

INVISIBLE PEOPLE:THE LEGACY OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN ON THE UPPER CUMBERLAND PLATEAU

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Background and History of the Upper Cumberland Area

The Upper Cumberland Plateau is an elevated sandstone tableland area that only became historically significant during the first quarter of the 19th Century. The philosophy of “Manifest Destiny” that stimulated late 18th Century, settlement of Frankfort, Lexington, and Burnside, Kentucky, and Pall Mall, Athens, and Knoxville, Tennessee was not enough to overcome the remoteness, inaccessibility, and poor soil of the Cumberland Plateau. The more choice lands surrounding the Upper Cumberland Plateau were settled first and only after that did the Plateau begin to be settled. Oral histories reveal that most of the migrants into the area were involved in extractive industries. Foremost among these were the fur trade and later salt manufacturing and niter mining. These pioneers eventually attracted settlers who established small subsistence farms and towns later grew up to serve the needs of these widespread farms. As these towns grew and the Civil War came and went transportation corridors began to open up. Roads were cut through the wilderness, commercial logging traffic plied the rivers and the Southern Railroad was built through the area in the late 1870’s. African-Americans, according to many older residents of Scott, Fentress, and Pickett Counties, Tennessee, never lived in this area. However, census data, photographs, and numerous black cemeteries attest to the presence of citizens of African American ancestry.

African American Occupation

The first African-Americans on record in this area were slaves that were owned by large landowners or manufacturers of various commodities. One of the first African-Americans of note on the Upper Cumberland Plateau, if not the first, is a boy named Surk who is referenced in 1820 by Capt. John W. Tuttle (1939). Tuttle writes;

“Fulton, Beatty, Ingram, all of Abigdon Virginia; Irvine and Zimmerman, originally from Pennsylvania, and later from Cumberland Gap Tennessee, in order to get an increased supply of salt water for the Salt Works at Saltville, in 1820 employed a contractor, John Neal, from Cumberland Gap Tennessee, to put down a well on the east side of the South Fork near the mouth of Bear Creek, the consideration being in part, payment of a negro boy named “Surk”, a slave. Issac Powell and Mike Castello were “blowers for the large hole for the crib” and afterwards were employed as assistants. The negro boy “Surk” also worked on the well which transferred him to Neal—a singular example of the irony of fate”.

One reason there is not intensive, historic occupation of the Upper Cumberland Plateau by African-Americans slaves is that the thin acidic soils here could not support the lucrative plantation system of monocrop agriculture that existed in other areas of Tennessee and Kentucky. Therefore, there was no local political support for such a slave-based economy in Scott County. And, when the Legislature for the State of Tennessee voted to secede from the Union, the County Commission for Scott County voted

to secede from the State of Tennessee. This is not to say that there were no slave-owning landholders in this area at this time. According to the United States Census of 1820 there were 28 slaves living within the Big South Fork region and by 1850 slaves counted for the census in this area numbered 39. These data indicate a steady and growing population of slaves living in the area by the War Between the States. At the time of this conflict, according to some oral traditions, there were only five men who owned slaves in Scott County. Thomas Chambers (b1777) was one of these. In the early 19th Century he moved his household, including 20 slaves from North Carolina to a 1000 acre land grant in the New River area of Scott County. In 1813 he relocated to a larger 5000 acre land grant in the area of Buffalo creek.

After the Civil War and emancipation, transportation networks were reestablished in the Upper Cumberland Plateau. Commerce and industry drove the development and expansion of these networks and logging was one of the first industries to appear. African-Americans were working in the timber and logging industry and several families moved into the Stearns, Kentucky, area in the late 19th Century. Coal mining also began in the area at this time and black miners formed a small percentage of this more lucrative industry.

