

Presentation to CU meeting 2/12/09 by Dan Bays, Harrison County Historian on early black history in Harrison County, IN. Bays, a lifelong resident of Harrison County, who worked at the Corydon Public Library for 17 years, is one of 92 voluntary county historians appointed by the Indiana Historical Society.

Fun Fact Question: Why did a white couple from North Carolina bring their 107 slaves to Indiana in 1814?

- a. They were starting a large plantation in Harrison County.
- b. They wanted to free their slaves.
- c. They wanted to establish a town called Mitchum.

“Most early residents of Indiana, both black and white, came north from Kentucky, including slaves.” So began Dan Bays’ talk in honor of Black History month. He went on to explain that though when the Indiana Territory was carved out of the Northwest Territory and then became a US state, it was supposed to be a free state, slave owners coming into the state did not want to give up their “property.” As a sad result, the *1810 Census* lists 237 slaves in Indiana. Included in that for Harrison County were 12 slaves and 15 “other free persons except Indians.” In 1811 the *Indiana Gazette* reported that Harrison County's tax of \$1/slave had been applied to 8 slaves. Perhaps the most extraordinary story occurred when Paul and Suzanna Mitchum, from North Carolina, came to Harrison County in 1814 with 107 slaves. The Mitchums felt that their duty to God and humanity was to liberate slaves and so they did! The *1820 Census* then listed 99 free blacks in Harrison County and 8 in Corydon.

Many of these former slaves took “Mitchum” as their new last name. In fact, a town called Mitchum was founded 7 miles south of Corydon. Between 1815 and 1820, 20 Mitchums were listed in county marriage license records. Many of these people were important early residents. For example Littleton Mitchum was a black doctor who cared for all races. He must have practiced good health measures because he died in 1902 at the age of 106 years. His wife Polly (90+) and son Isaiah (88) also lived long lives especially for those times.

Other free blacks who made their place in Harrison County history include Leonard Carter, who fought in the Civil War. His home has been purchased as an adjunct to the Leora Brown School. Oswell Wright who lived in Corydon on Chestnut Street (where Community Unity has helped sponsor a historical plaque in his honor) was active in the Underground Railroad. In 1857, when he was in his 70s, Wright was helping Charles and David Bell get Charles’ wife across the Ohio River to freedom. A Meade County, Kentucky, posse crossed into Indiana and tricked David to go down to the river where they arrested him at the shoreline, which was the Kentucky state boundary. Wright was also arrested and found guilty of forging a pass for a slave and was sentenced to five years in prison.

In June of 1870, 200 blacks met at the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in Corydon and paraded in celebration of the newly ratified 15th Amendment, which gave the right to vote to everyone regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude.

In 1891 the Summit Street School was built. Until 1951 it was one of three black schools in Harrison County (the others in South Harrison and North Boone townships.) The school was purchased in 1987 by Maxine Brown and named for her aunt Leora Brown Farrow, who taught there from 1924-51. Her mother was Lula Mitchum Brown.

The Ku Klux Klan did meet in Corydon in the 1920s occasionally, including under the Constitution Elm in 1923. They tried to meet in Corydon again in 1928 but could not get a public space to speak. Some people mistakenly think that the Whitecaps were also Klan

members, but actually they were vigilantes who began as a “horse thief protection association.” Their most infamous act was to hang two white men on Corydon’s West Bridge. As a footnote, the Klan held an unsuccessful rally in Corydon in 1999, which was the impetus for the founding of Community Unity.

Fun Fact Answer:

b. Paul and Suzanna Mitchum felt that their duty to God and humanity was to free their slaves.

END