Paul Reese, 1881-1891." Written in the 1940s when Rev. Reese was living in Rockport, Texas, this autobiographical sketch of his early life presents an interesting description of what it was like to grow up in Victorian Westminster. Paul Reese was born in the Shellman House, 206 E. Main St., a property now owned by the Historical Society. His sketch begins with a description of his birth:

At the time of my birth my parents, James William Reese and Mary Pauline (Perry) Reese, were members of the Shellman household, 206 East Main Street, Westminster, Maryland and occupied the room over the parlor.

Every family who thought any thing of themselves had a "parlor". It was more an institution than a room, and its doors were only opened to admit some sacred and solemn rite, such as a funeral, or the new minister's first visit. But in our family, as in the homes of most of our friends, this had ceased to be so. The parlor retained at the time of my arrival only its hallowed name. The only unlivable room in the house had been profaned and become the "living room", otherwise I verily believe from most of all that I can remember of the first ten or twelve years of my life its desecration was all that prevented it from being used for the "blessed event" as the only place in the house worthy to receive me. I had an Aunt Mame, and there were five other adoring females, the youngest nearly a generation older, in the house; four white and two colored.

At all events it was Aunt Mame who was the first to receive the joyous news as Dr. Hering came from my mother's room. "A fine boy, Miss Mary," he said.

So on that late afternoon of Saturday, Oct. 27, 1877, there was no lack of numbers to receive me to the large family group. There was my great aunt, Katherine Jones Shellman, my grandmother Perry's sister, her son James Merriwether Shellman, her daughters, Fanny Cheston Schley Pearson and her husband Isaac Pearson, and Mary Bostwick Shellman, my Mammy, Mary Key, who had been my father's Mammy in his father's home, and Lizzie Tyson, Dictator, Tyrant and Cook. Lizzie loved me with the true devotion of the Negro for the white children of the family, but she was the only friend of my early childhood of whom I stood really in awe. The clearest memory I have of Lizzie is, "Git outen my kitchen!" I never failed to "git" just as fast as my little legs would carry me.

My young, as well as old, Negro friends fill so many of the brightest memories of my childhood that to leave them out would dim it. There was no color line drawn, up to a certain age and point, among us children by our parents. To do so would have stamped us as "poor white trash".

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"Jimbim", (Dr. James A. Bond, Elkridge, Md.) lived next door, and "Little" Key, at Aunt Mary Reese's house, the one beyond. We were the inseparables, the Three Musketeers, of those halcyon days. Key was my Mammy's namesake and nephew and in one emphatic respect the color line was drawn. Both Jim and I had been taught from infancy that just about the meanest crime against decency that a "little white gentleman" could commit was mistreating a Negro. A sentiment heartily endorsed by all the parents of our immediate friends.

I have a little photograph of Jim, Key and myself, taken by Charlie Knight, in our kilt skirt days. When "Mamie", the only name I ever knew for Aunt Mame, showed it to Key with the happiness she always felt in giving pleasure to children, he burst into a torrent of sobs. It was the first time it had ever struck home to the poor little fellow that he was not like Jim and Me. No, in early childhood of the border land between the Old and the New South, the color line was only drawn in certain special and wise ways.

In next week's column we will learn about Paul's early schooling and for the following week, about the mischievous side of Paul Reese and his boyhood chums.

Photo caption: Dr. James W. Reese (1838-1917) and his son Paul (1877-1944) photographed by A. L. Rogers, Hagerstown, Md., c.1885. At the time that this image was taken, Dr. Reese was professor of Ancient Languages at Western Maryland College. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection, gift of Paul Reese, 1941.