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Crafting a Community: The Priestland Colored School in Carroll County

BY W. PETER PEARRE

South of Union Bridge, on Priestland Road near the Frederick County border, stands an unassuming chapel named The Gospel Spreading Church of God. The church has occupied the site since 1939. On July 5th of that year the Carroll County Board of Education sold the property on the courthouse steps to the Gospel Spreading Association of Baltimore for \$136. While that date was the beginning of a church, it was also the end of the Priestland Colored School, which had occupied the property for the previous 65 years. This “colored” school was a crucial part of the fabric of the African American community that straddled Carroll and Frederick counties in the McKinstry’s Mill area. The six men who joined in 1874 to establish a school for the education of their and their neighbors’ children lacked formal education. Some of those men could read and write, and some could not. Some had been born slaves, and some had been born free. Some had served in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, but all were united in the belief that their community would benefit from a school where their children could become literate members of American society.

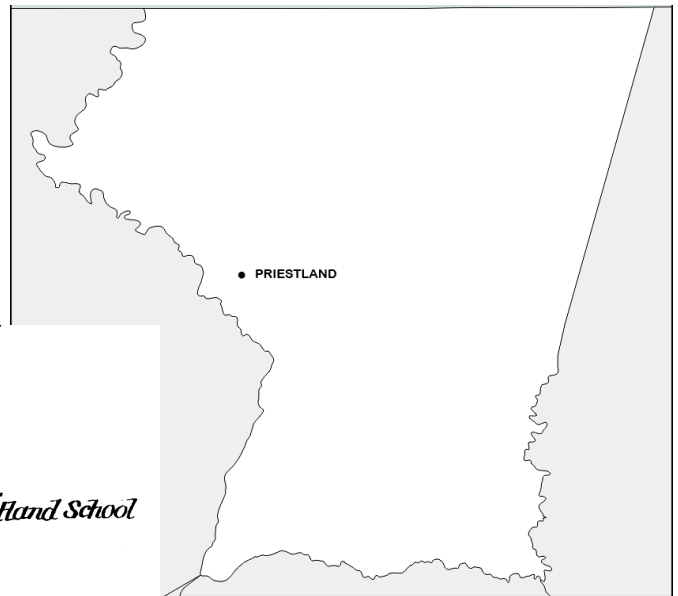


The Gospel Spreading Church of God, formerly the Priestland Colored School and Lodge Hall. (Courtesy of the author)

A Community for the Free and the Enslaved

The full story of the Priestland Colored School began in 1850. That year seven free African American men, acting as trustees, purchased one acre in the Oak Orchard area of eastern Frederick County “for the use of the colored people as a public burial ground and whereon to erect... a house or place of worship for the use of the colored members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” Less than half a mile from the Carroll County line, the Mount Olive Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery was the first place where Frederick and Carroll County African Americans, free or enslaved, could gather for communal worship and burying the dead on their own land. Like

Detail of Priestland Area. Note original site of “Priestland School” for whites on right with tenant houses below. “Col.d School” is opposite at mid-center with “B. Washington” (Benjamin Washington) house below. Road designation 236 is today’s Quaker Hill/Priestland Road and 294 is McKinstry’s Mill Road. (*An Illustrated Atlas of Carroll County, Maryland, 1877*) (HSCC Collection)



Methodist Episcopal Church and cemetery – required the presence of a white man.

Such laws made the years after 1831 some of the most challenging for African Americans. The Civil War, however, brought notable

the white settlers in the previous century, the black residents of the area were crafting a sense of community with the establishment of a church and cemetery.

Due to a series of laws the Maryland legislature had passed in 1831 in the wake of the Virginia slave uprising led by Nat Turner, creating an African American community was difficult in 1850. Fearing a similar rebellion, Maryland’s legislators had limited the rights of freedmen and hardened the lives of slaves. For instance, one of the laws forbade religious gatherings of freedmen or slaves, except in the cities of Baltimore or Annapolis, unless an ordained white minister or some other authorized “respectable white person” was in attendance throughout the service. For this reason, even the first concrete step in establishing their community – the consecration ceremony of the Mount Olive

changes to their status. For the first time, free and enslaved black men were able to enlist in the United States Army. Several early recruits from Frederick and Carroll counties served in the 4th United States Colored Troops (USCT), organized in Baltimore during August 1863. They enlisted as volunteers to ensure that the recent Emancipation Proclamation was more than just words on a piece of paper. Ultimately, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery in the United States and guaranteed equal rights for all men in the nation, regardless of race.

