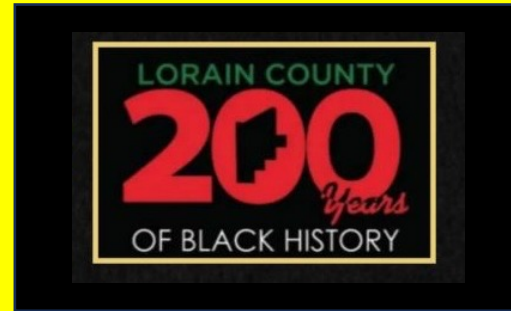


Oberlin's African American Pioneers

Stories of the First Generation



A Special Bicentennial Presentation Celebrating Lorain County's Black History

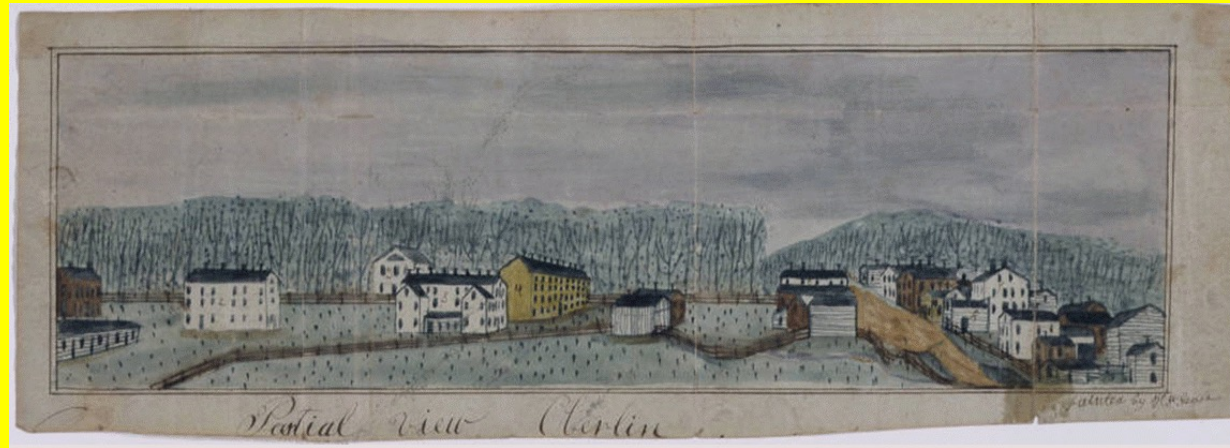
Gary Kornblith

Oberlin Public Library
March 2, 2024

Sponsored by Oberlin African-American Genealogy & History Group and Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society