The construction of the Southern Railroad, completed in 1879, brought African-Americans into this area as well. Construction of this railroad and the Glenmary Coke ovens was the catalyst that gave rise to the establishment of the small community of Glenmary, in Scott County, Tennessee. Working on these projects encouraged several of the black workmen and their families to remain and work at the coaling station and coke ovens that they had built. This small rural community existed until the Cincinnati and Southern Railroad closed down its coaling station there in 1894. These former railroad employees, many of them trained masons, were now out of jobs. However, with the closing of one door another opened. The Tennessee Paving Brick Company established in 1892 (Des Jean 1996, H.C. Smith 1985:454; Barger 1989:4,8) at Robbins, Tennessee, attracted the out of work black workers from nearby Glenmary, Tennessee. This company sold out in about 1904 to the larger more widespread Southern Clay Manufacturing Company (SCM) which employed more workers.

The early wage laborers at SCM included a sizable percentage of African-Americans who were willing to accept the low wages, hard work, and long hours in exchange for steady employment and the "company system" way of life. Migrant black workers that arrived as part of railroad construction crews often stayed on and began to work for the Southern Clay Manufacturing Company (SCM). Here a stable job and an efficient operation, "where everyone had a job to do", imparted a kind of "esprit de corps" towards production. Black and white employees worked at various tasks at the SCM brickyard as noted by a former employee, Mr. Harold McCarty, who stated that blacks and whites worked "side by side". While it is not documented that jobs at the Robbins plant were performed with integrated crews the fact that some tasks were done by all black workers suggests that at least some work was segregated. At least 21 of the 24 kilns at Robbins were built by African American masons. Also, some of the work was done by black female workers, at least after World War I. The African American people were an integral part of the Robbins community eventually establishing a Normal school, a church, and several cemeteries. Other areas and communities also became integrated with the addition of black neighbors and coworkers. By the early decades of the Twentieth Century there were many African American families living in this area of McCreary County, Kentucky, and Scott, Fentress, and Pickett, Counties Tennessee. These families included surnames of: Buttram, Smith, Meadowlark, Williams, Wilson, Miles, Simpson and Henderson.

The Stearns Coal and Lumber Company in McCreary County, Kentucky, also employed a diverse workforce which was unusual in the Upper South of the early Twentieth Century. One of the Stearns Company's physicians went to Knoxville, Tennessee, expressly to recruit black laborers for construction projects in 1902-04. The African American laborers seem to have been limited to working in support occupations like cook, gardener, or janitor, and many females worked as washerwomen. Other occupations were open to black males, however, and many men worked for the Stearns Company in its logging, mining, and railroad operations (**Figures 1 - 4**). Miners pay was better but some individuals both black and white did not want to go into the mines. There is evidence that some black laborers did work in the coal mines but African American coal miners were few. One of these fellows was Mr. Joseph Asbury Simpson who by 1924 had 36 years of coal mining experience. A 1940s engineering report identifies an African American miner killed in a mine explosion at Barthell, Kentucky. The presence of people of color working at the Stearns Company is evident by the many black faces that peer out at us from group photographs of lumber and logging operations of the 1920's and 30's (**Figures 5 and 6**). But these black workers were not relegated to just laborer positions. If a person was productive, resourceful, and reliable they could develop their own business.

Mr. George Hatcher was such a person (**Figure 7 & 8**). He ran one of the logging camps near the Peter's Mountain firetower and cut logs for or sold logs to the Stearns Company. Mr. Hatcher was the Lumber Camp boss overseeing both white and black loggers and he was well liked and intelligent. This latter point is revealed by the fact that he invested his earnings wisely. After working for several years at the logging camps he went to work for a stove and handle mill east of Jamestown, Tennessee, at Sharp Place. When Mr. Hatcher got paid he took one half of his pay in cash and the other half in land. Eventually he owned over 2000 acres west of what is now the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, bordering the southside of Highway 297. He also constructed and maintained a pole road across Grooms Branch connecting several ridges with a shortcut to the town of Gernt, Tennessee. The pole road was a low-tech version of a railroad using peeled logs as rails and metal wheeled wagons that ran on these poles. Horse and mule power was used to carry people, timber and other products in and out of the more remote areas. Mr. Hatcher died and was buried in Wayne County, near Monticello, Kentucky. Several of his children are buried at the Alticrest Cemetery just outside of the west boundary of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Tennessee. His heirs eventually sold the property that was left to them and moved away.

