"UPON THIS ROCK"—THE FREE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY OF ANTEBELLUM LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

By J. Blaine Hudson

Introduction

Until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on December 18, 1865, the presumptive status of all African Americans in the United States was that of slave. However, from the arrival of the first Africans at Jamestown in 1619, a small minority of the black American population was not enslaved and played a critically important role in antebellum history—a role little known outside the ranks of professional historians.

This minority grew larger when the northern states began the slow process of ending slavery during the American Revolution and, by the mid-1820s, this "first emancipation" had eliminated human bondage in New England, the mid-Atlantic states and the Old Northwest Territory. For example, by 1800, the black American population had grown to slightly more than one million, 11 percent of whom were free and by 1830 the black population stood at more than two million, three hundred thousand, 14 percent of whom were free.[1] Free

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[1] Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974); Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities* (New York, 1997); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago, 1981); Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Free Negro*

people of color became a small but significant minority of African Americans in Kentucky as well—with, by 1850, 10,011 free people of color (4.5 percent of the total black population) compared to 11,262 African Americans in Indiana, a free state (see Table 1).[2]

Table 1
African American Population, 1790-1860: Kentucky and the United States

	Kentucky				United States			
	Slave	FPC*	Total	%FPC	Slave	FPC	Total	%FPC
1790	11,830	114	11,944	1.0	697,897	59,466	757,363	7.9
1800	40,343	241	41,084	0.6	893,041	108,395	1,001,436	10.8
1810	80,561	1,713	82,274	2.1	1,191,364	186,446	1,377,810	13.5
1820	126,732	2,759	129,491	2.1	1,538,038	238,156	1,776,194	13.4
1830	165,213	4,917	170,130	2.9	2,009,043	319,599	2,328,642	13.7
1840	182,258	7,317	189,575	3.9	2,487,455	386,303	2,873,758	13.4
1850	210,981	10,011	220,992	4.5	3,204,313	434,495	3,638,808	11.9
1860	225,483	10,684	236,167	4.5	3,953,760	488,070	4,441,830	11.0

* Free People of Color

U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1915): 8-15.

Free African Americans were vulnerable in the North and the South to constant discrimination and strict limitations on their civil liberties. On one hand, they were free and were "persons" in some sense under the law. As free people, their births and deaths were recorded. They could marry and enter into contracts, own property, pay taxes, make wills, own businesses (if a license was obtainable), and form organizations—and, unlike enslaved African Americans, the bare outline of their lives could be reconstructed from the pub-

Family: A Study of Family Origins before the Civil War (Nashville, 1932); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York, 1997); J. Blaine Hudson, "In Pursuit of Freedom: Slave Law and Emancipation in Antebellum Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky," *Filson History Quarterly* 76 (2002): 287-325; Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women during the Slave Era* (Columbia, Mo., 2006).

[2] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960), 8-15.

lic record. On the other hand, in the most important respects, they were black and:

> Because of intense racial antagonism, they were treated as outcasts throughout much of the north and west. However, the strength of this antagonism varied regionally. States in the "southern interior" or "Cotton Kingdom" were dependent upon and committed uncompromisingly to slavery, with no place for free people of color. In the "border and upper south," slavery existed but climatic conditions did not permit cotton cultivation. There, free people of color were tolerated, grudgingly, as an alien element . . . The combined effects of these factors scattered free African Americans throughout the border states and the north in towns, cities, and rural enclaves where opportunities were greatest and resistance was least.[3]

Louisville was one such community and, perhaps, the least-studied segment of its early social structure was a growing free-black population that coalesced into a viable community by the 1830s, representing nearly one-fifth of all African Americans in the city by 1860. In so doing, it became the largest free-black community in the Upper South, west of Baltimore, and the only meaningful concentration of free people of color in Kentucky.

This article will sketch the main lines of the development of that community.

Free People of Color in Antebellum Louisville

The free African American community of Louisville was not created by white Louisvillians, neither did it emerge in a vacuum nor by coincidence. Because free people of color tended to concentrate in urban areas, the growth of a sizable free African American population in Louisville was, to a great extent, a function of the growth of Louisville itself. Put simply, the location of Louisville at the Falls of the Ohio, the only break in navigation on the 981-mile length of the

[3] J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, N.C., 2002), (quote)19; Mervin Aubespin, Kenneth Clay, and J. Blaine Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville: A Photographic History* (Louisville, 2011), 51-56.