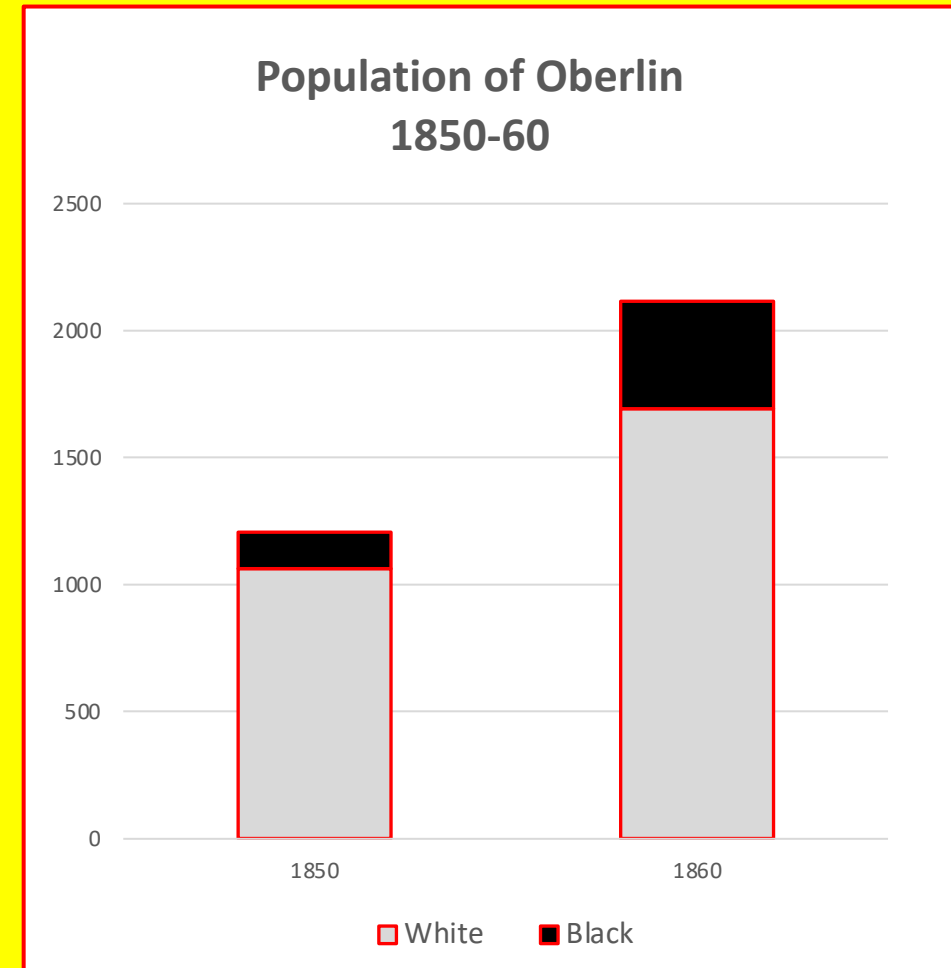
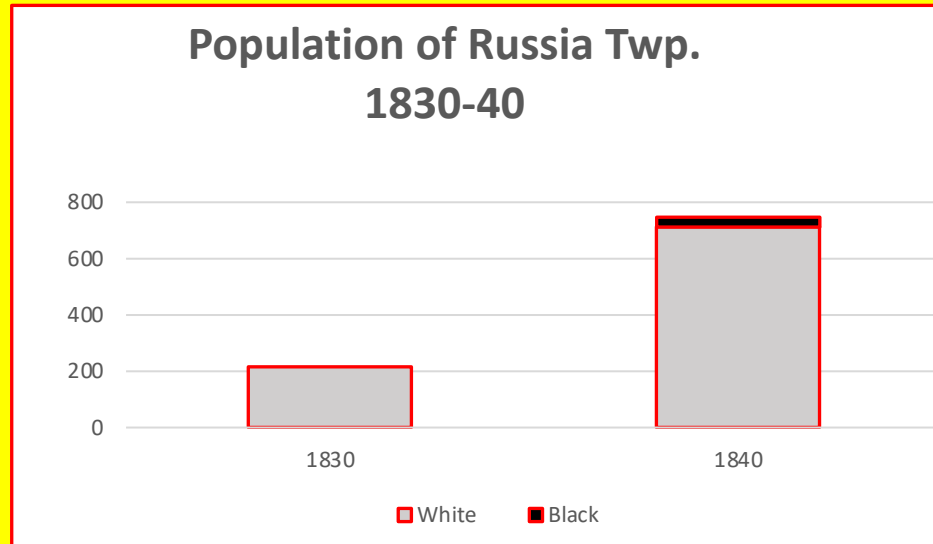
Oberlin's Double Founding

- 1833: Establishment of community and institute on basis of Oberlin Covenant
- 1835: Institute's decision to admit Black students and community's embrace of the principle of racial equality



"Partial View [of] Oberlin" by Hiram Alonzo Pease ca. 1838

Racial Demographics of Early Oberlin



Sources: Federal Censuses of 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860

Who Were the First Blacks to Come?

- Gideon and Charles Langston
 - Free-born sons of wealthy white Virginia planter Ralph Quarles and his former bondswoman Lucy Langston, older brothers of John Mercer Langston
 - After parents died in 1833, moved to Chillicothe, OH, where half-brother already resided
 - Enrolled in Oberlin Institute's preparatory department in fall 1835, joined Congregational Church in March 1836
 - Transferred to new Sheffield Manual Labor Institute, satellite preparatory school affiliated with Oberlin, in spring 1836

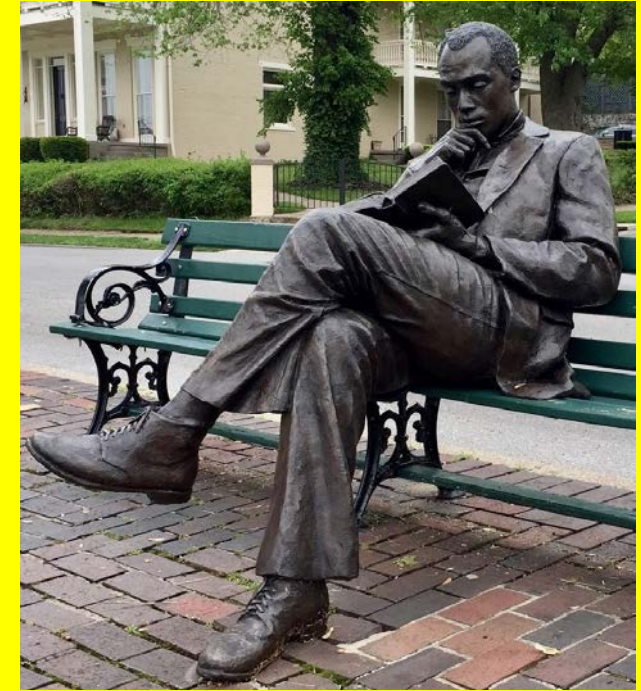
- Charles Langston returned to Oberlin for further schooling in 1841-43
- Younger brother John Mercer Langston arrived in 1844
- Although Charles Langston did not reside in Oberlin in the 1850s, he visited often and took part in the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue of 1858 and was convicted for his role in 1859



