

# History in black, white

## Slavery and separation part of local heritage

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Blacks in Washington County share a local history rooted along a less-than-one-quarter-mile stretch in downtown Hagerstown. Jonathan Street has housed, fed, entertained — and sometimes frightened — many of its black residents for more than two centuries.

Jonathan Street is so named only through the black district. The street is mostly white on each end, where it's known as Summit Avenue to the south and Forest Drive to the north. That is a point of contention among those who believe this makes it easy for the city to profile a Jonathan Street address as a black address.

The three predominantly black blocks sandwiched between Summit Avenue and Forest Drive once housed the county jail that held ne'er-do-wells and fugitive slaves waiting to be freed, reclaimed or sold on the nearby auction block. Jonathan Street was a settling place for free blacks in the county and the site of their first churches, city homes and businesses.

Until the 1960s, common practice prevented members of Hagerstown's black community from leaving Jonathan Street.

Black history files at the Washington County Historical Society include a recent comprehensive study of the area called the "Heritage Preservation Project." The study includes census data and historical, social, educational, religious, economic and architectural information about the area's first black community.

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The City of Hagerstown in 2002 commissioned the study to help preserve an often overlooked slice of county history, City Planning Director Kathleen Maher said.

Local black history most likely dates to the mid-1700s, when European American settlers brought their slaves to Washington County. By 1790, Washington County's nearly 16,000 residents included 64 free blacks and almost 1,300 slaves — half the number of enslaved persons in neighboring Frederick County — while the state's slave population totaled about 103,000, according to the first American census.

Washington County landowner John Barnes in 1790 boasted the highest number of slaves at 75. The county's slave and white populations continued to climb in tandem into the first quarter of the 18th century, peaking at more than 3,200 slaves in 1820, but whites in Washington County still ranked low statewide in slave ownership.

Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties each counted more than 10,000 slaves, according to 1820 census figures.

Only about 11 percent of white Washington Countians could afford to own slaves, according to the "Heritage Preservation Project." The area's large German population tended to avoid slave ownership, and a great number of slaves weren't needed to work on the county's proliferation of small, owner-occupied farms.

Quakers and Methodists led anti-slavery movements in Washington County, but the area was far from a safe haven for escaping slaves. The county's border-state location attracted slaves fleeing to the north through neighboring Pennsylvania's many Underground Railroad stops.

Although there are no documented Underground Railroad stops in Washington County, "Big Sam" Williams, a free black who owned a farm on the Potomac River at Four Locks, was known for helping escaping slaves across the waterway in the mid-19th century. (Williams' son, Nathan, and his family farmed Fort Frederick — now a state park — from 1857 to 1911.)

Washington County's roads were patrolled for escaping slaves, and blacks caught without documentation were held at the county jail on Jonathan Street until their status was resolved.

### Racial constraints

Racial constraints tightened after a Virginia slave rebellion in 1831. The Maryland General Assembly passed legislation that reduced blacks' access to religion, education and jobs. Black farmers needed special licenses to sell their goods, and free blacks were discouraged from returning to the state, according to information at the Washington County Historical Society.

Maryland even dedicated state funds to return free blacks to Africa. In 1833, 19 free blacks from Frederick and Washington counties were sent to Liberia.

In Hagerstown, blacks were not allowed to gather in such public places as the Market House.

As a gateway to the North, Hagerstown beckoned slave catchers and traders. Slave markets were found in Sharpsburg and Beaver Creek, on Jonathan Street and in front of the courthouse in Hagerstown.

The possibility of being shipped to the South's brutal cotton fields so terrified some local slaves they mutilated themselves to discourage buyers. The fear of going south prompted a slave woman owned by Susan Gray of Boonsboro to cut off her left hand with an ax in 1906, according to historical documents.

