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JOHN T. LEWIS: BLACK AMERICAN HERO OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY SHARON BURLESON SCHUSTER

In 1835 the scimitar-shaped tail of Halley's Comet came near to earth, bringing with it predictions of doom, gloom, and greatness—the doom of the War Between the States, the gloom of the reality of slavery, and in Linwood, Maryland—greatness: John T. Lewis was born.



Looking at Halley's Comet, 1835 by John James Chalon.
(Public Domain-U.S.)

Freeborn, John T. Lewis was a humble black man who became notable in history through faith, fortitude, and a friendship that seems to have been foretold by the appearance of a comet. Although some pioneer families had settled along Little Pipe Creek by 1745 near what is now Linwood, at Lewis's birth, 90 years later in

1835, Linwood was a sparsely populated village. Wolves, bears, deer, and other wildlife roamed the countryside. The creek was a good place to fish.

Lewis lived and worked with his family in Linwood as a farm laborer and blacksmith. He could read and write. According to J. Maurice Henry's *History of the Church of the Brethren in Maryland*, Lewis cherished the collection of books in his home library, "not the least of which are the first books he ever studied... an old Maryland arithmetic, an old speller, and a geography, all published about 1850." In 1851 he purchased "the first copybook he ever owned. Every page is filled with his first endeavors at handwriting" with a quill pen.

The young Lewis, "of serious mind and strong religious inclination," grew in the Brethren faith. Adherents of the religion stood fast against slavery. Members were known as "German Baptists," "Dunkards," or "Dunkers." At age 18 Lewis was baptized at Meadow Branch in their tradition of being dunked in water to symbolize the washing away of sins and being born anew as a follower of Jesus Christ. He formally became a member of Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren near the village of Linwood before he transferred his membership to the conservative "old order" Beaver Dam Church in Johnsville.

The Brethren and the Quakers comprised the majority of settlers in Linwood. These peace-



Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren. (HSCC Photograph)

seeking people represented the mindset of most of the villagers of the time. In the decade before Lewis' birth, residents of the Pipe Creek settlement formed the Anti-Slavery and the Pipe Creek Protection societies for "the protection of free colored people against the wrongs of any kind, practiced by unprincipled whites." The September 12, 1835, issue of *Niles' Weekly Register*, a Baltimore newspaper, reported that 175,000 pamphlets were issued by The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1,000 of which were destroyed, most likely by pro-slavery factions. The newspaper reported that their interception and destruction were a daily occurrence.

John Lewis aligned himself with the Brethren Church, even though nearby New Windsor is referred to as "the cradle of Methodism in America." With regard to slavery, Methodist congregations were not in agreement. Many southern Methodists supported the institution, offering Old Testament scriptures as justification. Other Methodists joined with Quakers to form the Maryland Society of the Abolition of Slavery.

The southern border state of Maryland was divided regarding the politics of slavery. By 1860 one in every six families in Maryland held a few slaves with a total of 87,189 reported in the census of that year. In Carroll County there were 783 slaves. Lewis was one of 1,225 free blacks in the county, and they accounted for 49.1 percent of all

African-Americans in the state. Maryland was a slave state and remained so even after the Emancipation Proclamation was decreed a few years later.

TOWARD THE NORTH STAR

In 1860 the 25-year-old Lewis set out for the north. Perhaps the harsh political climate in Maryland and the need to produce his freed-status papers at every turn were enough to prompt his departure. He went to the free state of Pennsylvania, north of the Mason and Dixon Line, and settled in Adams County. He transferred his membership to Marsh Creek Church of the Brethren and lived nearby on the outskirts of Gettysburg. The congregants of the old order Marsh Creek Brethren Church practiced their rituals of foot washing, love feasts, non-conformity with the sinful world, and the Holy Kiss, a greeting between members of the same gender. But race surfaced as a matter of policy. While the Brethren wanted African-Americans to be accepted as equals with whites, the church elected to do away with the Holy Kiss because some whites refused to kiss blacks. In its place they chose a handshake.

Many Marsh Creek Dunkers suffered the effects of the Civil War—damage, destruction, and theft of property and crops. At one point, the Marsh Creek Brethren Council could not account for all of its members. Some escaped the surrounding battles with just the clothes they wore. Blacks—freeborn or not—faced the additional threat of capture by Rebel forces. Some Confederate soldiers hunted for African-Americans or "contrabands," to capture and send to the Deep South for sale into slavery. In 1870 Lewis wrote, "I must here say that surely goodness and mercy has followed me, for through all the war and bloodshed... for which I feel to give thanks."