Charles Langston with Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers in the Cuyahoga County Jail, April 1859

- James Bradley

- Born in Africa, ca. 1805
- Stolen from his mother as a young boy, enslaved, transported across Atlantic Ocean to Charleston, SC
- Bought by “a Mr. Bradley” and labored as a field hand
- Around 1820 moved to Arkansas Territory with owner, who died and left James to his widow
- With her consent, James made money by working on his own time and bought his freedom in 1833
- Moved to Cincinnati, where he enrolled as special student at Lane Seminary; participated in famous Lane Debates over merits of immediate abolition vs. colonization in early 1834



Historical marker honoring James Bradley in Covington, KY

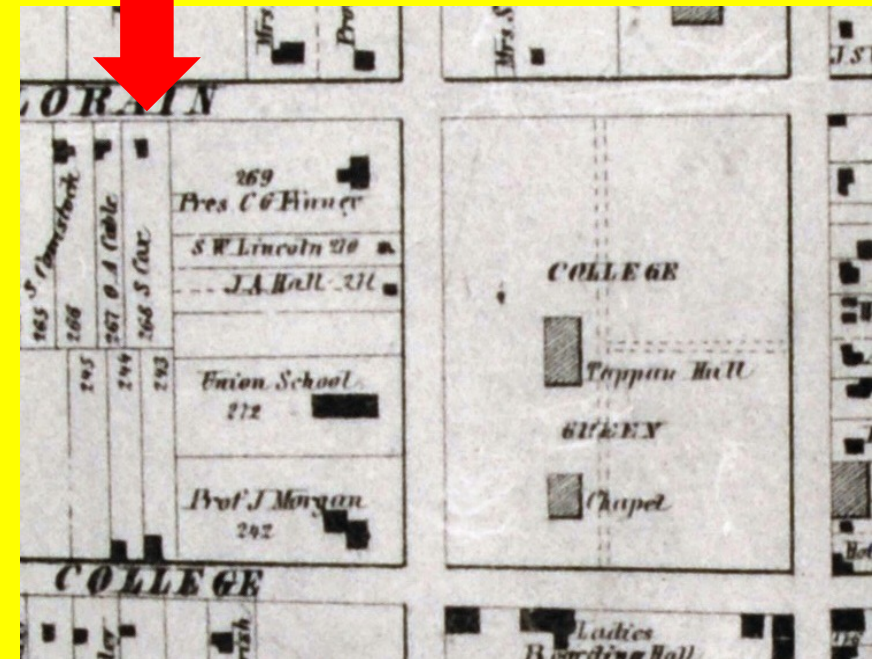
- After Lane's trustees moved to suppress abolitionist activism, Bradley along with other so-called "Lane Rebels" quit Lane in fall 1834
- Traveled from Cincinnati to Oberlin with fellow rebel Hiram Wilson in March 1836, encountering racist hostility along the way
- Enrolled in preparatory program at Sheffield Manual Labor Institute
- Disappeared from Lorain County, perhaps relocating to Canada



Burrell Homestead, which housed short-lived Sheffield Manual Labor Institute

Other Well-documented Early Black Pioneers

- Sabram Cox
 - Born into bondage in VA, 1823
 - Taken to TN, then IL, where he escaped enslaver
 - Befriended abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, IL
 - After Lovejoy's murder by anti-abolitionist mob, Cox handled his funeral and departed
 - Moved to Oberlin in 1839 and enrolled in preparatory department
 - Helped freedom seekers and lectured on anti-slavery
 - Prospered as drayman and farmer, acquiring parcel on next to Charles Grandison Finney's

