

Overview of Black History in Muscatine and Muscatine County

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Muscatine County, Iowa, was initially settled in the 1830s, and Muscatine (then Bloomington) developed as a Mississippi River community and the county seat through the 1840s. The population of Muscatine climbed to 2,540 by 1850, third in Iowa behind fellow Mississippi River communities of Dubuque and Burlington. African Americans were among the early settlers in Muscatine, with a core group arriving in town by the early 1840s that included Benjamin Matthews, Ellen (Matthews) Anderson, Thomas C. Motts, Jane (Motts) Watkins, Alexander Clark, and George Manly. The original core group of black residents grew with additional migration from other states, including Joseph Cook, James Ruff, William and Margaret Anderson, and Jacob and Deborah Pritchard. By the late 1840s, Thomas C. Motts and Alexander Clark operated barber shops and invested in real estate, and Jacob Pritchard ran a restaurant. While these early black residents composed a small percentage of the overall residents in Muscatine, they interacted with the early white residents, formed business relationships and friendships, and were included as a part of the community. A lot on E. 7th St was purchased for the Methodist Episcopal African Educational and Church Society on June 21, 1848. The lot was then transferred to the trustees of the newly organized African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church on October 10, 1849, which included Benjamin Mathews, Thomas C. Motts, Isaac Manning, Edmund Mathews, and Jacob Pritchard. In 1850, Muscatine led the state with 68 African American residents (black or mulatto), composing 2.7% of their population of 2,520 residents. The number was more than double the African American population of any other Iowa community. Overall, there were 333 African American (black or mulatto) residents in Iowa in 1850, with Muscatine accounting for roughly 20%. Only one black resident is recorded as living outside of Muscatine (Bloomington) in Muscatine County in the 1850 census.

The African American population of Iowa and Muscatine County increased in the 1850s. The 1854 Iowa census tabulated 326,014 residents in Iowa, including 59,984 voters and 480 African Americans. Not all known black residents are recorded in the 1854 census, so the actual numbers of residents would be higher than the 70 tabulated in Muscatine County in the census. Nearly all of these residents lived in Muscatine. The household of Dennis Greenway in Wapsinonoc Township (the portion that would become Goshen Township in 1857) was the only household with any black residents recorded in Muscatine County outside of Muscatine. A large number of African American residents in Muscatine in the 1850s belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, which served as both the religious and social center for this community in Muscatine. The 1856 city directory notes that the church was constructed in 1850 and that the trustees were Alexander Clark, Daniel Anderson, Charles Jackson, and Benjamin Matthews. Members of the church included early black residents of Muscatine who were born free, as well as former slaves who had been emancipated, purchased their freedom, or escaped from slavery. The first "colored convention" in the state of Iowa was held in the church in Muscatine on January 5, 1857. By 1860, the population of Muscatine increased to 5,374 residents, the fifth largest city in Iowa behind fellow river towns of Dubuque, Davenport, Burlington, and Keokuk. The African American population of Iowa grew significantly in the late 1850s, increasing to 1,069 residents in the 1860 federal census. While Muscatine's African American population grew to 81 by 1860, Keokuk's population boomed to 179 in this period. Muscatine remained the city with the second highest number in the state, with African American residents composing 1.5% of their population compared to 2.2% in Keokuk. The increase in African American population in Muscatine was largely due to an increase in family size and the number of children. A total of 24 children between the ages of 5 and 17 attended school, as

opposed to seven who did not. Typical value of real estate held among the 13 African American property owners ranged from \$300 to \$600, though Alexander Clark (\$10,000), Thomas Motts (\$5,000), George Manly (\$1,000), Benjamin Mathews (\$1,000), and Jane (Motts) Watkins (\$1,000) held more valuable property.

The number of African American residents moving to Iowa increased in the 1860s as slaves were freed and sought new homes. The overall black population of Iowa grew to 5,762 residents in 1870 with the influx of residents during and after the Civil War. Overall, Muscatine County had 163 African American residents (black or mulatto per census records), with 56 found outside of the city of Muscatine. A number of these new Iowa residents settled in other towns in Iowa, such as Keokuk, Mount Pleasant, Des Moines, and Council Bluffs. The African American population of Muscatine grew from 81 in 1860 to 107 in 1870, ranking it ninth among Iowa towns with Keokuk at 1,015 residents (first and nearly 8% of their population) and Mount Pleasant with 249 residents (second and nearly 6% of their population). The 1870 census lists 29 households in Muscatine with African American heads of the household. Laborers, teamsters, servants, cooks, and barbers remained common occupations, though Jane D. Watkins was listed in the intelligence business. A total of 16 of the 21 children between the ages of 5 and 15 attended school. Alexander Clark became known for his statewide and national advocacy for civil rights for black residents in this period, including filing a suit in court on behalf of his daughter Susan V. Clark to attend the regular school in Muscatine. With a ruling from the Iowa Supreme Court in his favor, schools in Muscatine and throughout Iowa were formally integrated in 1868. Clark was also instrumental in the fight for amendments to eliminate "white" from several clauses in the Iowa constitution, including the right for suffrage. Thus, black male residents of Iowa became eligible to vote by the end of 1868, prior to the ratification of the 15th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870.