Lewis, like many others in the Marsh Creek Brethren Church, became a refugee. He gathered up his belongings in an oilcloth satchel, carefully packed the money that he had saved for the journey, and headed farther north on foot. He joined two

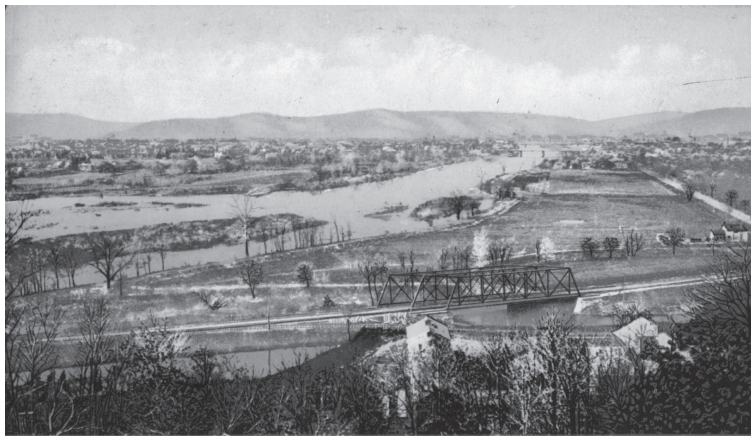
white men as traveling companions, Mr. Wygant and another man named “Leo.” Lewis did not divulge that he had money with him, as he did not know the men with whom he traveled.

The Underground Railroad, the collection of routes that enslaved blacks

followed north with dreams of freedom, was manned by “conductors,” mostly abolitionists, and had “stations,” or hiding places along the way. Elmira, NY, was known to many escapees as a safe haven. No doubt, stories of successful escape to Elmira got back to those who would follow. Enslaved Maryland blacks reached Elmira where they either settled or moved farther north to Canada.

The trio arrived in Elmira in 1864 and went their separate ways. Lewis made it through the perilous journey with most of his cash and first found employment in a meat market. In the fall of 1865 he served as a private coachman at East Hill Farm three miles from town overlooking the Chemung River. It was at this time that he married Mary Stover, a former slave, whose parents were from Virginia. She could not read or write. From 1867 to 1870 Lewis worked as a blacksmith, then returned to manage East Hill Farm, where he and Mary lived in a tenant house. When the landowner died, Lewis rented the farm from his daughter, but found farming and raising hogs unprofitable, and became indebted to her for about \$900.

John and Mary Lewis appeared in subsequent Federal and New York censuses as farming and “keeping house.” Mary Lewis was a domestic at nearby Quarry Farm. The couple had a daughter, Susanna Alice, born in May 1871. In 1870 the value of his land was \$800 and his personal estate was \$150—almost equal to his debt. The dismal state of Lewis’ finances left him in despair. There



Bird's Eye View of Elmira, NY from East Hill, c. 1875 postcard.
(Courtesy of the author)

were no Brethren or Dunkers in Elmira for him to associate with, no “German Baptist Brethren” Church to attend to bolster his faith and offer encouragement. “I have not been able to meet with the Brethren since 1863,” wrote Lewis in a letter published in *The Christian Family*

Companion in January 1870, “yet I am trying with the help of God to live in accordance with the Gospel and the order of the Brethren. All the preaching I have is in the Bible, The Companion, and the Gospel Visitor, which are great comforters to me.”

Lewis continued to farm, barely making a living. He hauled his goods to market in a horse-drawn wagon. His neighbor described him as “the most picturesque of men, when he sits in his fluttering work-day rags, humped forward into a bunch, with his aged slouch hat mashed down over his ears and neck. He is of mighty frame and muscle, stocky, stooping, ungainly, has a manly face and a clear eye... age about 45.” Lewis was stooped because of a spinal injury that he had suffered.

“A MIRACLE”

On August 23, 1877, Lewis was returning to East Hill Farm with a load of manure in his two-horse wagon. It was a long, uphill climb with a sharp turn to avoid a steep ravine. As he was about to make the turn, Lewis saw a runaway buggy with three passengers careening down the hill. “The buggy seemed to fly,” described a witness. “It would strike obstructions and apparently spring the height of a man off the ground.”

Lewis, reacting quickly to the dangerous situation, steered his horses diagonally across the road to the fence and formed a “V” to stop the runaway horse. He jumped from his wagon and stood

in the “V.” As the galloping gray horse ran straight for him with buggy and panicked passengers in tow, he grabbed the bridle and stopped the buggy from breaking through the fence and crashing into the steep ravine below. The occupants of the runaway buggy, Ida Langdon, her young daughter Julia, and their black nurse,

Nora, were safe and grateful for the strong arm and quick action of Lewis. He knew these ladies as the residents of Quarry Farm where his wife Mary was a servant. Among those who witnessed the horrifying scene was Ida’s famous brother-in-law: Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain. “How this miracle was ever accomplished at all,” wrote Twain, “by human strength, generalship and accuracy, is clean beyond my comprehension.”