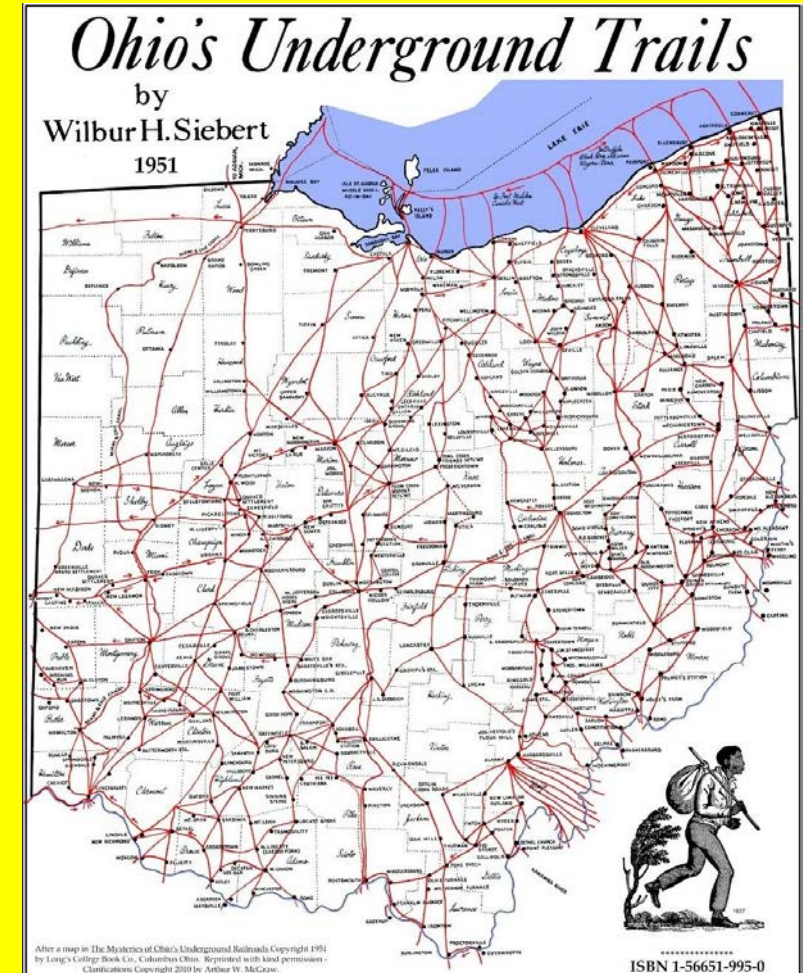


- Martha Janey/Ferris/Gaskins

- Born in Chillicothe in 1798
- Married Joseph Janey ca. 1820
- Janey's resided in Seneca Township with 5 children in 1830; later moved to MI
- In 1838, Martha and 3 children (Elizabeth, Emeline, and Thomas Jefferson Janey) came to Oberlin without Joseph and took up residence with William Ferris, whose surname she took (whether because he was her husband or brother is unclear)
- Children attended Oberlin public schools, Elizabeth entered prep at Institute
- William Ferris was censured by public meeting for spreading "evil" views on antislavery in 1847
- Daughter Emeline married self-emancipated barber Dennis Bibb in 1848
- Martha married Godfrey Gaskins, a Black sailor, in 1850; worked as washerwoman
- Son Thomas was indicted for participation in Oberlin-Wellington Rescue and served in Union army during Civil War

Pathways from the Upper South to Oberlin

- Migration from Upper South accounted for 2/3 of all adult African Americans residing in Russia Township in 1850
- Many came via Underground Railroad: “fugitive slaves” in the parlance of the era and “freedom seekers” in today’s terminology
- Other Black migrants came by an “above-ground freeway” (so-called “Free Negroes” comprised about 12 percent of all African Americans in the Upper South at mid-century)



Prominent Migrants from Virginia

- John Mercer Langston
 - Born free in 1829; moved to Chillicothe with older brothers in 1833
 - Came to Oberlin in 1844
 - Lived in white professor's household
 - Started in prep, admitted to college course in 1845
 - Earned B.A. in 1849, M.A. in theology in 1852, and then studied law privately
 - Admitted to Ohio bar in 1854, bought farm and opened practice in Brownhelm
 - Elected Brownhelm township clerk in 1855
 - Moved back to Oberlin in 1856; elected Russia Township clerk in 1857



John Mercer Langston In 1853

• Thomas Jarvis

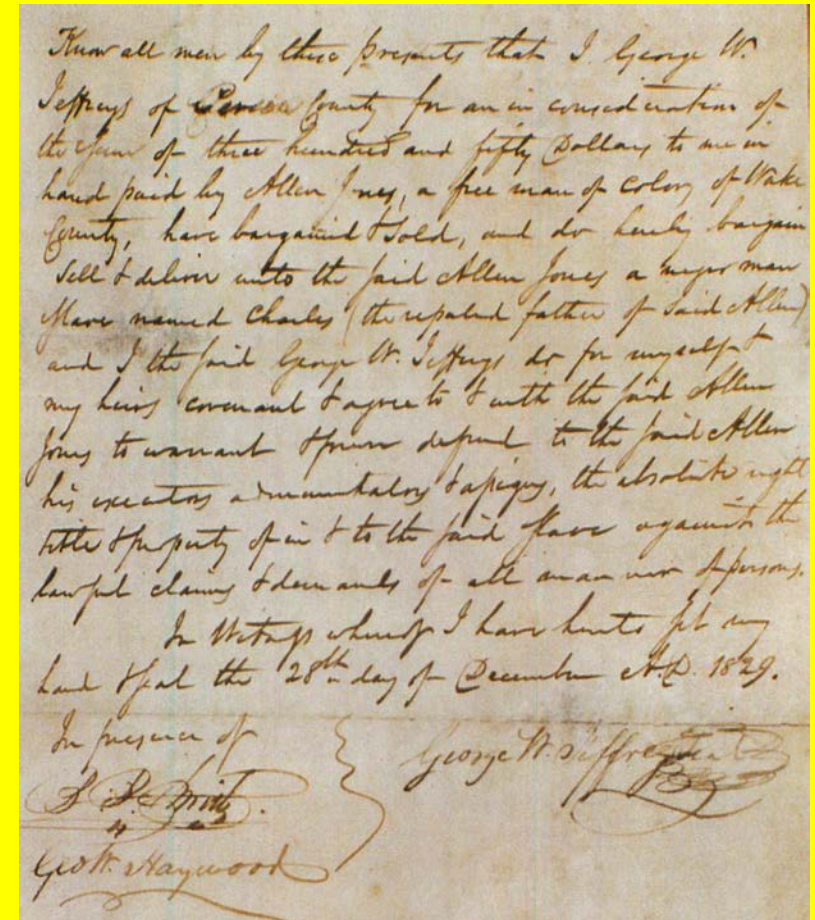
- Born free in 1801, the second son of William Jarvis, a mixed-race planter from Tidewater region of VA
- William Jarvis had been born a slave; after being manumitted by his enslaver's will, William had himself become a slaveholder
- In 1820 William Jarvis owned 11 slaves
- When William died in 1825, his estate was valued at \$6650 (over \$200,000 in today's currency)
- Thomas inherited roughly half of his father's estate and in 1830 owned 5 slaves
- In late 1840s, Thomas, his wife Nancy, and their 10 children migrated to Oberlin, where Nancy soon died
- By 1849, he had purchased large tract of farmland in Russia Township
- In 1850, he was listed among top 10% of taxpayers in the township