The census records of the Upper Cumberland Area continue to reveal some interesting changes through time. In 1900 Joseph Asbury Simpson and his wife Sally are listed in Scott County, Tennessee simply as husband and wife. However, in 1910 the McCreary County, Kentucky, census lists him as "mulatto" and his wife Sally as "Indian". By the 1920 census both are listed in the McCreary County, Kentucky census as "Black". While Black Americans were accepted in the workforce of the area they kept to themselves living together in small infrequent communities, or, more accurately, small clusters of houses or neighborhoods. One of these housing clusters was Newtown southwest of Stearns, Kentucky, on "old Highway 27", along what is locally called Mill Circle Drive. This small town or neighborhood included families with surnames of Hudson, Davis, Burrass, Reeves, Simpson, and Stigall. The town had its own school and was an identifiable community from the beginning of the 20th Century to the late 1950's by which time many of these families had moved north to the Cincinnati, Ohio, area to take advantage of higher paying factory jobs.

When the depression worsened in the early and middle 1930's labor troubles occurred between the Black and White workers in Robbins, Tennessee. Logging demands were down and so were demands for coal which resulted in lay-offs, logging mill closures, and mine closures. The previous un-envied low paying jobs at the SCM plant at Robbins, largely performed by black workers, were better than no job at all and this caused some enmity between whites and blacks.



Figure 1. Stearns lumber crew in the first part of the 20th Century. The two individuals on the far right are African-American men and the one standing may be Mr. Bill Simpson (Compare this to Figures 2 & 5) If this identification is correct it reflects the fact that, since Mr. Simpson's name is not listed, he was "invisible" to the note maker. There is of course the possibility that this could be a different individual or a mistaken identification.



Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1 Stearns logging crew.



Figure 3. Detail of another Stearns logging crew in the first part of the 20th Century. Possibly George Hatcher standing 2nd from right.

