

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Carroll’s Yesteryears
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Shellman house offers a look at black history
by Jay Graybeal

Last week’s article chronicled the several black families who lived with Jacob and Elizabeth Sherman, the first owners of the Historical Society’s Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House of Westminster. Interestingly, other blacks lived in the house throughout the nineteenth century.

Following Elizabeth Sherman’s death in 1842, John Fisher (1780-1863) moved into the house. Fisher was a well-to-do bachelor who served as cashier of the Bank of Westminster, now Union National Bank. According to the 1842 Carroll County Tax Assessment, Fisher owned five slaves, Eli (age 22, \$400), Ace (age 45, \$160), Emily (age 4, \$50), Sarah (age 39, \$300) and Hanah (age 23, \$300). Some or all of these slaves moved with Fisher to his new residence. By 1850 the only black member of the household was Henry Mathews (born c. 1800). John Fisher freed three slaves in 1853, Sarah Mathews (born c. 1810), Eli Mathews (born c. 1830), and Maria Thompson (born c. 1828).

Three years before his death Fisher and his wife (at age seventy-six he had married thirty-six year old Anna E. Morthland) lived with two servants Hannah (born c. 1830), and Lewis (born c. 1839). John Fisher’s executors sold the house in 1864 to George Jones, trustee for the estate of his late brother-in-law Col. James M. Shellman (1801-1851).

Col. Shellman’s widow Catherine J. Shellman (1815-1898) did not own slaves nor did she employ free blacks. Two blacks joined the household in the late 1860’s when Mrs. Shellman took in boarders Dr. James W. Reese, Professor of Ancient Languages at Western Maryland College brought Mary Key (1812-1892) who had been a slave in the house.

Mary was a house servant and mammy for the Reeses. Paul Reese who was born in the house in 1877, recalled that his grandfather Jacob Reese bought Mary about 1823 “from the Shermans” and that she later died in the same room where she had been born. Mary was buried at Ascension P.E. Church near the Reeses and the Shellmans. Her tombstone carries the inscription: “A faithful servant in the family of Jacob Reese and of his son James W. Reese.” “Lizzie” Tyson was a cook who probably worked for the entire household. Paul Reese wrote of her, “There was also 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 really stood in awe. The clearest memory I have of her is, ‘Get outen my kitchen.’”

Historical photographs of Carroll County’s black residents taken during the nineteenth century are relatively rare. In many cases, such photographs are unidentified making it difficult to document Carroll County’s black history. A late nineteenth century photograph of the log loom house that once stood at the rear of the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House shows two black residents. The genealogical findings at the site indicate that this is likely to be Lizzie Tyson and

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her husband Henry Johnson, married in 1881. The departure of the Johnsons before 1900, brought to a close nearly a century of slaves and free black servant life at the site.

A workshop on researching black history in Carroll County will be hosted by the Historical Society of Carroll County on Wednesday, February 27 at 7:30 p.m. in the Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 East Main Street, Westminster. Panelists will present research techniques and findings on the history of black churches, Civil War soldiers, local family genealogy and residents of the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House. For information contact Jay Graybeal at 848-6494.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: The identities of these black residents are likely to be Lizzie Tyson, the household cook, and her husband, Henry Johnson.