Jarvis gravesite monument
in Westwood Cemetery

The North Carolina Connection

- Allen Jones
 - Born enslaved in 1794 in North Carolina; father had been forcibly transported from Africa
 - Trained as a blacksmith and gunsmith in Raleigh, where he was often hired out by his owner to work on assigned projects
 - Wed Temperance (Tempe) Josephson in 1821— a legally sanctioned marriage despite slave status
 - Earned enough on his own time to buy his freedom (twice)
 - Purchased his wife, children, and father in 1829



Know all men by these presents that I George W. Jefferys of Person County for an in consideration of the sum of three hundred and fifty Dollars to me in hand paid by Allen Jones, a free man of color of Wake County, have bargained & sold, and do hereby bargain sell & deliver unto the said Allen Jones a negro man whose name is Charles (the reputed father of said Allen) and I the said George W. Jefferys do for myself & my heirs covenant & agree to & with the said Allen Jones to warrant & defend to the said Allen Jones his executors administrators & assigns, the absolute right title & property of in & to the said slave against the lawful claims & demands of all manner of persons.

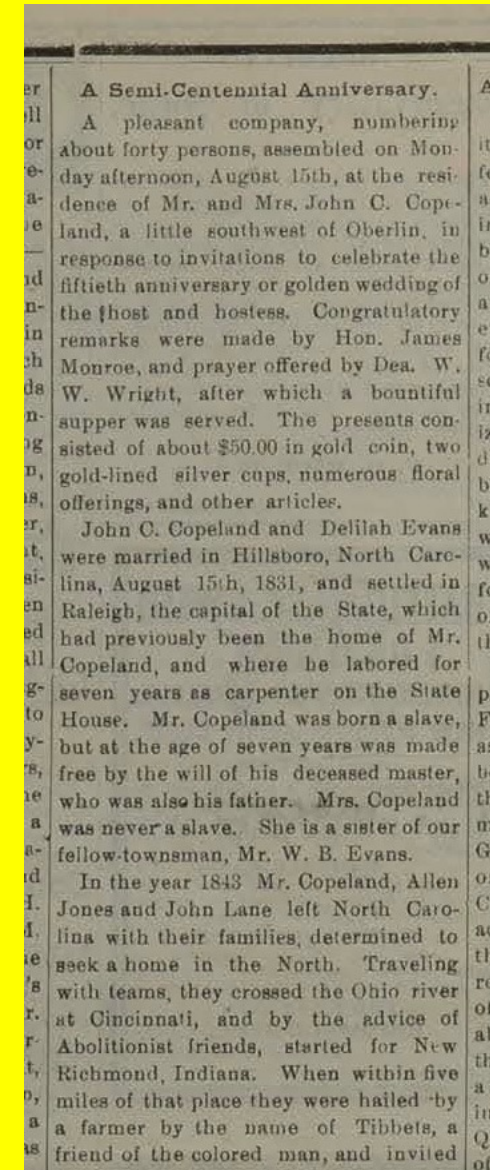
In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & seal the 20th day of December A.D. 1829.

