

**Final Report
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**House of Bondage, Springboard into Freedom:
Clermont and Clarke County's Black Community**

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Clermont and Clarke County boast a fascinating and sometimes surprising African American history. That story should be presented to the public—and I believe it can be, even though Clermont itself evinces only a few physical reminders of its past as a home to black people during the era of slavery. That fact comes to seem less important when one engages the *entire span* of black history at and near Clermont and in Clarke County as a whole. Hence the title of this report, which recognizes the role of Clermont and Clarke not only as a “house of bondage,” but also as a “springboard into freedom” for blacks. The need to cover the era of slavery in any historical programming involving Clermont is obvious to everyone; therefore I will devote this paper mainly to the second topic—black freedom, as ideal and reality, in its various manifestations.

Despite Clarke’s relatively small size and population, the history of the county’s black residents and of their relations with whites is far too expansive for me to have acquired expertise; still, my own research, though centered on areas of Virginia other than Clarke, has proved useful in addressing this assignment. Moreover, close examination of an extraordinarily valuable secondary source on African American history in Clarke County—Maral Kalbian and Leila Boyer’s report of 2002 on significant events and sites in the history of the county’s black folk—yields many intriguing leads that, if pursued, could occupy several people for quite a long while and yield a plethora of insights for all eras of Clarke’s existence.

Clarke was a largely grain-producing county that abutted the mountains; thus it had much in common with nearby western Maryland, which was rapidly becoming a free-labor economy well before the Civil War. Yet Clarke’s enslaved population was remarkably large—in

part, some have suggested, because the area that later became Clarke County was settled largely by big planters from Virginia's Tidewater region who brought their slaves, the masters having received land grants from Robert "King" Carter, administrator of Lord Fairfax's Northern Neck Proprietary.¹

Some might say that Clarke County's status as an "outlier" in this and other respects lessens its value as a window onto the past. I believe that something like the opposite is true. The expression *to define*, after all, derives from a Latin root meaning *to trace the bounds or limits*. I have argued elsewhere that "the boundaries of life in the . . . South encompass the loopholes, the 'give,' . . . and the African American achievements within that system." The story of Clarke County, *both in its representativeness and in its peculiarities*, can help us define what has been "normal" in the history of the American South.²

Even as Clarke County depended heavily on enslaved labor, a significant free black population lived there in the decades before 1865. I would bring to bear here four points I made in my book, *Israel on the Appomattox*. First, free African Americans were a numerically significant element of Old Virginia's population; one in nine black Virginians was free during the generation just before the Civil War. Second, free blacks sometimes participated noticeably in the antebellum economy. Third, free blacks figured vividly, and lamentably, as a topic in defenses of slavery that white Virginians generated. Finally, I have also shown that the roles free blacks played, and the relationships they had with whites were far more varied, and sometimes more friendly, than has generally been assumed. Free blacks were not particularly numerous in Clarke.³ Even so, the lives of the free people of color who did live there belong integrally to the larger history of free Afro-Virginia. For these people, in great part because of their own efforts, Clarke County indeed became a springboard into freedom; this amply justifies further research into their place in the county and the incorporation of those findings into any program of public education that the Clermont Foundation undertakes.

The rubric of black freedom that I am emphasizing here encompasses also the activity in Clarke County of at least three ardent, articulate white emancipationists/ colonizationists, Episcopal Bishop William Meade and his sisters, Susan Meade and Ann Randolph Meade Page. The bishop played an important role in the American Colonization Society; Ann Page and her husband freed a number of their own slaves. Ann Page's personal correspondence apparently opens an important window onto the moral universe of a member of the planter class who believed in universal human freedom; one published article affords a handy introduction to the thought and actions of Ann Randolph Meade Page.⁴

American history's most important springboard into freedom, of course, was the Civil War. Some black residents of Clarke County managed to join the Union armed forces, and one enslaved man, Thomas Laws, apparently carried messages to and from Union General Philip Sheridan during the latter's campaign in the Valley. Laws's exploits are described in a contemporaneous book that Kalbian and Boyer describe as "unique and indispensable": *The James E. Taylor Sketchbook, With Sheridan Up the Shenandoah Valley in 1864*.⁵ Laws's activities and those of others who struggled for freedom should be researched further and made known to the public. So should the experience of black people who lived more conventional lives during this tumultuous period (if there was any such thing as "conventional" human experience in wartime Virginia).