African American Education in Carroll County

One such right was education. Before 1864 there were no specific provisions in Maryland for the education of African American

children. That year at the Maryland State Constitutional Convention the Rev. Robert W. Todd of Caroline County stated in a speech before his fellow delegates:

The protectors and propagandists of slavery have seen and felt the force of the fact, that education is incompatible with the existence and benefits of slavery – that if you educate the negro, you create in him the thirst for freedom, or at least develop it: and hence your statute books, and the history of your State abound with facts going to show that every precaution has been resorted to to prevent the light of literature, even its most elementary branches, from shining into the enslaved mind of the African in our land.

Every Maryland county had a system of schoolhouses, but they were established for the white children of the district. While no law prohibited the education of black children, there was no guarantee that it could be attained at the local schoolhouse. Therefore, an education often had to be acquired informally. Able African Americans could teach their children to read and write. Slave owners could provide schooling, but it was their prerogative, not their duty. Sometimes education meant simply learning to read the Bible to be a better Christian, but not learning to write.

This informal and inadequate system changed with the 1864 Maryland State Constitution, which mandated that the General Assembly create a free, state educational system that included schools for black children. However, funding for this measure depended on taxes collected from African American residents. Few areas could provide enough funding for the establishment of such schools. Frederick County's African American taxpayers were able to contribute enough in 1866 to permit the county's Board of School Commissioners to divide the school tax equally among the nine "colored" schools in the county in 1867.

Why "Priestland"?

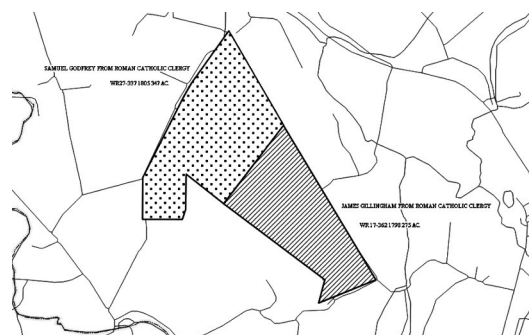
For 60 years more than 600 acres of prime farmland south of Linwood were owned by Roman Catholic clergy or their relatives. When patented in 1745, the tract was named "Mountain Prospect."

Thomas Cresap surveyed it for Reverend Thomas Digges, a Jesuit missionary following the example of other Jesuits who acquired large tracts in Cecil, Charles, St. Mary's, and Prince George's counties. Because the priests received no compensation, they relied upon the profits from their plantations, often called manors, to fund their missionary work.

Maryland was founded in 1634 by the Calvert family as a refuge for English Catholics. However, after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a series of laws were passed severely curtailing Catholicism. Priests countered by establishing secret "priests' houses" where they stayed from time to time as they traveled around the colony visiting the faithful, conducting religious services, and trying to make converts.

Nothing is known about how Digges and later owners of "Mountain Prospect" profited from the land but they likely received rent from tenant farmers. Settlers living around "Mountain Prospect" probably began referring to it as "the priests' land" long before the last portion was sold by the clergy in 1805.

Today, a road, a branch of Little Pipe Creek, a valley, and a historic African American community bear the name "Priestland," a holdover from the early landowners.



1798 and 1805 land transactions showing parcels representing the original 600 acres of *Mountain Prospect*. (Courtesy of Jeff Duvall)

One of them, Liberty (now Libertytown), was nearest to the border with Carroll County and paid for by the federally funded Freedmen's Bureau, authorized by Congress in 1865.

The 1873 Frederick County, Maryland, Atlas shows two colored schools in the eastern part of Frederick County – Libertytown and Oldfields – where sizeable communities of African Americans lived. The number grew to three in 1875 when four men purchased a half acre of land for one dollar for the "Colored School at Mount Olive Meeting House," amidst the only other sizable and distinct black community in the Liberty district. Across Sam's Creek in Carroll County near the white Priestland School, there was another large black community, but it was far from any colored schools. The Muttontown school near Union Bridge was a four-mile walk to the north, and the Mount Olive school in Frederick County was three miles to the south, near the Mount Olive Church where many of the families worshiped.