In presence of
J. P. Smith }
G. W. Jefferys }
Geo. W. Jefferys }
Geo. W. Jefferys }

Bill of sale for Allen Jones's purchase of his father Charles, 1829

- By 1842, Allen Jones was rich and socially respectable: owned a “good two-story wood Dwelling House” and adjacent blacksmith shop in Raleigh plus 4 acres of land “in the South eastern suburbs of the City” on which stood another “good two story Dwelling House” as well as two more “small Houses, with two rooms each”
- Yet some white people resented in his success. In early 1842 he was charged with forgery. He was tried and acquitted, but in October he was “forcibly taken from his own house, in the dead of night, by a mob” and viciously beaten.
- Left Raleigh in early 1843 and headed north with his family
- Accompanied as well by John Lane, a free-born Black blacksmith who probably worked for Jones, and by the family of John C. Copeland

- John C. Copeland
 - Born enslaved, the mixed-race son of his “master,” in 1808
 - As provided for by his father’s will, John gained his freedom in 1815
 - Trained as carpenter in Raleigh, NC
 - Married Delilah Evans of Hillsborough, NC, in 1831
 - Helped build statehouse in Raleigh
 - Had 6 children when Copelands joined with Joneses and Lane to head north in 1843, adopted another along the way
- The story of the Jones, Copeland, and Lane journey from Raleigh to Oberlin was recorded in *Oberlin Weekly News* on the occasion of the Copelands’ 50th wedding anniversary in 1881



• Henry Evans

- Born free in 1817, son of free Black woman Fanny Evans of Hillsborough, NC, and younger brother (half-brother?) of Delilah; father was probably a white planter
- Learned carpentry and cabinetmaking; opened own shop in Hillsborough by 1839
- In 1843, married Henrietta Leary of Fayetteville, NC, daughter of Mathew Nathaniel Leary, one of state's most prominent Free Blacks
- Listed in 1850 federal census as household head with wife, 4 children, his mother and another cabinetmaker
- In Oct. 1853, publicly announced decision to sell shop and leave NC
- Departed in April 1854 with family and a contingent of 19 persons in all; headed to Oberlin, where Delilah had resided for past decade

Cabinet-Making.
THE subscriber, grateful for the patronage heretofore received, would respectfully inform his friends and the public generally, that he has newly fitted up his establishment, with a great many conveniences, that will enable him to execute work in a superior style and with more expedition than heretofore; and he now offers his services to the public, with the determination that no pains shall be spared to give general satisfaction.

FURNITURE,
of all kinds, will be made in the neatest style, of Mahogany, Walnut, and other precious Wood.

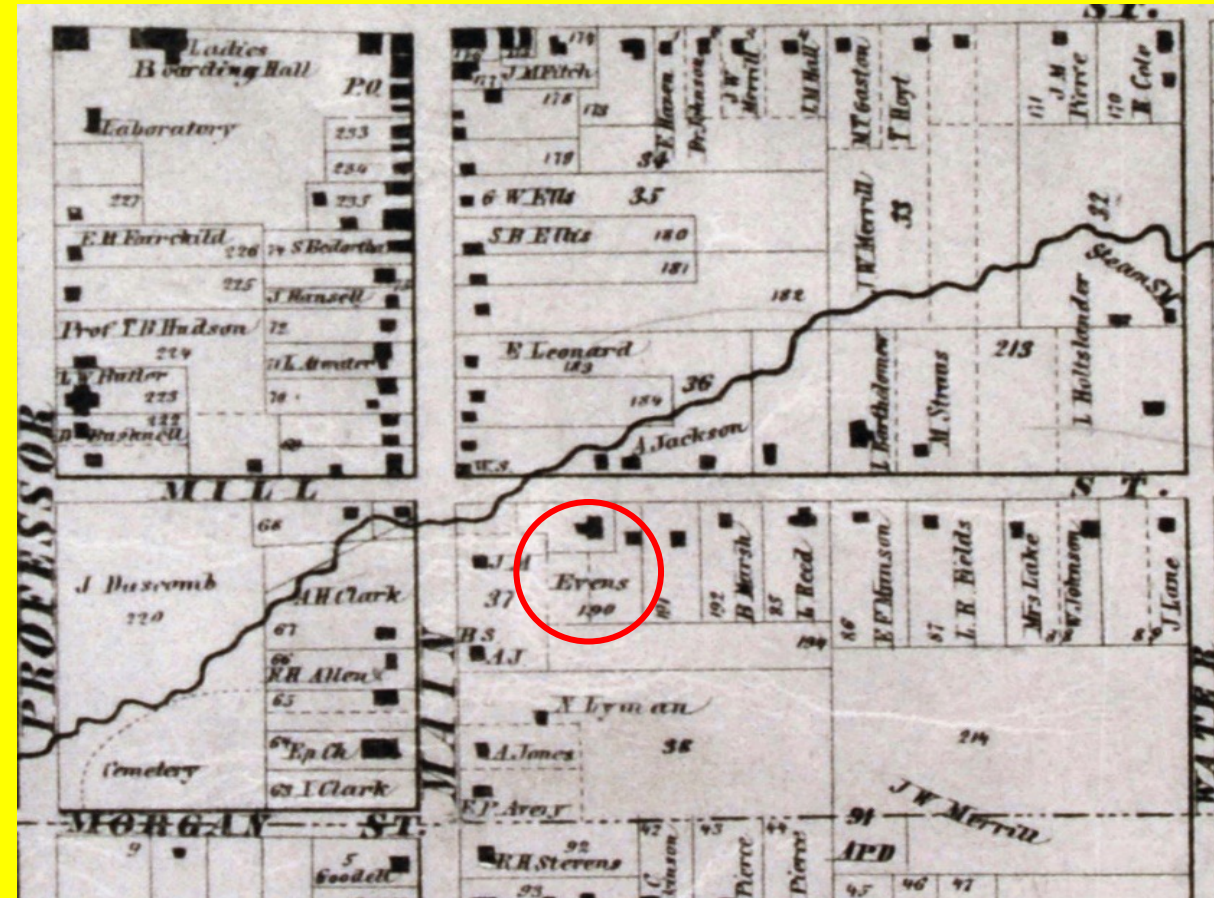
He will endeavor to keep on hand an assortment of Furniture; among which will be BED-STEADS of the cheapest and best quality, with stains of the most durable colors, in imitation of Mahogany, Rosewood, or Satinwood. Persons wishing to buy, will do well to call, as they will be sold on very reasonable terms. All repairing or varnishing will be thankfully received, and promptly attended to. Orders requiring haste, will be executed with all possible despatch.