■ **Church a beacon to follow, C4**



## Population by race

Population numbers by race for Washington County:

Year:	No. of Whites:	No. of Slaves	No. of Free blacks:
1790	14,472	1,286	64
1800	16,108	2,200	342
1810	15,591	2,656	483
1820	19,247	3,201	627
1830	21,277	2,909	1,082
1840	24,724	2,546	1,580
1850	26,930	2,090	1,826
1860	28,305	1,435	1,677
1870	31,874	N/A	2,838
1880	38,561	N/A	3,066
1890	37,275	N/A	2,507
1900	42,645	N/A	2,488
1910	47,497	N/A	2,113
1920	57,452	N/A	2,242
1930	63,872	N/A	2,010
1940	67,064	N/A	1,774
1950	76,708	N/A	2,178
1960	88,571	N/A	2,648
1970	100,040	N/A	3,789
1980	108,334	N/A	4,752
1990	114,148	N/A	7,245
2000	121,046	N/A	10,247

Two black churches were established on and near Jonathan Street — Asbury United Methodist Church in 1818 and Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal in 1838 — as free blacks continued to settle in the area. The county's black population of about 4,130 included more than 1,500 freedmen by 1840, according to census data.

The number of free blacks had increased to 1,826 by 1850, while the number of slaves in the county dropped from 2,546 in 1840 to 2,090 in 1850. Many local slave owners freed their slaves in the decade leading up to the American Civil War. The 1860 census counted 1,435 slaves in the county and nearly 500 free blacks — including 31 property owners — living in the Jonathan Street community.

## 'Colored units'

The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 allowed blacks to serve in U.S. Army "colored units." Seventeen black men from Washington County enlisted in the Union Army, including members of Hagerstown's Moxley Band, according to a book by the late Marguerite Doleman of Hagerstown.

Formed by Robert Moxley in 1854, the band's 12 enslaved musicians played at public events until they joined the First Brigade of the U.S. Colored Troops. The band

was used in part to recruit other slaves in the region for military service.

The end of the war found free blacks trying to find housing and competing for work in Washington County. Many moved to urban areas where jobs were more plentiful, while some ex-slaves stayed on county farms as hired help and tenants, the study says.

The Freedmen's Bureau, which was created by the U.S. War Department in 1863 to provide blacks with living assistance and support, started the county's first school for black children in 1869.

By 1870, black communities had formed in Williamsport, Clear Spring, Sharpsburg, Sandy Hook, Hancock and Beaver Creek — but Jonathan Street remained the base for nearly 900 of the 2,826 blacks in the county, according to census data.

The addition and improvement of railroad lines through Washington County turned Hagerstown into the Hub City in the 1870s and 1880s. The local manufacturing industry boomed, but few blacks benefited from the economic upturn.

Barred from working in factories with whites, blacks took low-paying service jobs at restaurants, hotels, barbershops and in the large new homes on Potomac Street. Black railroad workers were limited to picking up coal along the tracks or serving as janitors, the heritage study says.

Blacks couldn't use the county hospital or Hagerstown YMCA, shop in the city's central business district or attend the theater with their white neighbors and employers.

This was the environment to which Buffalo Soldier William O. Wilson returned in 1893 after earning the Medal of Honor for bravery during the Indian Wars of the late 1800s. It would be nearly a century before his achievement was recognized with a local memorial.

## Middle class

A black middle class formed on Jonathan Street despite — or perhaps because of — the countless racial barriers. Residents opened businesses to serve their own community.

Walter Harmon's black hotel was a notable addition to the community because visiting blacks weren't allowed to lodge in white hotels, the heritage study says.

Nearly 20 of the black men who were barred from holding local office or working as police enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War I, and 200 local blacks served in World War II. A new high school was built on North Street after that war, enabling local black students to attend 12 years of school for the first time.

The City of Hagerstown in the 1950s and 1960s built two housing projects — Bethel Gardens and Douglas Court — for the Jonathan Street community. Civil rights legislation then opened Jonathan Street's exit door, but many chose to stay.