Belatedly recognizing the funding problem for African American schools, the Maryland legislature passed a law in 1872 that required the establishment of at least one public school in every election district for "colored" children ages six to 20 without regard to the source of the taxes for its support, provided that the number of children attending did not fall below 15. The new law had an immediate effect. In the fall term of 1873 and just before the Union Bridge district was created, 55 African American children were enrolled in a New Windsor district school, with 20-year-old Rachel A.V. Tyler of Linganore, Frederick County, listed as the school's "colored teacher." The minutes of

the School Commission of Carroll County recorded that Benjamin Washington, Benjamin Harp, and Hanson Davis were the trustees of this school for "Africans" near Union Bridge. Judging by the names of the trustees, it might have been in a house or a farm building in the McKinstry's Mill area.

On November 13, 1874, Israel C. and Lucinda Rinehart sold 40 square perches of land, a quarter of an acre, for \$40 to six African American trustees for use as a school and a lodge building. Before the Civil War three of those men were free and three were slaves. They were Benjamin Jones, Calvin Dunson, and Thomas Harp, trustees of the Priestland Colored School and Benjamin Dunson, Benjamin Harp, and Benjamin Washington, trustees of the "Flower of the Day Lodge No. 1462 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows Friendly Society of America Mount Olive Fred'k Co MD." For the next 65 years the African American children of the Priestland area would attend school in the heart of their own community.



The Rinehart house, c. 1900; since demolished.
(HSCC Collection)

**The Grantors:
Israel Clay Rinehart &
Lucinda (Englar) Rinehart**

Israel Clay Rinehart (1835-1913) and his wife, Lucinda Englar (1838-1924), were the children of prosperous Carroll County farmers and entrepreneurs. Israel was the brother of the renowned sculptor William Henry Rinehart. While the 1830 census recorded that Rinehart's father had two enslaved people, there is no evidence that his son or his children owned slaves in subsequent census records. The only known record of David Englar owning an enslaved person occurred in 1850. Both families belonged to the Church of the Brethren, which officially opposed slavery.

The 1877 atlas shows Israel and Lucinda Rinehart owning eight houses near the intersection of today's Quaker Hill and Priestland roads in the Union Bridge district. Five were along Priestland Road and four of these were likely rented to African Americans. At least two are known to be log construction, probably built by the African Americans who would live there. One remains standing today. With manumission and later emancipation, former slaves needed independent housing. Many of them were still the farm laborers and domestic servants for white families in the McKinstry's Mill area.

Benjamin Jones had his own business. He was a blacksmith and a free man from birth. In 1870, like his black Priestland neighbors, he rented a house and shop, located then on today's Marble Quarry Road. However, unlike his black neighbors, he claimed personal property. Probably it was his blacksmithing tools, valued at \$1,000 – a significant amount when compared to his neighbors that same year. The Rineharts helped fill the immediate housing need for blacks in the area and later sold those rented

houses to black families. Other lots along Priestland Road were owned by white residents, but later purchased by black families, forming a distinct African American neighborhood anchored by the Priestland Colored School.

**The Grantees:
Trustees of Priestland School**

Benjamin Jones, Calvin Dunson, and Thomas Harp, trustees of the Priestland Colored School, signed as grantees of the quarter-acre that the school would occupy. It is difficult to flesh out fully detailed biographies of these men, but census, land, and military records provide at least some bare details.

Benjamin Jones was born in 1828 to Moses and Mariah Jones. Moses was a free man according to the 1830 census, when he headed a household of nine in an area of eastern Frederick County known in the family as "The Ridge." It is reasonable to assume that their son Benjamin was always free and never enslaved. Like his father and older brother Thomas, Benjamin was a blacksmith. In 1853 he married Eliza Glisan. The two headed a family of three boys by 1860. Within ten years, Benjamin and Eliza, now with four sons and a daughter, had moved to Carroll County and were living next to Benjamin Harp and two households away from Benjamin Washington, fellow grantees of the Priestland School property. Jones could read and write, but Eliza and the children could not, nor had the children attended school in 1870. In 1880, six of Benjamin's children still lived in his household and all were able to read and write. In the previous year, four of the children had attended school, without a doubt the Priestland Colored School.