HENRY EVANS,
February 3. 58 - 3m

1841 Advertisement

- Wilson Bruce Evans

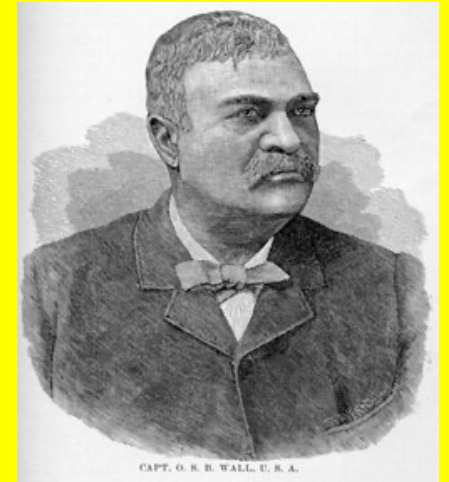
- Henry's younger brother, born 1824
- Also went into cabinetmaking
- Married younger sister of Henry's wife, Sarah Jane Leary in May 1853
- Shortly after birth of first child in early 1854, Wilson and Sarah Jane joined Henry, Henry's family and other free Blacks in making trek north
- Upon reaching Oberlin, Wilson joined his brother in opening a furniture shop on South Main Street and purchased land on Mill Street (now East Vine) for the substantial sum of \$500, perhaps with funds supplied by his wealthy father-in-law



1857 map showing Mill Street and vicinity

• The Walls

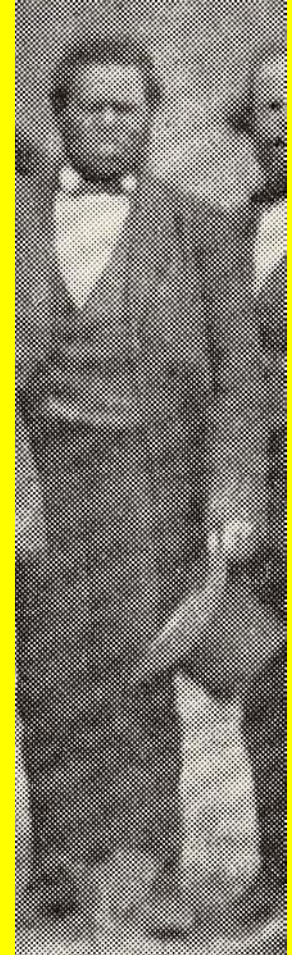
- Between 1822 and 1843, Stephen Wall, a wealthy white planter in Rockingham, NC, fathered 7 children -- Napoleon, Orindatus Simon Bolivar (O.S.B.), Caroline, Sarah, Benjamin, John, and Albert -- by three enslaved women
- In 1838 Wall manumitted and sent the first 5 children north, where they settled in Quaker community of Harveysburg, OH; John and Albert gained their freedom upon his death in 1845
- In 1850, Caroline and Sarah Wall came to Oberlin to attend the Institute, beginning in the prep and proceeding to the Ladies Literary Course
- O.S.B. and Benjamin Wall moved to Oberlin in 1853; O.S.B. opened a boot and shoemaking shop
- Caroline dropped out of the Institute when she married John Mercer Langston in 1854; Sarah earned her Ladies Literary degree in 1856
- John and Albert arrived in Oberlin in 1860



O.S.B. Wall in later life

African American Refugees from the Deep South

- John and Margaret Watson
 - Both born enslaved in VA, he in 1818 and she in 1820
 - Relocated to LA while still enslaved, had a child together in 1839
 - How they gained freedom remains unclear but made their way to Oberlin in early 1840s
 - John began as brick mason
 - In 1852 he opened a grocery store and restaurant on South Main Street
 - Active in Underground Railroad and an Oberlin-Wellington Rescuer
 - By 1860, Watsons in top 20% of Russia Township taxpayers



