
Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

African-American Builders of Sevier County, Tennessee

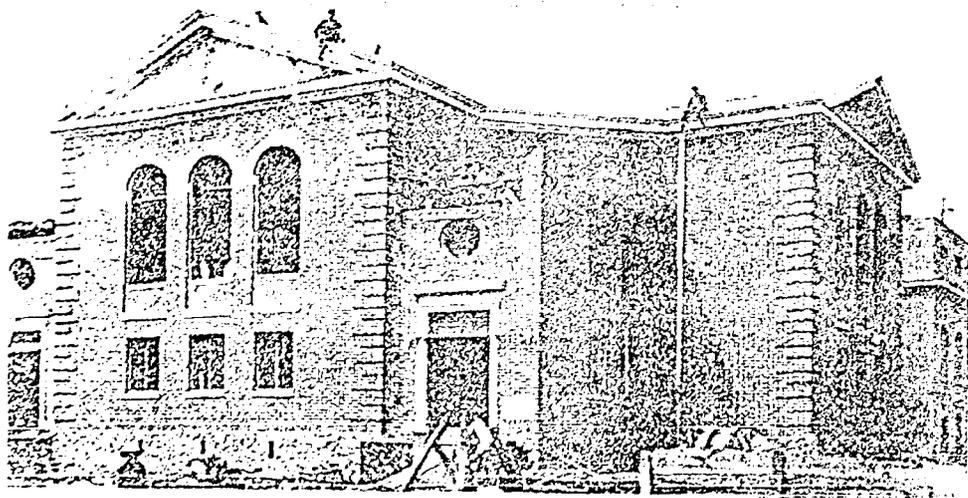
The architectural landscape of Tennessee's rural areas, small towns, and large cities is comprised of hundreds of historic buildings designed and built by African Americans. One rural county in East Tennessee has an extraordinary history of African-American builders. Established in 1794 along the North Carolina border, Sevier County has never featured a large black population; however, black builders constructed nearly every important late nineteenth and early twentieth century private and public building in the county. The county's African-American population never exceeded 700 people, but its tight-knit black community produced at least a dozen black brick masons, prolific all-black construction companies, and an exceptional black carpenter and furniture maker. Until recently, their amazing story had remained untold.

In the late 1860s, Isaac Dockery (1832-1910) built a brick kiln near Sevierville and established a brick masonry business. Dockery, who was born a free Black, moved to Sevierville to work as a merchant clerk for a white businessman, Henry M. Thomas, before the Civil

War. After the war, Dockery became instrumental in establishing the brick masonry tradition within the African-American culture of Sevier County. Often, he inscribed his initials, "I D.," and sometimes a date on his bricks as a trademark. Dockery taught his brick masonry craft to his sons, his sons-in-law, and his grandsons. Dockery constructed brick foundations and chimneys for many dwellings throughout the county, but his most notable buildings were located in Sevierville. Recognized as Sevier County landmarks, these buildings include the New Salem Baptist Church (1886), the original Murphy College building (1891), the Sevierville Masonic Lodge (1893), and the elaborate Sevier County Courthouse (1896). Dockery moved to Newport in adjoining Cocke County in 1898 and died at his son's home in Knoxville in 1910. He was buried in the public cemetery for African Americans near Sevierville.

Several members of Dockery's family also became well-known brick masons in Sevier County, including Paris Witt McMahan (1852-1929), a former slave who established the Riverside Steam Brick Company that operated near Sevierville until the 1930s; George and Stewart Burden (1890-1988), who established a highly-productive collection company in the early twentieth century; Bill Coleman, who moved to neighboring Jefferson County; and Joe Leak McMahan, Sr. (1881-1964). Fred McMahan (1895-1980), perhaps the most notable of Dockery's descendants, attended Knoxville College in the late 1910s and earned his master's degree in Architectural Engineering at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Around 1920, he returned to

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First Bnpfist Church of Sevierville (1926), built by J.F.&N. McMahan Construction Co. (under consfruction).
Photo Courtesy: In the Fork of the Little Pigeon River: A History of Sevierville's Business and Residential Districts.

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Sevierville and established the J. F & N McMahan Construction Company with his brothers, James and Newt McMahan.

One of the most prolific black builders and brick masons in the state, McMahan and his construction company were responsible for scores of Sevier County buildings, beginning with the Pleasant View Rosenwald School in 1921-22. The company built landmark buildings throughout the county and in adjoining counties between 1920 and 1960, including dwellings, churches, schools and college campus buildings, automobile showrooms and service stations, a WPA-funded post office, and commercial buildings. One of the most important buildings that Fred McMahan constructed may be the Dwight and Kate Wade House, which was finished in 1940 at Sevierville. This house was designed by Verna Cook Salomonsky, a leading female architect from New York City, and is a replica of an avant-garde exhibition dwelling at the 1939-40 New York World Fair's "Town of Tomorrow" exhibit. McMahan's own home still stands outside Sevierville.

Perhaps the most significant African-American builder in Sevier County's history was not a brick mason, but a highly-skilled carpenter, cabinetmaker, and house builder. Lewis C. Buckner (1856-1924), who was born a slave, had a white father and an African-American mother. During the years following the Civil War, Buckner most likely learned his trade in Sevierville as an apprentice to Christian H. Stump, a white furniture and cabinetmaker originally from Michigan. It was in Sevierville that he began his cabinetmaking business in the 1870s. By the late nineteenth century, the African-American artisan was building houses throughout Sevier County that featured robust Italianate and Queen Anne-style architectural elements. Using his unique interpretation of national architectural styles

acquired from patternbooks and published journals, Buckner's original work is extremely creative. Rarely were two pieces rendered exactly alike. The country artisan's well-crafted architectural detailing features vernacular renditions of Victorian patterns that include naturalistic elements such as a unique flower motif that became his signature trademark.

Nearly twenty examples of dwellings exhibiting Buckner's extraordinary craftsmanship still exist in the county. Buckner built these houses between 1880 and 1921, and he embellished them with the flamboyant architectural elements indicative of Victorian-era ebullience. Buckner usually built an entire dwelling and lived at the building site during its construction; however, he also traveled the countryside in order to construct decorative details, such as porches, staircases, and mantels for otherwise ordinary farmhouses. Buckner also crafted elaborate and ornate furniture, such as bedroom suites, cupboards, bureaus, washstands, cabinets, and even picture frames. Many of his works are prized family heirlooms. Buckner's own house, which he built in 1894 outside Sevierville, still stands. He was buried in an unmarked grave at the Union Hill Cemetery nearby.

The dozens of examples of well-crafted buildings and the extraordinary furniture, crafted by talented black brick masons and carpenters serve as historic reminders of the exceptional impact that African Americans had on the rural communities of East Tennessee, especially Sevier county.

-Robbie D. Jones