Calvin Dunson (alternatively spelled Dunston and Dunstan) was the youngest of the six trustees, barely an adult, having been born in

33	33	Harp Benjamin	37	M	19	Day Laborer		
		— Rachel	24	F	16	Keeping House		
		— William	12	M	19			
34	34	Jones Benjamin	42	M	19	Blacksmith	1	1.000
		— Eliza	37	F	16	Keeping House		
		— John Thomas	15	M	16	?		
		— William A.	13	M	16	?		
		— Moses	11	M	16	?		
		— Emma	9	F	16			
		Jones Abraham S	5	M	16			
35	35	White Philip	34	M	16	Day Laborer		
		— Francis	24	F	16	Keeping House		
		— Rosalie	5	F	16			
		— Perry	3	M	19			
36	36	Washington Benja	37	M	19	Work on Farm		
		— Emily L.	29	F	19	Keeping House		
		— Alice	3	F	19			
		— James A.	2	M	19			

Excerpt, 1870 census, showing Harp, Jones, and Washington households (1870 United States Federal Census)

1852 to free parents, six years after the birth of his brother Benjamin, a fellow grantee. In 1870, Calvin lived in the household of Union veteran Capt. Daniel Rinehart (Israel C. Rinehart's brother) and worked as a laborer on his farm. Calvin could write but not read. Four years later, with no wife and no children, he must have understood the importance of education and was listed as a trustee of the school that would be built on the Rinehart land. In 1876, Calvin married Ann Maria Johnson and lived with her for a few decades outside New Windsor. By 1910 they had

moved back to the Priestland community. In 33 years of marriage they had no children of their own. However, in every census between 1880 and 1920 there are one or two children of various ages and connections in the Dunson household. Every one of them could read and write, and all attended school during the year. In 1920, Frances, age 11 and identified as Calvin's "granddaughter," lived with them and surely attended the Priestland Colored School. By then she could read and write, as could Calvin and his wife.

Thomas W. Harp, younger brother of grantee Benjamin Harp, was a trustee for the Priestland School in 1874 and, with Calvin Dunson, still a trustee in 1918 when the property was sold to the Board of Education of Carroll County. Thomas was born a slave in 1835. In 1843, when nine years old, he was sold by Basil Simpson to his son, Charles B. Simpson, for ten dollars, with the stipulation that Thomas would be freed on his 37th birthday in 1872. There is no evidence that he joined the Union Army, as did two of his three brothers. When he was 31, he married Martha Thompson, and four years later in 1870 they had two children. By the time the Priestland Colored School property had been purchased, that number had increased to three and would eventually reach nine. In 1870, Thomas Harp claimed that he and Martha could read and write. In later censuses, however, only Martha made that claim, but all their children and grandchildren could read and write. Harp and his family eventually moved from the Priestland community to the other side of McKinstry's Mill, where he owned his own house.

The Grantees: Trustees of Flower of the Day Lodge

The remaining three buyers of the Priestland Colored School property, Benjamin Dunson, Benjamin Harp, and Benjamin Washington, were trustees for the Flower of the Day Lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America. The fraternal organization was founded in 1843 and differed from the American Grand United Odd Fellows in its welcoming of black members. The society's purpose was to provide aid to its members where and when possible. Coverage included sickness, disability, burial, and widowhood. However, members supported one another not just financially, but socially. The national meeting of the Grand United Order of Odd

Fellows in America was held in October 1871 in Frederick, with 88 lodges represented. Eight months earlier, the Flower of the Day Lodge, Number 1462, of "Mount Olive, Md" had been recognized as an official lodge. It is quite possible that Dunson, Harp, and Washington, the three future trustees, attended the Frederick convocation.

Benjamin Dunson, elder brother of Calvin, was a free man when the Civil War began. In August 1863, he gave his age as 25 when he enlisted as a private in the 4th United States Colored Troops. He served in Company H throughout the war and when mustered out in May 1866 had risen to the rank of sergeant. A year later he married Angeline Key in Carroll County. By 1870, they had a son and lived in the Priestland area. He could neither read nor write. Within ten years he had died, and his widow, Angeline Dunson, supported her four children by working as a washerwoman. Her neighbor was Benjamin Harp. The 1880 census recorded that she could read and write, as could her two older children, both of whom had "attended school," surely the Priestland Colored School. The next year she married Benjamin Milberry.

