

# Samuel Denson: a notable citizen of Cumberland

By Nayano Taylor -Neumann, PhD, revised September 5, 2020.

Put the name “Samuel Denson” and “Emmanuel Episcopal Church” into a search engine, and you will find a few dozen sites and documents that claim that Samuel Denson was an escaped slave who found his way to Cumberland, Maryland, became sexton for Emmanuel Episcopal Parish, and worked with Reverend David Hillhouse Buell, the rector, to assist other escaped slaves on their trek to freedom.

This is an inspiring and romantic story, but I am sad to say that there is evidence that, whatever happened at Emmanuel prior to 1865, Samuel Denson did not participate as sexton at Emmanuel before the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

The earliest story of this nature that I could find seems to have originated with a Vernon Roberts.<sup>1</sup> Roberts does not quote any sources. Indeed, no one referring to this story quotes any primary source.

This lack of sources does not in itself disprove the story. There are, however, several primary sources that indicate that Denson could not have had the role that this story gives him, and I shall discuss them as follows.

## Evidence that Samuel Denson and his family have lived in Cumberland MD

Samuel Denson first appears in the Federal Census records for Cumberland MD in 1870. Samuel Denson is listed as 30 years old with his wife Maria, 21, and daughter aged 1. His birthplace is given as Mississippi. There are no other Densons recorded. The censuses of 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920 also record Samuel Denson, his wife and growing family, and no other Densons are recorded. No other persons with the name Samuel Denson appear in any census. This confirms that he settled in Cumberland, and that, on the evidence, no other Samuel Denson resided there.

## Evidence that Samuel Denson of Cumberland who appears in the censuses was once a slave

The ages recorded for Samuel Denson in the censuses indicate that the year of his birth would have been 1840. In addition, his death certificate of 1928 records his full birthdate as April 16, 1840. In a newspaper article<sup>2</sup> he relates that he was born in Brandon, (county of Rankin) Mississippi. Prior to 1870, if slaves were recorded at all in censuses, it was merely as items of property of their owners, with only ages, gender, and race recorded. In the Rankin, Mississippi Slave Census of 1850, four Densons are listed as owning a total of 24 slaves. It would not have been unusual for Samuel to adopt the name Denson after his owner.

## Was Samuel Denson Sexton of Emmanuel Episcopal Church at the time of Rev. David Hillhouse Buell?

There is some evidence that Rev. Buell and the tunnels of Emmanuel Church were part of the Underground Railroad system<sup>3</sup>. Rev. David Hillhouse Buell was Rector of Emmanuel Parish from 1847 to

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Episcopal Church Cumberland, Maryland “Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Cumberland, Maryland,” Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, Case Studies, July 12, 2010 Mr. Vernon Roberts <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/casestudies/fifeec.html>, accessed 1/2/2020.

<sup>2</sup> “Aged Colored Citizen Celebrates Birthday” Cumberland Evening Times, April 16, 1915

<sup>3</sup> “For many, path to freedom ran here”, The Washington Times, February 10, 2002

1857, with a one-year leave of absence 1854-55.<sup>4</sup> The records previously cited in this paper show that, during the time of Rev. D. H. Buell, Samuel Denson was aged between 7 and 14 years. To place Mr. Denson in Cumberland between 1854-55, he would have had to travel to Cumberland from Mississippi as an escaped slave aged between 7 and 14 years, nearly 1,000 miles. That does, however, raise the question of why Cumberland was selected as Mr. Denson's stopping place.

It is unlikely that he would have been chosen to be Emmanuel's sexton between the ages of 7 and 14 years. There is a possibility, however, that he could have rung the bell to assist Rev. Buell without being employed as sexton.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding this possibility, records do not support the idea that anyone named Denson was sexton or custodian of Emmanuel during the time of Rev. D. H. Buell.

#### When did Samuel Denson arrive in Cumberland?

It was not unusual for owners to send their young and fit male slaves to fight for the South. We have evidence that Samuel Denson served in the Confederate and Union Armies<sup>6</sup>. USCI records note that Samuel served in the Confederate forces, was captured, and subsequently "recruited from defeat" to the Union side. This record also notes that in May 1865, Samuel was in Virginia, a patient in hospital at Fort Monroe, Virginia, 283 miles from Cumberland. This record supports the proposal that Mr. Denson had been a slave until the Civil War and was not able to travel to Cumberland until May 1865, ten years after Rev. Buell left his post at Emmanuel Church.

That Mr. Denson first came to Cumberland after the Civil War is substantiated by his comments in a newspaper article from the Cumberland Evening Times of April 16, 1915<sup>7</sup> in which he states that he was born in Mississippi in 1840, joined the Confederate Army, was an eyewitness to many battles, and came to Cumberland at the end of the war.

Later records show that Samuel Denson was indeed a sexton at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, but between 1886 and 1890, well after Rev. Buell's rectorship and the time of the Underground Railroad<sup>8</sup>. In Emmanuel Episcopal Church records, Samuel Denson is listed as baptized and confirmed 1876.<sup>9</sup>

#### Mr. Denson was a remarkable man

Records show that not only did he have a barbering business as noted in census records 1890 onwards, but also operated a broom factory with Thomas Martin<sup>10</sup>. He began the Sunday School at St Philip's in 1881. St. Philip's Chapel evolved as a mission to serve black parishioners, and ten years later, the congregation was organized, and regular services held<sup>11</sup>. As noted, he was sexton of Emmanuel Church

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<sup>4</sup> History of Allegany County Maryland, Volume I James W. Thomas, LI.D. & Judge T. J. C. Williams, Regional Publishing Company Baltimore, 1969 (Originally Published 1923)

<sup>5</sup> I wish to thank Mr. J. Barrington Jackson, Esq, for this suggestion.

<sup>6</sup> 45th United States Colored Infantry Regiment, Company A, 5/2/1865

<sup>7</sup> "Aged Colored Citizen Celebrates Birthday" Cumberland Evening Times, April 16, 1915

<sup>8</sup> "Denson resigns as sexton of Episcopal Church", Cumberland Daily Times, April 13, 1890

<sup>9</sup> Bound volume of Emmanuel Historic Records compiled by the Genealogical Society of Allegany County, listing baptisms, confirmations and deaths, 1803-1910

<sup>10</sup> Annual report of the Bureau of Statistics and Information of Maryland, Maryland. Bureau of Statistics and Information, 1910, P 244

<sup>11</sup> "St Philip's notes 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary", Cumberland Times News, November 20, 1956

between 1886 and 1890. He served as a member of the Republican Club where he worked in support of a civil rights bill<sup>12</sup>, and was nominated as a candidate to the House of Delegates<sup>13</sup>.

Records, however, do not confirm that Mr. Denson was sexton of Emmanuel Episcopal Church prior to 1886. If he did ring the Emmanuel Church bell as a boy, not a sexton, to be in accord with the records cited here, he would have had to return to Mississippi after he completed that service.

Postscript: The Emmanuel Episcopal Church History Committee is committed to hearing or reading about any oral history accounts of Samuel Denson's life, especially as it pertains to the possibility of his assistance to Rev. Buell's mission to assist escaped slaves on their journey to freedom. I will add those accounts to this paper if and when they come to hand.

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<sup>12</sup> "Denson supporting a civil rights bill", Cumberland Daily Times, 10/13/1874

<sup>13</sup> "Denson Nominated for House of Delegates" Civilian and Telegraph, 9/27/1887