The postwar story of black freedom in Clarke County includes a development that is both interesting and very usefully documented by Kalbian and Boyer: the growth of numerous black residential enclaves. Clermont figures significantly in this history, first of all through the person of Josephine Williams, who, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests, had been an enslaved worker at Clermont before Emancipation. She purchased lots #1 and 2 in the enclave that came to be known as Josephine City near Berryville, and her given name likely was applied to the little black village; Williams maintained ties with the McCormick family after Emancipation, as did certain other residents of Josephine City until recent times.⁶ Just as significant,

Josephine City was founded on land sold in 1870 by the McCormick family of Clermont. The black community of Pigeon Hill likewise took shape largely on land purchased from the McCormicks.⁷ These links between the history of Clermont and that of the county's African American community are important by any standard, and particularly so as a potential focal point in Clermont's future efforts to disseminate historical knowledge to the public.

How to tell the story—and indeed, what the story actually is—are matters that require both additional research and further discussion, both among us specialists and with other interested people. A vivid example of this need arose at the Forum in June 2011. The placing at the entrance to Josephine City of a Virginia historical marker chronicling the neighborhood's past constitutes an important step forward. That marker states that “Ellen McCormick established this African-American community” in order “to improve the lives of former slaves,” and that the enclave became an “oasis” of black society and culture in Clarke County. I am aware of no one who would quarrel with the second statement—about Josephine City's importance in local black life over the years. Discussion at the Forum revealed, however, that there is disagreement about Ellen McCormick's role. It may be true that she wanted to help local freedpeople—I am told that oral tradition in at least in some quarters of the black community holds this to have been the case. Further research, if the appropriate sources exist, is desirable. Significantly, Kalbian and Boyer depict the McCormick land sales around this time as “liquidations” brought on by the owners' economic straits⁸—which, if true, does not prove that Mrs. McCormick had no concern for black well-being but does suggest that her motives were not entirely philanthropic.

In any event, it seems to me erroneous to say that Ellen McCormick, whatever her attitude toward freedpeople may have been, “established” Josephine City. The 31 acres were auctioned off in 1870 and settled by black purchasers, who almost surely built their own houses, practiced their occupations, and thus “established” Josephine City themselves. The latter nineteenth century was a period in which black Americans in both North and South were

building institutions and neighborhoods; thus, yet again, a train of events in Clarke County can illuminate a trend that was important on the national level.

Most intriguing to me, and worthy of energetic further research, is a report in the *Clarke Courier* in the fall of 1870, shortly after the sale of the tract that became Josephine City. The paper reported that the 31 acres had been auctioned off to “Robert Hall (colored) . . . [who] represents some thirty-three colored families, as he informs us. They intend to run a street the whole length of the lot and build.” This account suggests a high degree of initiative, organization, and planning on the part of a large group of blacks. In particular, one would like to know as much as possible about Robert Hall and about the deliberations among future residents of Josephine that preceded this purchase of land—though documentation that would illuminate these topics may well be difficult to come by.⁹

Hundreds of black folk in Clarke ultimately made a different decision than those who settled Josephine City and the other African American enclaves in the county. No less striking than the prevalence of slave labor in this Valley community before the Civil War is the size of the black migration *out of* Clarke in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which surpassed in magnitude the exodus from most other southern localities. In much of the South, of course, black outmigration reduced the *percentage* of the whole population that was African American; in Clarke County, black departures outstripped natural population increase—that is, the *absolute number* of black residents declined markedly (2,231 blacks in the county in 1900, but only 1,743 in 1920). In what had been a majority-black county in 1840 (and as such unique in Virginia west of the Blue Ridge, I believe), only 7 percent of Clarke’s population today is black.¹⁰ This remarkable diaspora—as well as the abiding North-South connections it must have created in many black extended families—needs to be researched through interviews and by other means, and the story then could be told as part of Clermont’s mission. Many black citizens, I suspect, have family narratives to relate. Here again, a local phenomenon can throw light on national developments.

