



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society - Research Article
West Bloomfield Township Pioneers: - Afro-American Families by Neil
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There's been much talk about the 2000 census and the changes it may bring for the Detroit metropolitan area. What's often overlooked is the fact that the census doesn't cause change, it documents it. Individually, each census is an American-family "snapshot" - a moment in time digitized for demographers and posterity. But viewed together, successive censuses offer a glimpse of the "genetic code" of the nation - the evolving raw-number framework that each personal story is hung upon.

At the time of the 1820 Federal Census Michigan was still a territory, 17 years away from statehood. That census lists a total of 59 households in all of Oakland County, including one black household headed by a John Wilson. Because the county had yet to be divided into townships, we do not know exactly where John lived. He is listed as a farmer, with a total of seven people residing in his household.

The 1840 Federal Census gives us the first Afro-American family definitely residing within West Bloomfield Township's present limits. Simply listed as "H. Nod" we know only that his household contained two "free colored" males ages 10-24, one "free colored" male age 36-55, three "free colored" females ages under 10, one "free colored" female age 10-24, and one "free colored" female age 24-36. It would seem that this represents a married couple and their six children, but the lack of detail captured by early censuses makes it impossible to know for sure. As Nod does not appear in the 1850 Federal Census, and no members of the Nod family are buried in local cemeteries, it is unlikely that the family stayed in this immediate area for long.

The 1860 Federal Census contains but one Afro-American residing in West Bloomfield Township. Twenty-four-year-old James Kelly is listed in the household of farmer Edward Clendining and his wife. James, born in Ohio, is most likely a laborer employed to assist the 54-year-old Clendining. One crucial difference between the 1860 and 1870 Federal Censuses is that one was taken before the Civil War, the other after. It is not unusual to expect that the series of events that forever changed America wouldn't also alter the face of West Bloomfield. Although no battles were fought upon local soil, a generation of our farm boys lived through a hell their parents, who had experienced a peaceful half-century, could not imagine. In short, the nation, even our little corner of it, would never be the same again.

As with any armed conflict, men volunteered to fight for a multitude of reasons. Many saw a need to preserve the Union, some abhorred slavery, others were simply looking for adventure. The influence of a significant Abolition-minded Quaker population in Farmington, as well as rumored Underground Railroad activity here in West Bloomfield Township, gives one hope that our white forefathers were tolerant, if not respectful, of people of color. But the fact is that in 1860, with the

exception of one individual, only white people appear in our township's census. Ten years later, however, West Bloomfield's "snapshot" contains 17 Afro-American faces.

Twenty-year-olds, Jefferson Harris and John Williams, from Kentucky and Tennessee respectively, are both laborers in the 1870 household of 79-year-old retired farmer Joseph Coates. Although much is known of Coates and his son, Edward, a Major in the 8th Michigan Cavalry during the Civil War, attempts to trace Harris' and Williams' histories have been futile.

Fortunately, this is not entirely the case with the James Walton family, also documented in the 1870 Federal Census. Walton is listed as a 46-year-old farm laborer from Kentucky. He is noted to be blind at the time. His 30-year-old wife Ann is from Canada. Their Michigan-born children include Sherman (14), Fanny (10), George (8), Mary (6), & James (1). In the actual census document, James Sr. and his family are listed adjacent to Hartwell Green, who owned 340 acres on the NW corner of Orchard Lake and Walnut Lake roads. As Walton's entry includes no mention of real estate value, there's a good chance that Walton rented a house and farmland from Green. James' middle three children had all attended school in the past year, most likely the one-room School #6, on Green Road, which ran through the middle of Hartwell's property.

Walton had also put his life on the line during the Civil War, as one of the thousands of free black men who volunteered to serve in the Union Army. James enlisted in Company C of the First Colored Michigan Infantry, later a part of the 102nd United States Colored Troops, on Sept. 29, 1863, at Detroit, for 3 years. He was mustered in on Oct. 9, 1863 and mustered out at Charleston, S.C. on Sept. 30, 1865.

James spent his final years in the Michigan Soldier's Home, in Grand Rapids. Authorized by Act 152 of the Public Acts of 1885, the Michigan Soldier's Home, now the Michigan Veteran's Facility, was the first of its kind to provide care for sick and destitute Michigan veterans. The home was formally dedicated in December 1886 with speeches by Governor Russell A. Alger, Governor-elect Cyrus G. Luce, former Governor Austin Blair and various legislators. The main facility housed three hundred and twenty beds.

In April 1886 the Board of Managers of the Michigan Veteran's Facility set aside five acres for a cemetery. The Grand Rapids posts of the Grand Army of the Republic dedicated the cemetery on Memorial Day, May 31, 1886. The original cemetery was designed in the form of a Maltese cross with 262 gravesites in each of its four sections. James Walton is buried in this cemetery, but no dates appear on his tombstone. By the time of its centennial in 1986, an expanded Soldier's Home Cemetery had recorded over 4,000 burials of veterans and their dependents.

The 1870 Federal Census also contains West Bloomfield's Jacob Crockett family. Crockett is listed as a 46-year-old black farm laborer from Pennsylvania. His 48-year-old wife Harriet, and eldest son, George (23) were also born in Pennsylvania. Their other Michigan-born children include Ellen (15), William (11), & Rosana (9). William, who may have been blind, and Rosana both attended school in the past year. Crockett is listed adjacent to Robert Cummings, who owned 185 acres stretching from Orchard Lake to Morris Lake. Jacob most likely rented land from Cummings, as his census entry does not include any real estate value.

The final two Afro-Americans listed in the 1870 Federal Census, resided in the Orchard Lake home of retired farmer Joseph Tarr Copeland. Copeland, one of the area's wealthiest men, had also served as an officer during the Civil War. On June 27, 1863 he commanded the 5th & 6th Cavalry on reconnaissance through Pennsylvania to find Confederate General R. E. Lee's forces. On the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg, Gen. Copeland was replaced by the soon-to-be-infamous Gen. George Armstrong Custer.

In Copeland's household, which at the time was operating as the Orchard Lake Hotel, is listed Alice Johnson, a 12-year-old domestic servant born in Michigan, and Henry Taylor, a 40-year-old farm laborer from Kentucky. As with many subjects of this article, nothing further is known about either of these individuals.

Examining census data alone, these post-Civil War Afro-American settlers are different than their neighbors. Michigan was initially populated largely by New Yorkers flooding in after the Erie Canal opened in 1825. Although born in New York, these peoples' parents came mostly from New England and the British Isles. In contrast, four of West Bloomfield's seven Afro-American adults recorded in 1870 came from the mid-south. Several are single people working on the large estates of white farmers. Those who are married and have families lease, rather than own, their land. Collectively, they are a people free of the institution of slavery, yet bound by a harsh economic reality.