Ohio River, transformed the city into a major center for commerce and transportation as American settlement moved westward and as cotton became "king" in the Gulf States after the War of 1812. By 1850, Louisville had grown from a small village into the tenth-largest city in the United States and, as illustrated in Table 2 below, the black population, particularly the free-black population attracted by opportunities for work and living space, grew along with the city.[4]

Table 2
African Americans in Louisville: 1800 - 1860

Black Population

Year	Enslaved	Free	Total	Black % of City
1800	76	1	77	21.5
1810	484	11	495	36.5
1820	1,031	93	1,124	28.0
1830	2,406	232	2,638	25.5
1840	3,430	619	4,049	19.1
1850	5,432	1,538	6,970	16.1
1860	4,903	1,917	6,820	10.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1915), 8-15.

By 1830, the population had grown to 10,341, with an African American population of 2,638 (25.5 percent), 2,406 of whom were enslaved. By 1860, because of river traffic, the construction of the Louisville & Nashville (L&N) Railroad, and a massive influx of German and Irish immigrants, the population of Louisville reached 68,033. The African American population had increased as well, but more slowly, to 6,820 (10 percent)—4,903 of whom were enslaved. However, because of the availability of cheap immigrant labor and because slavery was better suited to the isolation and controls of rural

[4] Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, 1997), 18-79; Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, vol. 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 2 vols. (Frankfort, 1992), xv-xviii.

areas, the number of enslaved African Americans actually decreased by one hundred fifty persons between 1850 and 1860, while the free African American population increased at a much faster pace. Between 1830 and 1860, the number of free people of color living in Louisville increased by 726.3 percent from 232 to 1,917, which even exceeded the rate of white population increase over the same period, from 7,703 to 61,213 whites, a 694.7 percent growth rate.[5] Further, the growth of the free-black population of Louisville, even in relation to other western cities, was equally impressive.[6]

Clearly, there were other concentrations of free people of color in Kentucky, but most were small and none were located at the nexus of the social and economic forces that shaped Louisville. In this respect, the African American community of Louisville, much as Louisville itself, belonged as much to the Ohio Valley as to Kentucky—and, as the racial "map" of the United States was being redrawn by the shift of black population into the Gulf States and the trans-Appalachian West, black Louisville found itself, suddenly, on that "map."[7]

Table 3
1850 Kentucky Free Black Population: Counties with 100 or More FPCs

County	No. of FPCs	% Black Population	% County Population	Major Towns or Cities (No. FPCs)
Adair	108	6.0	1.1	
Barren	113	2.4	2.4	Glasgow (20)
Bath	116	4.4	1.0	
Bourbon	245	3.4	1.7	Paris (46)
Boyle	317	8.5	3.5	
Bracken	114	11.9	1.3	Augusta (40)
Caldwell	139	4.3	1.0	
Christian	150	1.8	0.8	
Clark	134	2.7	1.1	

[5] J. Blaine Hudson, "Louisville," *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad* (Jefferson, N.C., 2006), 139-41.

[6] Curry, *Free Black,* 244-45.

[7] Darrel E. Bigham, *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (Lexington, 2006), 13-32; Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves*, 139.

Clay	172	25.0	3.2	
Fayette	668	5.8	2.9	Lexington (671)
Fleming	158	6.9	1.1	Flemingsburg (26)
Franklin	357	9.6	2.9	Frankfort (213)
Greene	117	4.3	1.3	
Harrison	146	4.4	1.1	
Henderson	123	2.7	1.0	Henderson (17)
Jefferson	1,637	13.0	2.7	
Knox	200	24.6	2.8	
Lincoln	104	3.0	1.0	
Logan	364	6.2	2.2	Russellville (64)
Mason	386	8.3	2.1	Maysville (142)
Mercer	336	9.3	2.4	Harrodsburg (110)
Montgomery	164	5.1	1.7	Mt. Sterling (39)
Nelson	116	2.2	0.1	
Nicholas	166	9.9	1.6	
Scott	219	3.6	0.1	
Shelby	189	2.8	1.1	
Taylor	148	8.3	2.0	Campbellsville (11)
Warren	209	4.6	1.4	
Woodford	169	2.6	1.4	
Kentucky	10,011	4.5	1.0	

Note: There were also small clusters of free people of color in Covington (36, in Kenton County), Newport (43, in Campbell County), Smithland (48, in Livingston County) and Paducah (17, in McCracken County).
Curry, *Free Black*, 267, from the U.S. Census Office, *Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1851), 56-57, 206-7, 235-38, 281-87, 334-39, 415-18, 471-72, 501-2, 517-20, 534-59, 687-91, 745-46, 812-17, 850.

