

Lexington Black Confederate Sites / Tour



No topic is more hotly contended over than the role of slavery and Black Confederates during the Civil War. There is no doubt that many slaves had no choice about serving during the contest, but there are plenty of examples of others who voluntarily served or at least looked at their service fondly post-war. Lexington was located in the more mountainous region of Virginia and was therefore not heavily populated with slaves. In fact, the region was moderately abolitionist, however, just like the rest of Virginia, when Lincoln called for an armed invasion of the South, the area voted to secede from the Union. When the local troops marched off to war, a number of free and enslaved blacks accompanied them. Among those were the likes of Jim Lewis, James Humbles, Levi Miller, and Jefferson Shields. You will find their graves at Lexington's historically Black Cemetery, Evergreen with the exception of those buried prior to the 1880's in the Old Colored Cemetery which was obliterated by a housing development in 1945.

Charles H. Wesley, a distinguished black historian who lived from 1891 to 1987, wrote "The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army," in the Journal of Negro History (1919). He says, "Seventy free blacks enlisted in the Confederate Army in Lynchburg, Virginia. Sixteen companies (1,600) of free men of color marched through Augusta, Georgia on their way to fight in Virginia." according to (Dr. Walter E. Williams)



Site 1) Jefferson Shields House

Jefferson Shields was a local brick and stone mason following the Civil War. He was a co-founder and Trustee of the First Baptist Church (African) of Lexington. He did serve in Company H , Rockbridge Rifles, 27th Virginia Infantry Stonewall Brigade, as a personal body servant of Colonel James Kerr Edmonson of Lexington, Virginia. Edmonson was Commander of the 27th Virginia. Shields purchased a lot on what is now [109] Davidson Street in Lexington and built a handsome brick home that still stands.



Shields lived here with his wife, the former Mary McNutt, until his death in 1918 at the age of eighty-nine. Today, he and his wife rest in Evergreen Cemetery in Lexington." "He became a favorite of Confederate veterans' groups, attending many reunions and special events after the war. While in attendance at a reunion of the survivors of the Stonewall Brigade in Staunton, "Uncle" Jeff was voted in as a member of the brigade and authorized to wear one of the brigade's badges. According to Boley, Shields was proud to attend these meetings and display the badges and ribbons the old Confederates gave him; "Uncle Jeff attended all Confederate reunions in many parts of the South, where he was always the recipient of much attention, about which he talked freely. . . . After each

reunion he had a fresh supply of medals and when he would proudly open his coat to display them he looked like the Kaiser on parade." [from *Stonewall Jackson ~ The Black Man's Friend* by Richard G. Williams, Jr.] Shields had also attended Stonewall Jackson's Colored Sunday School and was said to be indebted to Jackson for his early religious training.



Site 2) Stonewall Jackson Monument

So your asking how can the Stonewall Jackson Monument be associated with the local Black Community? Well as a matter of fact, the members of Jackson's well known Colored Sunday School raised the first donations to pay for the construction of the monument. In fact during the war the locals removed a Confederate flag from Jackson's original grave for fear it would be desecrated by occupying Union forces. A young Black man who had been a member of Jackson's Colored Sunday School procured a small replacement flag and placed it along with a stanza of one of Jackson's favorite hymns on the grave.



Site 3) Lexington Presbyterian Church

General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson was instrumental in leading a Colored Sunday School program from the meeting room originally adjoining the main church building. It has since been replaced by part of the church's annex. Members of the Black community could come here to be instructed not just in hearing about the Gospel, but how to read it as well. Teaching slaves to read was against state law at the time and Jackson was once threatened with prosecution for doing so. The Sunday School continued beyond the war and one student grew up to become the Rev. Lyburn Downing, Jr. was taught by Jackson's brother-in-law J.T.L. Preston there. Jackson and others efforts gave the local Black

Community a leg up for the post-war era. Jefferson Shields had also been a student of Jackson at this school.



Site 4) First Baptist Church

The First Baptist Church (originally known as the Lexington African Baptist Church) was organized in 1867. The current building was built in 1894-1896. Among the founding members was Jefferson Shields who served in the 27th Virginia Infantry. Shields was also a Trustee for the church. An earlier wooden structure stood adjacent to the existing building on the north side. As a stone and brick mason, Jefferson Shields no doubt laid much of the exterior masonry of the building during its construction before his death 22 years after its completion.



Site 5) Original African-American Cemetery

The original cemetery in Lexington was located at the intersection of Washington and Lewis Streets. This is where Jim Lewis who served as Stonewall Jackson's body servant during the Civil War was buried. Jim who is featured prominently in the movie "Gods and Generals." Burials at this site ended about 1880 and the site was developed by the town as a subdivision in 1946. It remains doubtful that much, if any, remains were actually

transferred to the newer Evergreen Cemetery. The only known life image of Jim Lewis was as part of a sketch by Adelbert Volck depicting Lewis seated behind Jackson during a prayer service in camp. A direct reference to where Jim Lewis was buried appeared in the Lexington Gazette and Citizen in December 1875 by a former Confederate officer who was calling upon his comrades to mark the grave of Lewis. The officer wrote: "Let us not forget that James Lewis, General Jackson's faithful body servant, lies in a neglected grave in the Colored Cemetery at Lexington without a stone..."



Site 6) Evergreen Cemetery

Evergreen Cemetery became the primary burial ground for Lexington's Black community in the 1880s. The cemetery has several Black Confederates buried within its borders including Jefferson Shields, James Humbles, Levi Miller, William Washington, and others.



The most notable Black Confederate headstone in Evergreen Cemetery belongs to Levi Miller. Miller who was a Rockbridge County native accompanied his master John J. McBride of the 5th Texas Infantry Co. C into battle and nursed him back to health after he was nearly killed in the battle of the Wilderness. He so impressed his white comrades that he was voted as a full soldier in the unit for the remainder of the war and subsequently received a pension for that service. He fought in battles in the states of Virginia, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and

Georgia. He was noted for his bravery in repelling attacks during the Spotsylvania campaign. Captain J.E. Anderson said that "Levi Miller stood by my side and no man ever fought and better than he did." Levi Miller spent much of his post-war life in Frederick County and worked as a water dipper for tourists at Capon Springs. He purchased an orchard at Opequon which garnered him a handsome profit. The Winchester Evening Star published the following tribute: "Levi Miller, one of the few colored men regularly enlisted in the Confederate army during the civil war... was affectionately known among the white as well as colored people of this section as the grand old man of his race. He always had a deep love for everything southern, and although born a slave, it was his loyalty to his state that led him to enter the southern army and fight through the four entire years of the war." Miller's coffin was reverently draped with the Stars and Bars and taken to Lexington for a hero's burial in its black cemetery."



Other stones found in Evergreen Cemetery will include Jefferson Shield's marker and James Humbles. Humbles was a Free Black soldier who served as a bugler in Co. C. of the 1st Virginia Cavalry. He was mustered in on 4/18/1861. He has served as the mechanic for the Lexington public water works. His records also show that he was later armed and saw active combat. Humbles died on 9/28/1906. William Washington, body servant of Gen. Edwing G. Lee and later Lexington entrepreneur is buried here.

SITES (BLACK CONFEDERATE-)

- 1) JEFFERSON SHIELDS HOUSE
- 2) JACKSON MONUMENT
- 3) LEXINGTON PRESBYTERIAN
- 4) FIRST BAPTIST
- 5) OLD AFRICAN-AMERICAN CEMETERY
- 6) EVERGREEN CEMETERY