In appreciation for rescuing the Langdons and their nurse, Lewis received money and a gold watch inscribed, “John T. Lewis, who saved three lives at the peril of his own, August 23, 1877. This is in grateful remembrance from Mrs. Charles J. Langdon.” Her husband, General Charles J. Langdon, presented Lewis with a check for \$1,000 and his debts were forgiven. Twain presented Lewis with a collection of his books, personally inscribed and autographed, along with \$50.

With money in hand, Lewis’ first action was, in Twain’s words, “to make his old father comfortable, who is wretchedly poor and lives down in Maryland.” In a letter of gratitude for the rewards bestowed upon him, Lewis wrote, “I beg to say humbly, that inasmuch as divine providence saw fit to use me as a instrument for the saving of those presshious lives, the honner conferd upon me was greater than the feat performed.”

The monetary gifts and debt forgiveness enabled Lewis to purchase a 64-acre farm. The 1880 Federal



John T. Lewis with wagon and team of horses, 1903.
(Library of Congress)

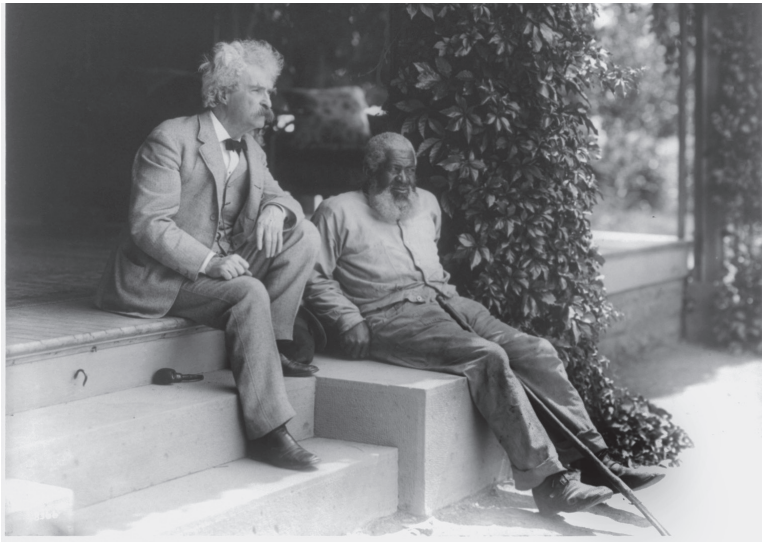
Agricultural Census gave a detailed account of Lewis’ farm production that offers a glimpse of the farm economics of the time. His land was valued at \$4,000, the implements and machinery were worth \$100, and the livestock was valued at \$525. He had three horses on grassland, four “milch” cows and three others,

33 poultry, “3 calves dropped,” and four swine. He produced 180 pounds of butter made on the farm, ten gallons of molasses, 36 acres of hay, and three acres of Indian corn yielding 100 bushels. He grew six acres of oats, one acre of Irish potatoes, one-half acre of sorghum, and 20 apple trees on one-half acre. The value of orchard products was \$5. Lewis also tilled 38 acres of rented farmland for shares of production. The estimated value of all Lewis’ farm productions for 1879 was \$280.

“JIM”

Mark Twain summered at Quarry Farm on East Hill from 1870 through 1889. The farm was the home of the family of Susan Crane, the sister of Twain’s wife Olivia (Livy), and 12 cats. His main residence was in Hartford, CT, where he lived with his wife and daughters. He preferred to write in a specially-built retreat at Quarry Farm. “I am free here, and I can work uninterruptedly,” Twain told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1886. “This may be called the home of Huckleberry Finn and other books of mine, for they were written here.”

Twain got to know Lewis during the summers at Quarry Farm, where he admired and respected the gentle man. Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin observed that Twain’s “racial consciousness was elevated in Elmira” through his association with Lewis and other black employees at the farm. Elmira was a place of progressive-minded



Samuel Clemens and John T. Lewis at Quarry Farm on East Hill, 1903. (Library of Congress)

individuals: white businessmen and professionals alongside freeborn blacks and freed slaves. Twain's father-in-law, Jervis Langdon, had helped finance the Underground Railroad. He and his wife, Olivia Lewis Langdon, offered food and shelter in their home to many runaway slaves, including Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery in Maryland to become an abolitionist, orator, writer, social reformer, and statesman. Mary Ann Cord, a black servant at Quarry Farm and a former slave, assisted escaped slaves, including her own son. She impressed Twain with the heart-wrenching account of her family torn apart by slavery. He wrote and published her story.