In the 1870s, the African American community in Muscatine consisted of the original core group of residents that had lived in town since the 1840s and 1850s, and the group of new arrivals from the 1860s. The African M.E. Church provided an organizational structure for these new arrivals to assimilate into the community, as well as to become acquainted with the other residents. The core group included names such as Benjamin Matthews, Alexander Clark, Ellen Anderson, George Manley, and Jane D. (Motts) Watkins. They continued to form the nucleus of the community that provided leadership through their success and support of others. While former slaves such as George Anderson and Abraham Seabrooks arrived during the early 1860s and remained in Muscatine after the Civil War, other former slaves who were emancipated during or after the Civil War initially lived in other areas and then moved to join this community in Muscatine in the early 1870s. The 1885 Iowa census tabulates 188 African American (black or mulatto per census records) residents in Muscatine. The majority of these residents (109 people, 26 families) lived in the first ward on the west side of Muscatine, which also included Muscatine Island. Second ward in the middle of the city, including the downtown, had 59 residents (15 families). Third ward to the east only had 20 residents (five families, three individuals). No African American residents were identified in the 1885 Iowa census in the townships adjacent to Muscatine, with 38 African American residents found in northwest Muscatine County.

The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church continued to flourish as the center of the religious and social community for African Americans in Muscatine through the end of the 19th century. In June 1885, the members decided to construct a new brick church on the site of the old church, with Alexander Clark, Benjamin Matthews, Richard Haney, and Rev. W.R. Alexander appointed as the committee for solicitations. On Sunday September 27, 1885, the cornerstone for the new A.M.E. Church was laid. In addition to religious services, the new

church continued to provide meeting space for the community. For example, a meeting was held in the new A.M.E. Church in February 1886 to appoint a delegate to the state “colored convention” in Des Moines on March 9. Alexander Clark was unanimously elected as delegate, with remarks by Benjamin Matthews on the first “colored convention” that had been held in Muscatine in 1857. The 1886-87 city directory lists the African M.E. Church at 507 E. 7th St, with Rev. William R. Alexander as minister. In 1889, the church built a new parsonage for their minister. A number of the black “Old Settlers” of Muscatine would pass away in the late 1880s and in the early 1890s. George Washington Manly (Manley) died on April 5, 1891, noted as one of the earliest black residents of Muscatine. Alexander Clark was appointed in 1890 by President Benjamin Harrison as the Minister and Consul General to Liberia, where he died on May 31, 1891, with a funeral later in Muscatine in February 1892. Benjamin Matthews died on February 1, 1893, at age 82. “Uncle Ben” was noted as the last of the “colored old settlers” in Muscatine. His pallbearers represented the next generation: Martin Lee, Sawyer Lamb, Noah Tutt, Abraham Seabrooks, Richard Haney, and James Walker. This newer core group of African American residents of Muscatine that largely arrived in the 1860s continued to support the A.M.E. Church and hold emancipation celebrations through the 1890s.

The growing community of West Liberty in Wapsinonoc Township in northwestern Muscatine County began to attract some additional African American residents in the 1870s. Elijah Trusty moved his family from Ohio to Goshen Township in Muscatine County around 1859 where he had connections with the Gregg family, also from Ohio. He then purchased farmland in Section 22 of Wapsinonoc Township to the southwest of West Liberty in the early 1860s. The 14 members of the Trusty family composed two-thirds of the African American residents of Wapsinonoc Township in 1870, noted as the oldest African American family remaining in northwest Muscatine County. Five families and one individual, totaling 17 residents, are listed as living in West Liberty in the 1880 federal census. Six families totaling 21 residents were listed in town in the 1885 Iowa census, including two families from both years. Residents that lived in West Liberty at various points in the 1870s included the families of Henry Kelly, Arthur Diggs (who then moved to Muscatine), Cornelius Reece (Reese), and Mack Reece (Reese). After living in Muscatine since the Civil War, Richard (Dick) and Hannah Anderson moved to West Liberty in December 1878, where they remained until their deaths in 1901 and 1903. The family of Gulliver Wells included daughters Anna and Nora, who attended public schools and became the first two African American graduates of West Liberty High School in 1887 and 1888. Anna married Augustus (Gus) Hall in May 1889, who was the son of Samuel Hall of Washington County, Iowa. Over the 1890s, several African American residents of West Liberty and Wapsinonoc Township died or moved away, leaving five families and one individual in West Liberty in the 1900 federal census. The Wells/Hall families were the last African American residents to live in West Liberty in the early 20th century.