Clermont and Clarke County possess assets that can go far toward making this African American history known to local citizens and to visitors. The county has an active and sophisticated local historical society that, if my own recent experience is any guide, now takes seriously the history of black residents and of race relations. Mary Morris, a skilled, public-spirited archivist, lends her talents both to Clermont and to the Historical Society and has been endlessly helpful to all of us. A glance at the footnotes in my report will instantly make clear something I stated early in this document: the report on Clarke's black communities produced by Maral Kalbian and Leila Boyer in 2002 offers a veritable road map for further research. The principal and most original contribution of that document is the plethora of information it offers about black residential enclaves in Clarke County, including both substantial neighborhoods such as Josephine City and tiny nooks. As a devotee of such enclaves, I find this history riveting. Moreover, Kalbian and Boyer suggest many promising topics of inquiry outside the area of their own expertise.

The greatest asset for presenting local black history to the public is and should continue to be the Josephine School Community Museum/Clarke County African American Museum and Cultural Center. This institution is nothing less than a gem; that it is the product of local initiative and talent strikes me as remarkable. The museum seems to me to capture the spirit of Clarke's black community while adhering to high academic standards (though I would be happy later, if asked, to suggest certain minor alterations and additions to the museum's content). The building and the displays it houses are aesthetically pleasing. This small institution has the further great advantage of being located in a historic building within Josephine City itself, and at the same time only a short distance from Clermont.

I recommend that any program of the Clermont Foundation which seeks to promote public enlightenment include an active partnership with the museum to present the *entire sweep* of Clarke County's black history—not only the story of slavery, important as that is, but rather the entire range of black experience and of black-white relations from Anglo-American

settlement to the present. This should be a true partnership, with the museum retaining full autonomy and having an equal voice in whatever joint programs may be created. The participation of black residents of Clarke in every stage of planning this enterprise is of the highest importance; intellectual and ethical integrity requires their participation, and the public credibility of any program chronicling the African American component of Clarke's and Clermont's history will depend on such involvement. The Clermont Foundation and the Museum are both to be commended for their eagerness to turn to academic and professional experts for guidance; that should certainly continue.

I believe two particular subjects that pervade the history of race in Clarke County and throughout the South—black self-help and black-white relations—should receive special emphasis in programming undertaken by the Foundation and by the Museum. The first of these, black self-help, is perhaps the central motif of African American history, in part because few outside persons and institutions were aiding blacks through most of our history. I have already mentioned the founding of Josephine City as an example of black self-help.

Another is the advent of black churches, the separation of most Protestants across the South into white and black congregations having occurred about 1867. It is remarkable how many African American communities, even very small ones, established their own churches, more than a few of which still stand today. These buildings were centers not only of religious activity, but also of educational, political, and social endeavors—community centers in the fullest sense. One- and two-room schools, sometimes housed in church buildings, likewise became core institutions of black life; a few, prominently including the Josephine School, still stand. An additional salient component of self-help was black-owned small business. Older residents of Josephine City recall a time when that little community boasted a grocery store, a gas station, a boarding house, a restaurant, and a ladies' hat shop. Between the 1890s and the 1920s, two newspapers were produced by black residents of Berryville.¹¹

The subject of race *relations*, including attitudes of people of one race toward persons of the other—is trickier to convey to modern audiences than black self-help is, yet it is extremely important. Clarke County, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the South as a whole have been societies in which people lived together and interacted daily across the color line even as whites ruled. That system produced all kinds of subtleties and undercurrents, and—let’s face it—conveying subtle points is not the strong suit of most interpretations of history for the public at large. The specific challenge in depicting what I’m calling race relations is to reveal both the oppression that pervaded society and the everyday human interactions, which, though premised on racial inequality, were by no means always hostile and in some respects appear to have been (and in some senses actually were) what one could reasonably call friendly. The danger of succumbing either to twenty-first-century “political correctness” on the one hand, or of appearing to whitewash the past on the other, is considerable.

A prime example of the sort of nuance or ambiguity I am speaking of appears in an article in the *Clarke Courier* in 1870 which conveyed news of the intent of black citizens to found what soon became Josephine City. Some Americans today would be surprised to learn that whites of that time—and in the antebellum period, too, as my own published work on free blacks shows—openly recognized the existence of “respectable” blacks. Yet those very same whites tended to assume that this respectability was the exception rather than the norm among blacks, and to worry that the character even of “respectable colored” families might degenerate over time. In the case of what would soon become Josephine City, the *Courier* raised the “question [of] how such a settlement will affect the interest of this community [Berryville], and especially of those [whites] living in that part of the village”:

The few whom we have heard mentioned as part of the purchasers [of the land that became Josephine City], are among the most respectable colored men of the county, and we believe that during their lives, at least, they will be no injury to the community, but rather an advantage, in that they will be a valuable addition to the labor supply. But an introduction of so large a number [of blacks] into so small a space, all of whom cannot be among the best, is a natural cause of some uneasiness. We trust that these people as they settle here may feel the responsibility that rests upon them to sustain a

good character. The white people may do a good deal by considerate kindness to give them an impulse in the right direction.¹²

It would be difficult to encapsulate better within a single paragraph the complexities of white attitudes that we rightly regard as oppressive, yet which we sometimes mistakenly think of as lacking in nuance. One could identify countless documents from various eras that resemble the one just quoted in conveying the intricacies that have characterized a system that we tend to regard as simple and static. I am not yet ready to concede that a museum display, or literature made available to the public or even to school pupils, cannot encompass these complexities.

Other examples abound (and here again, as so often in this paper, I cite leads collected by Kalbian and Boyer). One of the early black congregations in Berryville gave the *Clarke Courier* to understand in 1879 that the church's members would "be glad to see their white friends" at a fund-raising entertainment.¹³ This sort of cross-racial invitation, in both directions, seems been issued with some frequency by churches and other institutions in Virginia from the latter nineteenth century well into the twentieth. For instance, the Farmville Baptist Church, though by 1936 an all-white congregation, took black neighbors into account when the church mounted an exhibition to mark its centenary in that year. "A special invitation is extended the colored people, who are interested, to visit the exhibit Sunday afternoon from 4:30 to 5:30," the local newspaper announced.¹⁴

Such overtures offer an entrée into the racial etiquette of post-Emancipation Virginia, though they may raise as many questions as they answer. The black Christians in Berryville address an invitation to their white "friends" (or at least the white newspaper understands them to have used that term). The whites in Farmville do not apply the word *friends* to the black neighbors they address, though experience leads me to believe that one could find invitations from white congregations to black folk that do use that language. The whites of Farmville did couch their invitation to their black neighbors as "a *special* invitation," as if otherwise someone might think the overture perfunctory.

On the “other other” hand, it is noteworthy that the appeal issued to the black citizens of Farmville is “special” not only because the whites who tender it define it as such in a seemingly positive sense, but also because the chit can be redeemed only during a single hour; in other words, blacks are invited, but on a segregated basis. The invitation from Berryville’s black Christians does not set aside a special hour for whites to attend the festivities. Indeed, anyone of late middle age or older who grew up in the South will remember that whites could attend black functions (for example, church services) at will, while black attendance at white churches (except perhaps in the gallery) was generally not welcomed. My purpose here is not to adumbrate this etiquette in all its subtleties, but rather to illustrate its endless complexity.

The white newspaper in Berryville in 1883 mentioned, without apparent disdain, the existence of a local black paper, and it recorded the death in 1927 of the editor of another such journal. A local man, Graham Blandy, who I infer was white, contributed most of the funds needed to construct schools for black pupils at White Post and Millwood in Clarke County in 1909. He conditioned his offer for White Post on the county school board’s agreement to hire a teacher of “manual training such as bricklaying, carpentry etc.”¹⁵ These donations are remarkable both on their face (Blandy could have found many uses for his money other than to provide for black schooling) and because of the questions they raise. Did the donor believe that “manual training” was the most appropriate form of instruction for blacks? Or did he rate humanities and sciences more highly, therefore sloughing off to the county the responsibility for funding manual training? Or yet again—a possibility compatible with either or both of the first two—did the benefactor conclude that he could enlist some county support for the black school at White Post, but only if he played on the prevailing white prejudice that education for blacks was justified insofar as it helped create a useful labor force?

The white press in Clarke, as in other counties in Virginia, not infrequently contains references to black individuals over the decades whom they designate as “well-thought-of,” “respectable,” and the like.¹⁶ These references cut two ways: they are meaningful recognitions

of the accomplishments of black people and, at the same time, assertions of white people's right to *define* respectability and to judge the character of black individuals.