The Brethren Historical Society maintains that "some believe that Lewis was the model for Jim in Twain's book, *Huckleberry Finn*." Jim was a runaway slave who was a friend and protector of the book's main character, Huck Finn. Likewise, some Twain scholars agree that Lewis influenced Twain's creation of the heroic character. Others suggest that Lewis was only a part of Jim's character or of no influence at all. The Huck Finn Freedom Center in Hannibal, MO, Twain's childhood home, focuses on the influence that Twain's relationships with the African American people in his life "contributed to the change of heart and his attempts to change America through satire and humor."

Mark Twain was photographed for the 20th anniversary issue of *The Ladies Home Journal* in November 1903. There are multiple images of Twain and Lewis of whom Twain remarked, "a friend of mine these many years—thirty-four, in fact. He was my father-in-law's coachman forty years ago; was many years farmer of Quarry Farm, and is still a neighbor. I have not known an honest man nor a more respect-worthy one."

The young John T. Lewis grew up near the rippling waters of Little Pipe Creek, not the surge of the muddy Mississippi. He couldn't have known where his travels northward would take him—to a friendship immortalized by the famous author. It was a friendship forged by fate and perhaps influenced by a comet. Lewis and Clemens were born in the same year, 1835, when the brilliant Halley's Comet crossed the skies over Linwood, MD, and Florida, MO.



Huck and Jim enjoy some "learnin' and seegars."
(Public Domain – U.S.)

BROTHER JOHN AND THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Many years later Lewis surprisingly reconnected with his Maryland roots, the Brethren Church, and the Civil War. The Battle of Antietam ravaged troops, livestock, landscapes, and civilian lives on September 17, 1862. Lewis had been miles



Antietam's Dunker Church with Confederate Artillerymen.
(Library of Congress)

away in Gettysburg, where he would survive the fighting and its aftermath. The battle at Antietam, "the bloodiest day in the War Between the States," raged in the West Woods around the old whitewashed Dunker Church. The small meeting place of pacifist, peace-loving, non-violent people ironically became a hospital, with reports of severed arms and legs piled high outside the plain windows of the church.

A large leather Bible measuring 11 x 9 x 2.5 inches was opened to the Old Testament and occupied a special place on the long table at the front of the sparsely furnished church. The roar of cannons, shouts of soldiers and groans of the wounded and dying easily overpowered the church's message of peace. Following the battle, the Dunker Church stood, badly damaged, with the Bible still on display. The day after the battle, Corporal Nathan Dykeman of the New York Volunteers entered the church, saw the Bible, and took it with him. Dykeman died on the way home, and it eventually ended up in the hands of his sister in Schuyler, NY, just north of Elmira. In 1903 she presented the Antietam Bible to the few remaining members of his regiment as a keepsake. The veterans decided that the book should be returned to the Dunker Church in Antietam.

The question arose as to how to return the book and to whom? Antietam was several hundred miles

away and too much of a journey for the elderly veterans. There was no Dunkard Church in upper New York. They discovered that one Dunker lived in the region—John T. Lewis. They contacted him, and he agreed to assist in its return. Lewis contacted John E. Otto, elder of the Antietam church, and the Bible was sent back by express post. Before it was shipped, the gray-haired Lewis posed for a photograph holding the sacred book. Ankrum described the 68-year-old hero: "broken in health; his beard... worn in the custom of the Brethren of his day" framed his face, and "his brow was the brow of a philosopher."

Attached to the first page of the returned Bible is a letter written by Elder Otto:

Sharpsburg Dec. 4th-1903

This Bible was taken from the church after the Battle of Antietam by Sargent Nathan F. Dykeman Reg. 107 Co. H, N.Y.S.V. Sept. 28, 1862. He is now dead and it fell into the hands of his afflicted sister, she presented (it) to the company at their reunion this fall 1903 for which they gave her Ten Dollars. Their desire was to send it back to its home in the Brethren Church at Antietam Battlefield if it was still in existence. Through the kindness of Brother John T. Lewis, Elmira N.Y. They received my name and address, they wrote me, I answered, the Bible is here after an absence of 41 years, 2 mo., 6 days. It is supposed to have been placed in its church by Daniel Miller.

John E. Otto

John T. Lewis was again immortalized for his faith, character, and good works. The Antietam Bible, "the Bible Gone Astray," is on display at the Antietam National Battlefield Center Museum.

