

Carroll Yesteryears
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Volunteers Bring the Past to Life
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Volunteers and staff at the Historical Society of Carroll County have responded to questions about local history, genealogy, and a multitude of other topics for many years. As one of those volunteers, I can attest to the fact that we enjoy finding answers if we can.

After checking what is on our library shelves, in filing cabinets, and tapping the brains of our co-workers, we search the Society's Manuscript Room for journals, diaries, rare books, old newspapers, even a collection of phone books. We look online as well using Ancestry, FamilySearch, military records on Fold3, and digitized newspapers. One website we've found very helpful in the past is that of the Carroll County Genealogical Society. But this column is to share a few personal experiences I've had as a volunteer.

You cannot live long in Carroll County without developing an interest in Civil War history. I was bitten by the bug when I ran across the story of Maryland's 7th Regiment Volunteer Infantry in a book on our library shelves.

In the summer of 1862, quite a few young men from New Windsor and Union Bridge joined that regiment and, over the next two and a half years, participated in some of the fiercest and bloody battles of the war. Isaiah Lightner of Union Bridge was one of them. He rose to the rank of captain by war's end, but just before Lee's surrender was seriously wounded. When President Lincoln visited the army hospital where he lay in early April 1865, he was one of the lucky men who shook the president's hand.

Returning home, Isaiah operated a store and became prominent in the town's Quaker community. After President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him the Indian agent for a Sioux reservation in Nebraska in 1877, he moved his family there and quickly earned a reputation for championing the rights of Native Americans. He served nine years as the agent, then retired to a life of farming along the Platte River where he died in 1923. As I researched his life, each portion proved different, fascinating, and made me want to discover more. Eventually I accumulated enough to publish his story in this paper.

One of Isaiah's descendants discovered the article this spring and got in touch. Larry Lightner and his family came to explore the area where their ancestor grew up. They stopped to eat at Original Pizza on the corner of Broadway and South Main Street in Union Bridge, the very building where Isaiah operated his dry goods store. Later, Larry told me one of Isaiah's letters supporting the Sioux people is now on display at the National Archives. How gratifying it is to know I played a part in helping the Lightner family discover more about its past.

But the story continues! I recently ate dinner with a woman who spent her early childhood on the very same reservation where Isaiah served. Her father was an Episcopal missionary. Isaiah had been a Quaker missionary. Better yet, a Carroll County resident now owns the family's memorabilia of life on the Santee Sioux reservation passed down from the 1930s and 1940s.

Library inquiries come from far and near. If you live in Oregon, it makes sense to utilize our research facilities and Betty Bethers did just that. She was looking for information about two prominent families in early Carroll County – Durbin and Wells. On my daily drive to Westminster I passed the area where those families once lived. The current owner of a farm along Route 27 showed me the well-preserved log house dating to the early 1800s that belonged to Charity Durbin. It was exciting to tell Betty about locating the house, send her pictures, and equally exciting to see a reference in the land record about an ancient Indian trail that ran near the old Durbin property. I've corresponded with Betty over the years because I once lived in Oregon so we had much in common.

Few people are aware that a large number of African Americans from Carroll County served in the Civil War. Some were free when they enlisted, but others were not. Henry and Joshua Dutton, a father and son, were enslaved by Nathan Gorsuch at the time they enlisted. The U.S. government, anxious to add men to the Union Army, paid Gorsuch \$600 for freeing the Duttons, then required he swear loyalty to the Union cause. Although Henry died of wounds during the war, his son, Joshua, returned safely home. Thanks to information Gorsuch could provide the Pension Bureau about Henry's marriage, his widow and her two minor children were able to receive the monthly stipend they deserved.

Several years ago, this newspaper published the Duttons' story and Errol Dutton, one of Joshua's descendants, discovered it. He and I met at a recent event honoring some of Carroll's Black Civil War soldiers. He had never known his ancestors were enslaved or much about Henry and Joshua's military service. His family didn't mention the subject. All he remembered was that older relatives spoke of Joshua as a rather grumpy old man. A little research showed Joshua had married a woman nearly 40 years his junior very late in life. His first child arrived when he was 59 and five more quickly followed. Perhaps that explained his reputation as a bit of a curmudgeon. Now Errol can pass these new family stories to future generations.

Other Historical Society volunteers have had equally rewarding experiences. We always enjoy watching the faces of library patrons as they find information about long-lost ancestors. Sometimes we help them uncover a will or a birth recorded in a family Bible. Research helps flesh out the lives of ancestors so you know more than simply their dates. Even if those ancestors never lived in Carroll County, library volunteers might be able to help you dig deeper into your past.

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



Caption – In 1870 Isaiah Lightner and a partner operated a general store in this building on the corner of Broadway and South Main Street in Union Bridge. Now it houses Original Pizza operated by the Monteleone Family. Submitted photo.



Caption – Charity Durbin's log house built by her son in 1813 near Spring Mills. A Native American trail ran through this area according to land records. Submitted photo.



Caption – The author and Errol Dutton at a recent event honoring Carroll's Black Civil War soldiers. Two of Errol's ancestors fought in the United States Colored Troops. Submitted photo.