Yet one also finds instances in which whites in Clarke County and elsewhere in Virginia recognize their black neighbors' right to define themselves. In 1869—when bitter memories of the Civil War were fresh—the *Clarke Courier* wrote of a school for blacks founded by John Holmes, “a colored veteran who had lost a leg in the war”; presumably Holmes had served in the Union army, yet the white writer's tone appears to have been neutral or even respectful. And during the same period, black citizens of Clarke did not hesitate to found the John Brown Temperance Society. That nomenclature—assuming the group named itself after the abolitionist leader of the famous raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859—would seem to evince both a habit on the part of blacks of choosing their own heroes and a tacit assumption on the part of whites that Afro-Virginians could and would exercise that prerogative.¹⁷ These undercurrents were and are part and parcel of the system of white dominance in the South; we need to do all we can to recognize both the oppression and its limits, and to chronicle with sensitivity both black resilience and African Americans' necessary accommodations to the system.

Such practical ideas as I have for disseminating the history of black (and white) life at Clermont and in Clarke County come mainly from keeping my ears open during the recent Forum and in conversations with local people. Inclusion of African American neighborhoods in such programs will mandate methods of presentation that require little staffing, as public demand is likely to be episodic and unpredictable. One possibility would be to prepare literature or even a DVD to facilitate self-guided driving tours. A related idea arose in correspondence with Ms. Dee-Dee Liggins, a resident of Josephine City and a stalwart promoter of black history awareness in Clarke County: she suggested that buildings and other sites in Josephine be identified by signboards. One scenario she and I have discussed would encompass signs containing informational text not unlike Virginia state historical markers. A less expensive alternative might be to erect signs with numbers keyed to a printed guide that could be made

available at little cost both through suitable venues in Berryville and in a self-serve box at the entrance to Josephine City.

A third idea would involve sponsorship of classroom visits to Clarke County schools by people trained to present facets of local history to pupils of various ages. Finally, my wife asked me whether relatively brief summer camp-style experiences, especially for city-dwelling young people, might be provided on the grounds of Clermont; if that proves feasible and desirable, the camp stays should involve visits to Josephine City and its museum and perhaps to other black enclaves identified by Kalbian and Boyer.

I realize that the multiplicity of intriguing ideas on any given topic tends to exceed one's ability to carry them out. Nevertheless, I hope that these reflections and suggestions will lead toward new ways of nurturing what I see as a growing interest in the history of black folk and of race relations in Clarke County—a place that is at once so different, so special, and at the same time so redolent of themes that go to the heart of human experience in our state and region.

¹See Warren R. Hofstra, *A Separate Place: The Formation of Clarke County, Virginia* (1999).

²Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (2004), pp. 15-16.

³Maral S. Kalbian and Leila O. W. Boyer, *Final Report: African-American Historic Context: Clarke County, VA* (CLG Project #66014, 2002), pp. 21 and 5.

⁴On the Pages, see Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, pp. 10-11, 88, and 104-05; the article I mention is Arthur Dicken Thomas Jr., "O That Slavery's Curse Might Cease': Ann Randolph Meade Page: The Struggle of a Plantation Mistress to Become an Emancipator," *Virginia Seminary Journal* 45 (December 1993), 56-61.

⁵Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, pp. 14-15 and 104. The *Taylor Sketchbook* was published in Cleveland in 1989.

⁶For a compact discussion of evidence on this subject, see Kyle Ainsworth, "Restoration, Resistance, and Reconstruction: Liberty at Last in Clarke County, Virginia, 1865-1879" (Master's thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 2010), pp. 119-120.

⁷Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, pp. 51-57 (Josephine City) and 69-71 (Pigeon Hill).

⁸Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 70.

⁹*Clarke Courier*, October 12, 1870, quoted at length in Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 53. Ainsworth's discussion of this newspaper article does not mention the ostensible role of Robert Hall in the founding of Josephine City ("Restoration, Resistance, and Reconstruction," pp. 121-22).

¹⁰Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 12.

¹¹Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 55.

¹²*Clarke Courier*, October 12, 1870, quoted in Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 53. See also the brief discussion of this article in Ainsworth, "Restoration, Resistance, and Reconstruction," pp. 121-122.

¹³*Clarke Courier*, December 11, 1879, quoted in Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 17.

¹⁴[Farmville] Herald, [Nov.(?)] 27, 1936, front page, clipping in Mrs. Judson Dowdy and Historic Committee, Scrapbook, 1961 (not labeled), in Records of Farmville Baptist Church, in pastor's office, courtesy of the same.

¹⁵Both these examples come from Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, pp. 55 (black newspapers) and 86 (Graham Bundy).

¹⁶See for example Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, p. 43.

¹⁷Kalbian and Boyer, *Final Report*, pp. 65 ("colored veteran") and 18 (John Brown Society, citing Freedmen's Bureau records),