Benjamin Harp, the elder brother of Thomas, was born enslaved in 1828. Although their mother, Hannah, was manumitted in 1844, Benjamin was still enslaved in 1859, when—like his brother—his owner Basil Simpson sold him to his son for \$50, with the proviso that Benjamin be freed in 1867. Like Benjamin Dunson, Benjamin Harp enlisted in the 4th United States Colored Troops in Baltimore in August 1863 as a private, serving in Company F. He was gravely wounded on September 29, 1864, in the Battle of New Market Heights outside Richmond. While in the hospital at Fort Monroe, he was moved to "Gangrene Camp" for those who had developed the often-fatal infection and needed to be quickly isolated from the other wounded. He



Benjamin Washington house, c.2020 (Courtesy of the author)

survived but remained in various hospitals until early 1866. After being mustered out he returned to Carroll County and by 1870 was living in the Priestland community. His immediate neighbor was Benjamin Jones. By this time, he had married Rachel Elizabeth Smith, and their first child had been born the previous year. He could neither read nor write, and Rachel could only read. Ten years later four more children had been born. The two oldest, ages ten and eight, had attended

the Priestland Colored School in the past year and, unlike their parents, could read and write. Eventually the total number of children would reach eight, and by 1900, Benjamin himself could read and write.

The final trustee from the Flower of the Day Lodge was the resident shown on the 1877 atlas map as "B. Washington." This was Benjamin Washington; whose residence is the first known house owned by an African American in the Priestland community. He purchased it in 1868 for \$350, a large amount for a man who probably had been a

slave before the war. His home, unlike those of other trustees, still stands on Marble Quarry Road. Washington was born sometime between 1832 and 1840. By the time of the 1870 census, he had married Emily S. Dowery. By the next census his household had grown to include eight children and his mother-in-law. Both censuses recorded that he could not write, but that he could read. Emily could do neither. However, four children over the age of five were attending

the Priestland Colored School. All could read and write, except for the oldest who could only read.



Priestland Colored School and lodge building, c.1930 (Courtesy of the Robert Moton Center)

Conclusion

The Priestland Colored School represents a wonderful legacy of those who endured slavery and continuing prejudice. Some had served in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, risking their lives to end bondage. They had survived the horrors of battle and joined with others to create a new life and a community known as Priestland. Their sense of camaraderie found expression in the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America, Flower of the Day Lodge, and in a school for their children. All of this would knit together a community that had been part slave and part free only a few years before. In 1873, all six men were registered voters, eager to exercise their new enfranchisement. On this spot, children would be educated, and adults would teach one another to be loyal and virtuous citizens.

It is important to history to remember a community and a former school building, tucked away in a small corner of Carroll County, that played such an essential role in the education of African Americans. The demographics of Priestland have been changing rapidly in recent years from a completely black community to one that is predominantly white. Its new residents do not have the historical connection to the Priestland Colored School. This is especially true as 19th-century houses built by freed slaves and their descendants are gradually replaced by vinyl-clad split levels. In time, few residents of the area will be able to claim Priestland as both their heritage and a portal to seeking the American dream.

I want to thank Mimi Ashcraft, Barbara Thompson, David Key, and especially Sam Brainerd for all their help in bringing this article to fruition.

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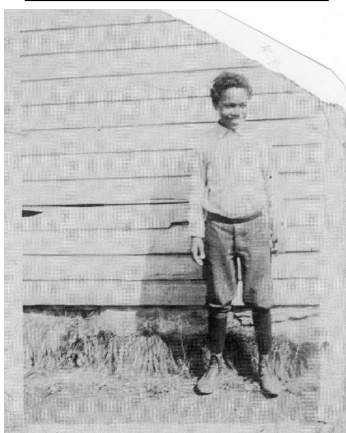
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Danny Jones with
Priestland Colored School
in background, c.1920
(Courtesy of Barbara
Jones Thompson)



Postscript

The branches of my family tree are spread throughout Carroll County. On my journey of discovery, I've come to realize searching one's genealogy is a never-ending saga. Every now and then you stumble onto information not previously known. Imagine my joy on discovering that Benjamin Jones (1828-1897), son of my great-great-great grandfather Moses Jones (1787-1868), was one of six African American men who purchased land for the construction of the Priestland Colored School. I'm forever grateful for Peter Pearre's research. It has enhanced the legacy of my family's roots and those of other African American families that have called Priestland home. The Priestland Colored School provided them the opportunity to leave their footprints in Carroll County's African American community.

Barbara Jones Thompson

A former resident of the Priestland area, Mrs. Thompson was born and raised there with many deep family roots in that part of Carroll County.

About the Author: Peter Pearre is a retired architect, who specializes in historic preservation. He lives in the McKinstry's Mills area where his family has been located since the 18th century. He believes that the touchstones of our history are fragile and can be easily lost if not recognized and preserved for their intrinsic value.

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