

## Discovering the Path to Freedom of Alfred McKnight and Ada Hart McKnight

By George Miller

I was pleased to find my son-in-law's great, great grandfather, Alfred, in the 1910 census living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife, Ada, and four of his five known children. His age, occupation, and location as well as that of his wife and children matched what I had found in the 1920 and 1930 census records as well as what I learned from family history. What did surprise me, however, is that Alfred, an African-American, was born in Ohio in 1856. **How could this be? What were the circumstances that brought him to Ohio before the Civil War?**

The 1900 census showed Alfred and his wife, Ada, with their four oldest children living in Union Township, Clinton County, Ohio. The date of birth for Alfred given in the census was October 1856; Ada was born in 1870, also in Ohio. I was able to locate birth records for 4 of the 5 children of Alfred and Ada which confirmed that they were all born in Clinton County. Alfred's parents were said to have been born in Tennessee.

The 1860 census listed only one Alfred McKnight born around 1855 in Ohio and that was in Vernon Township, Clinton County, Ohio. Alfred was listed in the household of William and Rachel McKnight. The presumed parents, William and Rachel, were listed as being born in Virginia and North Carolina, respectively and they were 51 and 40 years old at the time. The 1860 census also stated that all of the 11 younger McKnight's listed in the household were also born in Ohio. The oldest Thadeus was born in 1837 and the youngest, John, was 6 months old.

An 1870 census record found a 15-year-old Alfred living with William (63 years old) and two siblings, a young girl, Francine, found in the 1860 census and a brother, Ansalem, 9 years old. Rachel was not listed. **Could this be the correct Alfred and how did William and Rachel get to Ohio?**

An important clue emerged when I found Alfred's Ohio death certificate. The informant was a granddaughter of his, who said Alfred's father was a "William" born in Tennessee. She didn't know the name of his wife.

**A cemetery listing for an "Old Slave Cemetery" posted originally to Rootsweb but now on Ancestry provided a further clue.** The listing included a William McKnight with no dates but his wife Rachel's headstone shows she was born in 1818 and died in 1869. This explains her absence from the 1870 census and the likelihood that she was unknown to her granddaughter when Alfred died in 1938. Their oldest son, Thadeus (died 1867) and daughter Francine (died 1871) were buried there as well.

Another clue came with the discovery of a second Ohio death certificate for the youngest child of Alfred and Ada Hart McKnight. Ellen Louise was born in 1908 and died in May 1910, just 40 days after the 1910 census was enumerated in Columbus, Ohio. Here, the informant, Ada, said that Alfred was born in Harveysburg, Ohio and that she was born in Wilmington, Clinton County. Harveysburg is in Wayne Township, Warren County adjacent to Vernon Township,

Clinton County. The “Old Slave Cemetery” above was actually a cemetery from the AME Church in Harveysburg, Ohio. **Why did Harveysburg, Ohio have an “Old Slave Cemetery?”**

An online search of Harveysburg provided some answers. Harveysburg was founded in 1830 by William and Elizabeth Harvey, who were Quakers who moved from the South to Ohio where they freed their slaves. William Harvey sold lots in Harveysburg to other Quakers who had a similar story. In the 1850 census of Wayne Township, Warren County there were 3,859 white residents and 222 Black or mulatto residents. In neighboring Vernon Township, Clinton County, there were 1,468 white residents and 31 Black or mulatto residents. In 1834, Elizabeth Harvey established a school in Harveysburg for free Black children. It was the first such school in Ohio and possibly in the country.

**So is it possible that the Harveys or an another Quaker family brought William and Rachel to Ohio as enslaved people and then freed them? Or did they come on their own?** Harveysburg was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. It was just a short distance north of Cincinnati and the Ohio River and it had a population of both free Blacks and Quakers who provided sanctuary to runaways.

An obituary in the Wilmington, Ohio newspaper for Alfred McKnight placed there by his brother, Ansalem, in 1938 provided further evidence that Alfred was born in Harveysburg in 1856 but did not answer the question of how his parents got to Ohio.

**Finally an answer came from an obituary for one of Alfred’s brothers, William Thomas McKnight**, who was a Superintendent of a Sunday School in the AME Church of Wilmington. While I haven’t found a newspaper obituary for William Thomas, the Clinton County Genealogical Society provided an obituary from the AME Church Bulletin in 1923. It states that William Thomas’ parents, **William and Rachel, had come to Ohio in 1840 with their enslavers and were freed in Ohio.** It listed his surviving brothers as Alfred of Columbus and Martin and Ansalem of Wilmington.

*P.S. The Clinton County Genealogical Society provided one additional piece of data which explained why there were no dates for the father William in the “Old Slave Cemetery” in Harveysburg. He is listed as the father of William Thomas and buried in the Sugar Grove Cemetery in Clinton County where Thomas and his wife and children are buried. It says that William was born in 1808 and died in Clinton County on March 11, 1889. While the son, William Thomas and his wife and children are listed on “Find A Grave” in this cemetery, William is not.*