John Watson in 1859

- **Diza D'Anglas and her children**

- Born ca. 1814, Diza D'Anglas in 1840 was the enslaved concubine of Stanislas D'Anglas, a white French physician who had immigrated to LA in 1835 and bought a plantation in Natchitoches Parish
- By 1850, Stanislas had fathered 6 children by Diza and manumitted both Diza and their offspring even as he continued to enslave several other people
- Beginning in 1849, sent 2 daughters to Oberlin for schooling
- Then in 1853 Stanislas, Diza and the rest of their children moved to Oberlin; in 1855 Stanislas was the wealthiest taxpayer in Russia Township
- He died in 1856, affirming in his will that Diza was his wife and leaving to her half of his estate for the remainder of her life—thereby making her one of the wealthiest Black women in the U.S.

Profile of Russia Twp. Taxpayers by Race, 1850

Property Assessment Quintile	Percentage of White Taxpayers in Quintile	Percentage of Black Taxpayers in Quintile
5 (Highest)	20%	7%
4	21%	7%
3	20%	13%
2	20%	33%
1 (Lowest)	19%	40%
N	366	15

African American Activism in Antebellum Oberlin

- First of August Celebrations

- Aug. 1 as West Indian Emancipation Day
- "The idea of the celebration originated with, and all the arrangements were made and executed by the colored people, with scarcely a suggestion from others. . . . If any one returned from this first celebration of the colored people, without feeling a stronger interest in their improvement and elevation, and a new determination not to cease his labors for the immediate and universal emancipation of the race, we envy not his head or his heart." — *Oberlin Evangelist*, 8-17-1842



1846 Program

- Pursued educational opportunities
 - Integration of Oberlin's common (public) schools despite state law
 - Integration of Oberlin Institute, including Preparatory Department
 - Liberty School “designed chiefly for adult persons who have been debarred in early life, by slavery or prejudice, from the advantages of education”



Helen Ferris's class in Oberlin Prep, fall 1855

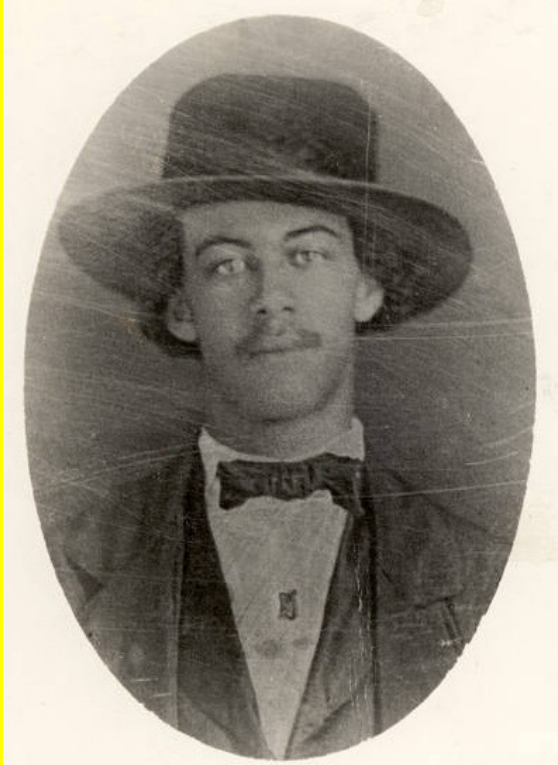
- Political mobilization
 - Black Oberlinians sent delegates to statewide and national Black conventions
 - Oberlin delegates not only supported abolition of slavery but pressed for repeal of Ohio's discriminatory Black Laws, a goal partially accomplished in 1849
 - A meeting of "the colored citizens of Oberlin" held in February 1849 went further by questioning whether, given the patriots' logic of "no taxation without representation," people of color should withhold tax payments if they didn't enjoy the right to vote
 - Yet some African Americans did cast ballots in Oberlin: a surviving list of voters in 1855 includes John Copeland, Henry and Wilson Bruce Evans, Thomas Jarvis, John Lane, O.S.B. Wall and John Watson, among others

- Oberlin as a sanctuary for freedom seekers
 - From the 1830s forward, Oberlin was notorious for welcoming and assisting “fugitive” bondpeople who were headed toward Canada
 - In 1841, for example, Sabram Cox and other local Blacks voluntarily served as decoys to distract slave hunters, allowing freedom seekers to escape
 - As the historian Brent Morris has written, “More than any other aspect of Oberlin society, the operations of its Underground Railroad station were disproportionately controlled and led by its black residents.”
 - After passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, John Watson rallied townspeople to pledge help for “any fugitive [who] came to his house day or night” and to sound the alarm if they learned of “any person trying to capture or carry off any fugitive.”

- Oberlin-Wellington Rescue and Trial (1858-59)



- Participation in John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry (1859)



Lewis Sheridan Leary



John Anthony Copeland



Monument to Oberlin's Harpers Ferry Martyrs, now located in MLK Park