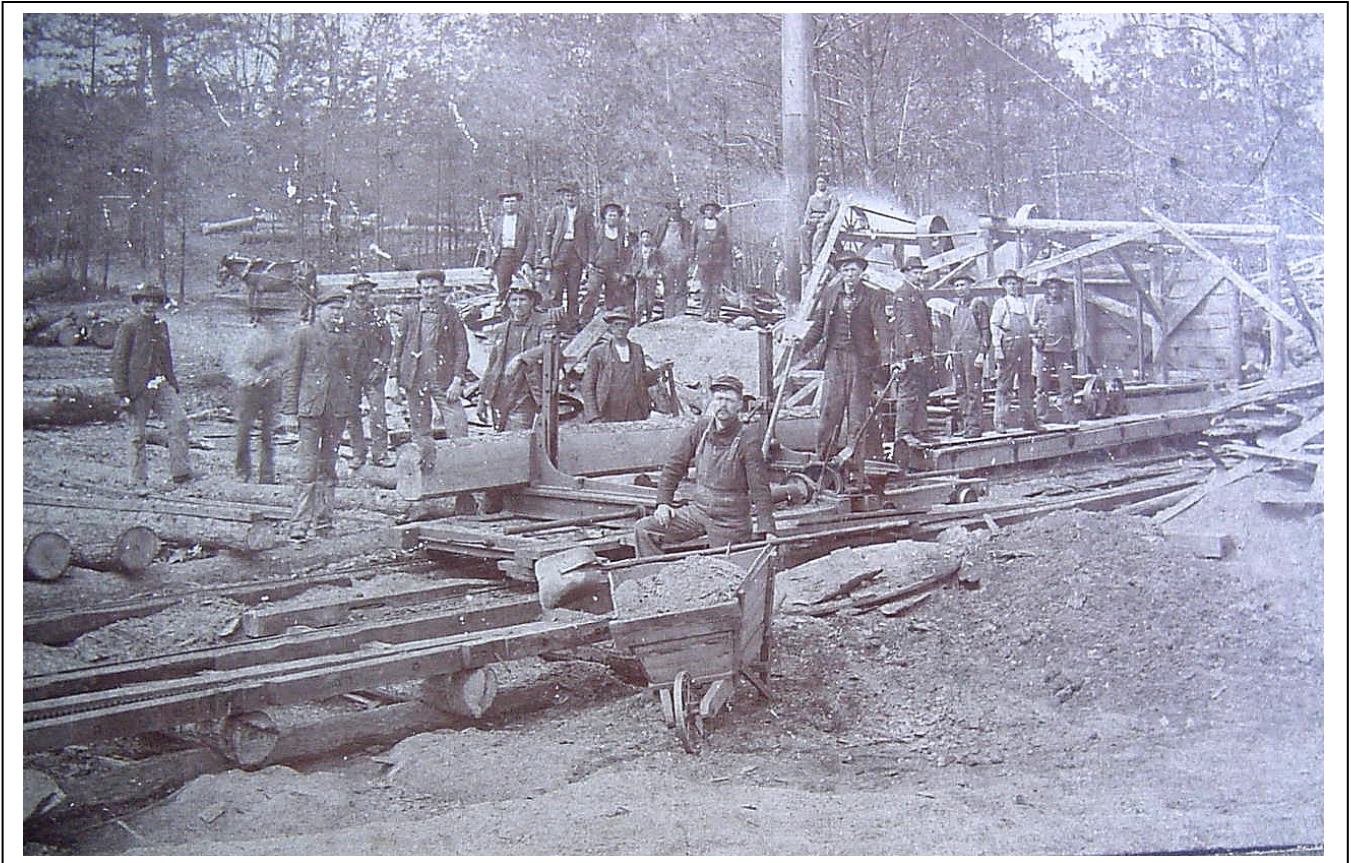


Figure 4. Stearns logging crew with African-Americans in center background early part of the 20th Century.



Figure 5. Stearns Railroad crew in the first part of the 20th Century. George Hudson 3rd from left (wearing fedora) and Bill Simpson 4th from left, in back.



Figure 6. Stearns Miners at Worley, Kentucky in the 1930s.



Figure 7. Mr. George Hatcher. Compare this identified photograph with Figures 3 & 8.



Figure 8:

Top: Several young black children from Jamestown, Tennessee.

Bottom: Four black men with small white child. 2nd from left is George Hatcher.

Black people not working at the Robbins brickyard also began to compete for other scarce jobs in the area. Most of the jobs that afforded African Americans work opportunities in the 19th and 20th Centuries were unskilled labor types of jobs in the construction trade (**Figure 9**) and in extractive industries. Finally, an incident occurred that resulted in one death and the expulsion of all blacks from Scott County and some of the surrounding areas.

Out Migration of African-Americans from the Upper Cumberland Plateau

The trouble at Robbins, Tennessee, occurred between a member of the SCM management and the son of an affable and well-known black man referred to locally as "Old Tom" Wilson. "Old Tom's" son, "Cat" Wilson, and Jewel Henderson, a friend, both young black men in their mid-twenties, killed the SCM bookkeeper in a fight. Following the killing of the bookkeeper both men were arrested by the clerk from the Commissary, who was able, with the help of others, to keep the two men from getting lynched. Both Wilson and Henderson were convicted of homicide and given 15 years in prison (Des Jean 1996; H.C. Smith 1985). Public resentment following this incident and the perception of a "light sentence" for these two men resulted in a public outcry. All black people were given just a few days to clear out of Scott County. The Wilson family moved to West Virginia and many of the other black families moved to Alabama.