With the boom of the pearl button industry in Muscatine at the end of the 19th century, the population of Muscatine grew from 11,454 in 1890 to 14,073 in 1900. The number of African American residents living in Muscatine decreased slightly to 125, composing about 0.9% of the population. Of the 27 families identified as owning or renting their houses in 1900, thirteen owned their houses outright, four owned their houses with a mortgage, and ten rented their dwellings. While families throughout town shifted in the late 19th century, a number of older families remain. In comparison to families in town in 1870, Joseph Carr, Frank Walker, Noah Tutt, Peter Townley, William Greenway, Abraham Seabrooks, Rosetta (Barnes) Watson, Henry Irvin, Silas Brown, Forrest White, Sawyer Lamb, Jacob Lamb (son of Sawyer), Rippen Keath, Alfred A. Keath (son of Rippen), and Arthur Manly (son of George) remained as local family names. Noted later arrivals included Arthur Diggs, Edward Bains, Stephen Lloyd, Walter Huston, Julius Seay, and Martin Lee. The most common occupations were general laborer (15)

with some noted as working in a sawmill, barber (8), cook (4), and servant or housekeeper (6). There were also two farmers, two gardeners, two teamsters, a carpenter, and a preacher. The majority of African American residents in 1900 in Muscatine County lived in Muscatine. The 17 African American residents outside of Muscatine included one family in nearby Fruitland Township (Nelson Lee) and the five families and one individual in West Liberty in Wapsinonoc Township (including the Anderson, Wells, and Hall families).

The African American population of Muscatine declined slightly in the early 20th century to 122 in 1910 and to 102 in 1920. While Bethel African M.E. Church remained the center of the African American community, the Paul Dunbar Club was a charter member of the Iowa State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, which was organized in Ottumwa in June 1902. The name later changed to the Iowa Association of Colored Women in keeping for the national name. They worked for the advancement of African American women in Iowa. Local clubs were required to have ten members to be a member of the state organization, and 14 clubs were represented at the convention in Davenport in May 1903. On May 22-24, 1905, Muscatine hosted the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Iowa State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs at Bethel A.M.E. Church. Maud Ousley, Alice Thompson, and Fannie (Barnes) Grooms continued to be active in the state organization and convention in 1910. Of the 23 member clubs, Muscatine's was the third oldest, dating to 1900. The club only had the minimum 10 members at this time, and it is not noted at the state convention in 1911 or subsequent years. In 1920, the 102 African American residents of Muscatine remained distributed throughout the city similarly as in 1900 and 1910. Most households were located in the 1st and 3rd ward, with renters also living in the 2nd ward and 4th ward. Of the 25 families that had house ownership indicated, 16 owned their homes with about half having a mortgage. The largest number of African Americans found work in a hotel (11) as a janitor, cook, chauffeur, baggage man, or porter. Two other men worked as chauffeurs, one man as janitor, and two women as janitors for other employers. The button industry employed six African American men and women as cutters, grinders, sorters, and clerks. Seven men worked as a laborer in various capacities, and one was a mechanic in a garage. Five continued to be employed in the barber trade. Alfred Keath was listed as a house contractor, and William Davie worked as a house plaster.

The black population in Muscatine continued to decrease through the second quarter of the 20th century and then increased in the late 20th century. By 1930, the number of residents had fallen to 86 (black and other), which composed only 0.5% of Muscatine's population. It continued to decrease to 77 in 1940 before increasing slightly to 82 by 1950, though only composing about 0.4% of Muscatine's population in both years. Muscatine grew to 20,997 residents by 1960, and it would continue to grow to 22,405 residents by 1970. During the 1950s, the black population grew from 82 (0.43%) in 1950 to 138 (0.66%) by 1960. This growth appears to have spurred an interest in black history in Muscatine. Local black resident Aldeen Davis wrote a series of articles on national African American history for the *Muscatine Journal* in the 1970s and 1980s. On June 11, 1979, she noted several local residents as representative of the 20th century residents, including Nola Walker (dressmaker), Maude Ousley (maker of hairpieces), Rosetta (Grandma) Watson (salt-water taffy), C.H. Heath (photographer), Dr. Alice Thompson (chiropractor), Richard Haney (waterman for street department), Dan Anderson (white washer), and Mildred Fuller (church worker). She also noted Clifton Lamb, professor and playwright, and Del Taylor, golf caddy for pros, including Billy Casper. The interest in African American history and research by Aldeen Davis and local historian Elizabeth (Bette) Veerhusen sparked an early preservation effort for the house of Alexander Clark, resulting in the Italianate brick double house at the corner to be moved further west to 203-205 W. 3rd St to spare it from demolition for a housing project. The Alexander Clark House was nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and it was part of the bicentennial program in Iowa in 1976. The

preservation of the house itself is noteworthy in early preservation efforts in Iowa, and it is among the first concentrated preservation efforts for a property associated with a black resident in the country. Through the 1970s, membership in Bethal A.M.E. Church continued to decline, with the church demolished and a new building constructed on the lot in 1978. The population of Muscatine remained nearly stable through the end of the 20th century, with 23,467 residents in 1980 and around 160 black residents. The number of black residents grew to 250 by 2000, representing 1.1% of the population of 22,697 residents in Muscatine (highest percentage of residents since 1890).

Information compiled from research on black history in Muscatine completed in 2024-25, which focused on the period from the 1840s to 1890s with more limited information on the 20th century. Additional information on black history in Muscatine and Muscatine County in the 19th century can be found in the 2025 report entitled "A Survey of Underground Railroad, African American, Emancipation, and Antislavery Themes in Muscatine and Muscatine County" for the Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission and available on the Musser Public Library website.