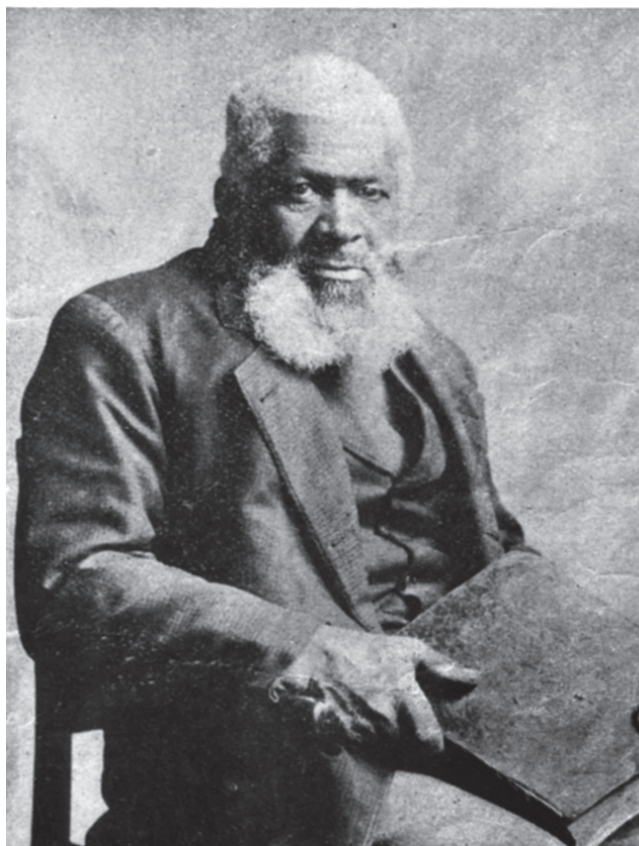
"I'LL FLY AWAY"

Lewis had planned some of the details of his funeral before his final day came. On July 23,

1906, he succumbed to complications of “Dropsy,” an abnormal accumulation of fluid that causes swelling in tissues and organs. When his heart gave out, he died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. At his request, Psalm 90, one of Lewis’s favorite Bible verses, was read at his funeral. The service took place at Harrington Undertaking Parlors, Main Street, Elmira. His wife Mary had died 12 years earlier and he was also pre-deceased by an infant son. He was survived by his daughter, Susanna Alice Lewis, who had attended to her ailing father; a brother, William A. Lewis; two sisters, Mrs. Janes Mason of Westminster, MD, and Mrs. Anna Chew of Baltimore, MD.

The obituary in *The Gospel Messenger* reported that no member of the Brethren Church was available to officiate at his funeral as he had requested. The Brethren “very much regretted that it so happened that we were unable to be present... at the funeral of this aged colored brother—a veritable father in Israel as it seems. He was very highly respected, and for very good reasons, by the best people of Elmira, where he lived for many years.”

“John T. Lewis, Colored Hero, Dies on the Way To Hospital.” The prominent and lengthy obituary in the *Elmira Gazette and Free Press* reported that “Mr. Lewis enjoyed the distinction of being about the first person whom Mark Twain asked for when he came to this city on his annual rest spells and a man whom the distinguished author delighted to honor in every possible way.”



John T. Lewis with Antietam Bible, 1903.
(Courtesy of Brethren Historical Library and Archives)

In the absence of official clergy, the following, written by Lewis, was read by the wife of the undertaker at his funeral:

I, John T. Lewis, was born in Carroll County, Maryland, Jan. 10, 1835. I joined the Brethren Church in Pipe Creek congregation in the fall of 1853. I was baptized at Meadow Branch meetinghouse by Eld. Philip Boyd and went from there to Beaverdam church by letter in 1856. From there, I went to Marsh Creek in 1860. I came to New York State in 1862, since which time I have been cut off

from the church. I have tried to live faithful to the New Testament and order of the Brethren. Though separated from them here, I hope to meet them above, where parting will be no more.

Lewis was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Elmira, the same cemetery in which his friend Mark Twain lies at rest. For many years, the grave of Lewis was not marked. Now, an unassuming plaque denotes the grave of this humble African-American hero. The inscription is simple:

JOHN T. LEWIS
1835 - 1906

A young, freeborn black man who packed his belongings and dreams into an oilcloth satchel set out on foot on a remarkable journey. He was a faithful member of the Brethren Church, saved lives, became a most treasured friend of Mark Twain, might have been immortalized as “Jim” in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and returned

the missing Antietam Bible. These important details of his life are represented by the hyphen on his stone between the dates of his birth and death. Like the brilliant tail of the comet that perhaps foretold greatness, this is where the real story and the accolades reside.

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