

"In Memory of Nicholas Paroway"

Carroll County Times Article for 7 March 1999

By Jay A. Graybeal

Last week's column dealt with the death of Nicholas Paroway (Paraway) of Westminster who died on December 8, 1876 at the remarkable age of 110. The former slave was remembered with a lengthy obituary in the American Sentinel and was also memorialized in a poem by Miss Mary B. Shellman of Westminster:

1.

Toll the bell softy and toll the bell slow,
The boat is crossing the silvery tide;
And the old man's life is ebbing low,
Soon he will land on the other side.

2.

The light in the cabin is growing dim,
And the old wife kneels with bended head;
Murmuring a prayer, "Lord take me too,
And number us both with the silent dead."

3.

Old Nick was a slave of African birth,
Born one hundred and ten years ago;
He has passed the Summer and Autumn of life,
And is bending beneath the Winter's snow.

4.

He saw this last century ushered in,
With all its trials, and struggles and woe;
He saw our patriot fathers stand,
With bleeding feet in the blood stained snow.

5.

He saw the struggle begin and end,
And heard the shout which the freemen gave;
But he knew not then of Liberty,
For poor old Nick was a Negro slave.

6.

But years rolled by. The Republic grew,
And exiles flock to the freeman's land;
And one by one in the arms of death,
Rested the little patriot band.

7.

But with the shout of the freemen came,
The iron clank of slavery's chain;

And the dark browned child of Africa birth;
Toiled hard for freedom, but in vain.

8.

At length a war cloud dark and drear.
Burst over the land with furious vim;
But in the dark that shadowed us then,
The slave saw sunshine breaking for him;

9.

And Lincoln as noble, and grand and brave,
Dared the furious, angry blast;
And stretching his hand in the darkness then,
He broke the chains of the slaves at last.

10.

And slavery's curse was all wiped out,
And the black cloud changed to sunshine then;
And Oh what a shout of gladness came,
From the lips of a million free made man.

11.

And the old man stood with bended head,
And tears of joy rolled down his cheek;
As he breathed the prayer of gratitude,
His trembling lips refused to speak.

12.

"Lord let me live yet a little while,
And add, to the blessings already sent,
The crowing joy the freedman craves,
To cast my vote for President."

13.

And there at the ballot with tearful eye,
And trembling hand his vote was cast;
And he breathed a prayer of thankfulness,
For joy that seemed to great to last.

14.

And proud may you be, Oh! chieftain great,
Grant, the laurel crowned, loyal, true;
That the first proud vote the freedmen gave,
Was given so gladly and freely to you.

15.

And the years rolled on with their ice and snow,
And their Summers of sun and showers;

And the old man slowly wended his way,
To the land of light and flowers.

16.

Once more he offered a heartfelt prayer,
That the Lord would lengthen his day,
That the last proud act of his long, long life
Might be casting his vote for Hayes.

17.

His prayer was granted, and happy and free
He cast his vote with a freedman's pride
And the life boat bearing his weary soul,
Slowly crossed to the other side.

Miss Shellman's poetic tribute was written at the height of the Centennial of American Independence. The memories of the recent Civil War, Reconstruction and black enfranchisement were also very much in evidence when she wrote her memorial verse. The writer would like to thank Historical Society volunteer George Horvath for locating the poem, a gift of Louis N. Dielman to the Maryland Historical Society Library in 1932.

Photo caption: Miss Mary B. Shellman of Westminster, photographed in c1885, penned a memorial poem for Nicholas Paroway after his death in 1876 at age 110. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.