The Great Depression had many effects on families in the South and the Upper Cumberland Plateau was no exception. The economic impacts caused many families to become more reliant on one another, to move where there were greater opportunities, and in many cases families even came apart. One account provided by Ms. Poppie Blevins attests to this type of situation relating that:

“A young black girl, Octi Down, came through No Business in the 1930’s and she was took in by Jake Darby Blevins and his wife til’ she made a woman. She met John Slaven and married him and had 3 or 4 children”. One of Octi’s daughters lives in the projects in Jamestown”.

As the depression continued to get worse many black and white families began to file for US Government assistance programs as they became available. The Social Security Administration records, for example, indicate that beginning in the mid 1930’s until the mid 1940’s a total of 16 African American people had signed up for Social Security in McCreary County, Kentucky. This reflects the sparse but continuous presence of African-Americans on the Upper Cumberland Plateau into the 1940’s. The declining opportunities generated by the great depression encouraged many people to move out of the area.

During World War II better-paying factory jobs opened up in more northern cities and many people continued to leave to take advantage of these jobs. At the same time coal mining work declined as the country moved from a coal/steam-based economy to a country running on petroleum. The area of “Newtown” in Stearns, Kentucky, disappeared by the late 1950’s. A very few African-Americans came to the area at this time and stayed on. One such individual was John Conrad who migrated from the Cumberland Valley Lumber Camp into Oneida, Tennessee, around the late 1940’s where he was hired as a cook. He eventually became the cook and a lodger at the Cross Hotel in Oneida. He stayed on in this community at this job for many years and integrated into the local culture.

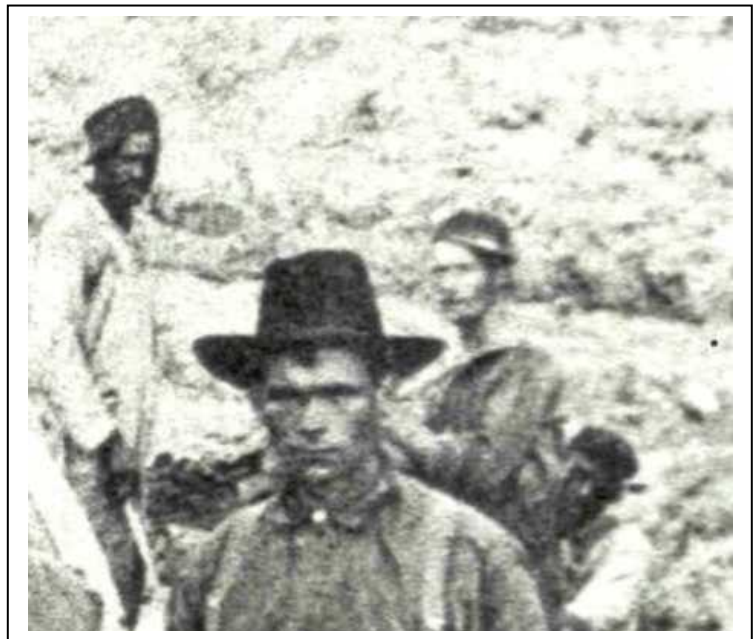


Figure 9. Top, 1913 Photograph of O&W Railroad construction crew.
Bottom, Detail of 1913 RR construction showing two black men in the background.

Mr. Conrad, “Negro John”, as he was known by many people locally (**Figure 10**), was considered an intelligent man who liked to read and was often found playing guitar. Mr. Conrad had his own chair in the movie theater and in the church. Mr. Conrad died in the 1960s and is buried in Oneida, Tennessee, just off of Bank and Depot Streets next to his employer of many years Dr. Milford Thompson.

As attitudes change and economic opportunity returns to the Upper Cumberland Plateau undoubtedly, so will the diversity that was once a conspicuous if an unrecognized, even *invisible* part of this rural culture.



Figure 10. Mr. John Conrad in his “Morris Chair”.