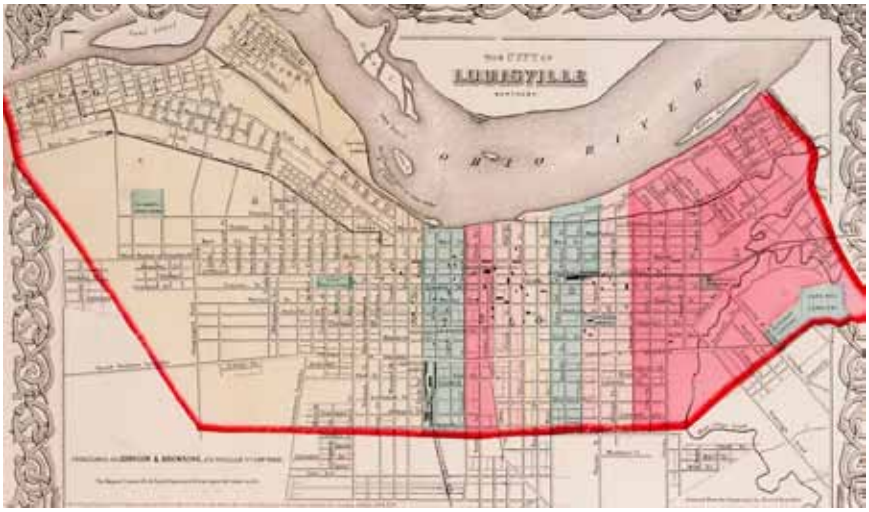
Geography

As with enslaved African Americans, free people of color were not distributed evenly either across the commonwealth (see Figure 2 and Table 3) or in Louisville.[8] By 1860, Louisville was divided into

[8] J. D. B. DeBow, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 603-8; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population: 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1918), 8-15.

wards with the following boundaries (all north of Broadway): First Ward (east of Hancock Street); Second Ward (between Hancock and Floyd Streets); Third Ward (between Floyd and First Streets); Fourth Ward (between First and Third Streets); Fifth Ward (between Third and Fifth Streets); Sixth Ward (between Fifth and Seventh Streets); Seventh Ward (between Seventh and Tenth Streets); and Eighth Ward (west of Tenth Street).

Figure 1
Louisville Ward Boundaries in 1860



The different bands show the wards from the first ward in the east to the eighth ward in the west. *Photograph collection, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky.*

Enslaved African Americans were concentrated most heavily in the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards of the city—the more affluent downtown sections of Louisville that were home to whites who could afford the cost of slave labor. The expanding population of free people of color, along with enslaved African Americans who hired their time and "lived out," could also be found largely in the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards, but they were closer to the southern limit of the city (then Prather Street, or Broadway), with growing numbers in the Seventh and Eighth Wards as the city

expanded west. The only neighborhoods without free or enslaved African Americans were some of the newer sections of town occupied by recently arrived working-class and white ethnic immigrants after the influx of the Irish and Germans beginning in the 1840s.[9]

Increasing population and increasing population concentration were not sufficient in themselves to create community, but were two of the preconditions for community formation:

> Having been excluded from membership in the American community, free people of color both challenged the legitimacy of their exclusion and, in the interests of survival, built communities of their own. Ultimately, these communities of exclusion, which usually included some urban slaves, achieved a critical mass of population size and density that triggered—in the face of white rejection and discrimination—the development of their own institutions, infrastructure, social system, and social relations with the surrounding white community. Although lacking in power and wealth, these evolved or evolving communities created opportunities for their residents to occupy roles and statuses closed to them in the larger community, e.g., leadership and high status positions, property, and business ownership, et al.[10]

By 1860, most free people of color in Louisville lived in recognizable African American enclaves immediately west (the Russell area) and east of downtown along Floyd and Preston Streets. Interestingly, these enclaves were not segregated per se in the antebellum period. Rather, African Americans might live on part of a city block or on one side of a street otherwise occupied by whites. In some cases, blacks lived in alley houses behind white dwellings on the main streets.

