

AFRICAN
AMERICAN
HISTORY
of
Spotsylvania,
Virginia



Teacher-activist John J. Wright championed education for Spotsylvania's black youth.

FROM THE START...



Blacks first arrived in isolated and sparsely populated Spotsylvania County along with white settlers in the early 1700's. Through the years before the Civil War, as slaves and occasionally as free men and women, they were an important force in area development. Occupations included labor as farm and plantation workers, as domestic servants, and as artisans, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, and fine needleworkers. They also worked in the iron industries, mining, construction, shipping on the Rappahannock River, and in their own businesses.

By the first half of the 19th century, Spotsylvania County's population reached about 11,000, over half of whom were black.

Alex Haley's award-winning novel, *Roots*, cast his African ancestor, Kunta Kinte, as a slave of a Spotsylvania family.

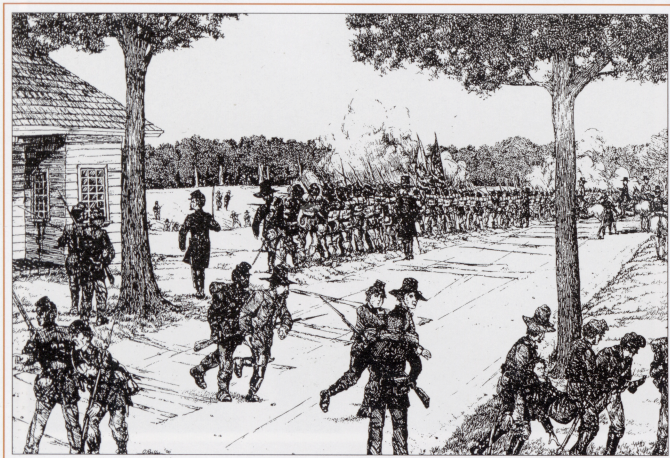


Various forms of agriculture occupied most early blacks here.

THROUGH THE CIVIL WAR



During the Civil War, blacks continued to labor in the war-torn area on farms and plantations. Others worked as body servants for



The 23rd Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry engages Confederate troops.

Confederate officers, as teamsters and as general laborers. Some left their owners to head North or worked for Union forces occupying the area, through the battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House.

Black Union soldiers battled white Confederate troops in Spotsylvania. On May 15, 1864, near the intersection of Catharpin Road and Plank Road (Route 3) in the northwestern part of the county, the 23rd Regiment, United States Colored Infantry (in the Army of the Potomac), fought the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

FREE SPIRITS...



After the Civil War, blacks remaining in the area began life as freedmen, most farming for themselves while also working for white landowners. Independent churches and schools were begun.

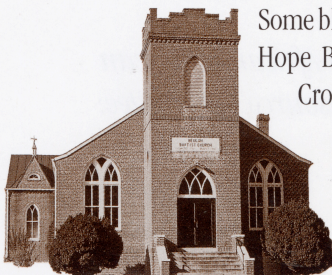
Independent black churches began informally with worship services held in private homes in winter and in brush arbors during milder weather.



Sylvannab Baptist Church began in 1867. Some of Sylvannab's early members originally attended Mt. Zion Baptist Church.

Many area congregations trace their roots to Mount Zion Baptist Church, which was organized in war-torn Spotsylvania County in 1862, a year before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Mount Zion Baptist Church, at 6030 Harrison Road, was organized during the Civil War.



A congregation of 30 founded Beulah Baptist in 1872.

Some black churches, such as Second New Hope Baptist Church at 3836 Summit Crossing Road, were outgrowths of existing congregations. The new church separated from Massaponax Baptist Church in 1869.

In 1872, Beulah Baptist Church, at 5216 Arcadia Road, was organized by former members

of Bethany Baptist Church. John J. Wright, a prominent Spotsylvania County educator, is buried in the church cemetery.

Other early Spotsylvania County churches include Branch Fork Baptist Church, Mount Olive Baptist Church, Piney Branch Baptist Church, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Mount Hope Baptist Church, Sylvannah Baptist Church, First New Hope Baptist Church, Little Mine Road Baptist Church, St. Paul's Baptist Church, and Zion Hill Baptist Church.

AND MINDS...



Educating African-Americans was unlawful in Virginia before the Civil War. The first legal school for blacks in Spotsylvania was begun in November, 1867, by Philip Pendleton, a former student in the Fredericksburg Freedmen's Bureau school. Other schools began in January, 1871, and continued to grow, often meeting in or near churches in various county districts.



Massaponax area children studied and played at School No. 4.

One early black school house can be seen near Piney Branch Church at 10727 Piney Branch Road, and next to Branch Fork Church at 6930 Stubbs Bridge Road.

Recognizing the need for education beyond the primary level, the Spotsylvania Sunday School Union, a coalition of black churches, was organized. At first, the group worked with the Fredericksburg Normal and Industrial Institute, a black high school for area students. In 1909, land was purchased near Snell, three miles south of Spotsylvania Court House on the old Richmond-Washington Highway. Here, Alfred Fairchild, a county carpenter, contractor and builder, began to construct a school building, and in 1913 the first classroom of the Snell Training School opened. Sadie Coates Combs (Johnson) was the teacher.



Teacher and librarian Sadie Coates Combs (Johnson) served as president of the Spotsylvania Sunday School Union and prepared black citizens for voter registration.



One of the many activists behind the movement for education for black youth was John J. Wright, a native Spotsylvania County resident and teacher. When the County's new consolidated black school was completed in 1951, it was named for Wright. When the school was integrated in 1968, it became the John J. Wright Intermediate School.

Others who helped to further education in the county as organizers or teachers were Littleberry Coleman, the Reverend Harry James Ellis, James Terrell, Jr., Rebecca Gordon Terrell, Bessie Fairchild Tyler and Virgil Williams.



The Snell Training School was the first black high school in Spotsylvania County.

John J. Wright and many other black Spotsylvania County residents believed that education, land ownership and voting were essential for progress. Many young Spotsylvanians have achieved successful careers as educators, lawyers, civil servants, scientists, businesspersons and military professionals, among achievements too numerous to mention.

Their accomplishments stand as a monument to the dedicated black people of Spotsylvania County, echoing the spirit of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the Negro National Anthem by James Weldon Johnson: "Stony, the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod...out from the gloomy past, till now we stand, at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast."



*"Lift ev'ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the
dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the
present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won."*

Lift Every Voice and Sing, the Negro National Anthem,
by James Weldon Johnson



For more information, contact:

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