[9] J. Blaine Hudson, "African Americans in Louisville: An Historical Overview," in J. Blaine Hudson, Lateef O. Badru, Carole Cobb, Kevin Fields, Bonetta M. Hines-Hudson, Theresa A. Rajack-Talley, and Clarence Talley, eds., *The State of African American Youth in Metropolitan Louisville* (Louisville, 2001), 2-19; George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville, 1987), 42-43.

[10] J. Blaine Hudson, "Diversity, Inequality, and Community: African Americans in American Society," *Diversity and Community: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Philip Alperson (New York, 2003), 147-48.

This patchwork residential pattern did not reflect greater tolerance on the part of antebellum whites but reflected instead the perceived need to keep free African Americans under close scrutiny.[11]

For African Americans living in other parts of the city and even in Jefferson County outside the city, it is important to note that the geography of black communities, then and now, was based more on race than on physical location—since, wherever they were, they still bore the visible mark of color that defined them as "black." In other words, the free African American community of Louisville came to occupy a few identifiable areas, but all free African Americans, regardless of where they lived, belonged to that community.[12]

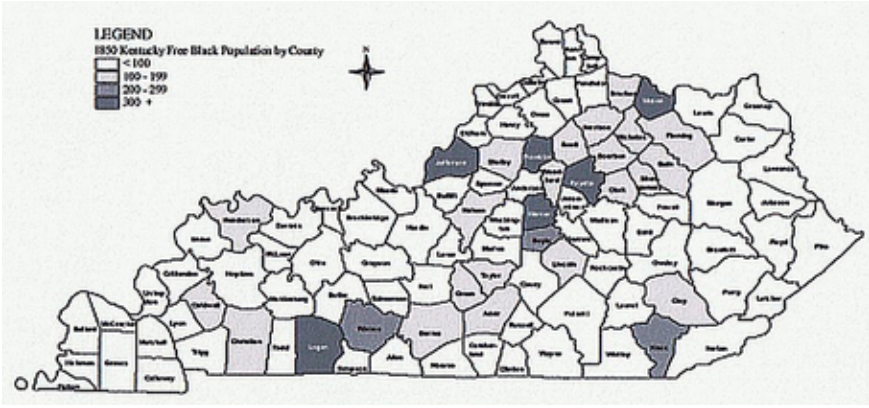


Figure 2
Map of Free People of Color by County in Kentucky, 1850

Composition

The demographic composition of the free African American community of Louisville differed from that of the whole city in two critically important respects. One was the ratio of males to females. Specifically, females were a significant majority of the black population of Louisville and Jefferson County. For example, based on the 1850 census, there were 830 black males in Louisville to 1000 black

[11] J. B. D. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1854); Curry, *Free Black*, 147.

[12] Hudson, "Diversity, Inequality, and Community," 148-50.

females—and 850 black males to 1000 females in the surrounding county. In contrast, there were roughly 930 black males to every 1000 black females in Cincinnati—and 1,130 black males to 1000 black females in St. Louis. In 1860, females remained a majority in Louisville of both the urban slave population and free people of color (60.6 and 55 percent, respectively).[13]

The second difference was because the average life expectancy of African Americans was about thirty-five years in the 1830s (compared to about forty-five years for whites), in 1854 African American children younger than ten years of age represented 22.4 percent of free African Americans in Louisville.[14] One consequence of these demographic factors was the presence of numerous young, female-headed households. Women were most often single mothers with children since there were "not enough black men to go around" and the white men who fathered the unusually large number of "mulattos" in the area "were seldom available for parenting duty." Young people represented a much larger segment of the African American population. However, census enumeration records from this period—in which free African Americans were counted individually and by household—reveal another interesting adaptive pattern. Specifically, free African Americans often lived in extended family or multifamily households. More often than not, notwithstanding the pronounced female majority, the "head of the household" was an adult black male—and the household included members of his own family and one or more other family units, perhaps living on the premises as boarders.[15]

Making a Living

Work was the most important constant in the daily lives of African Americans, free and enslaved, during this period**.** Slavery was first and foremost a labor system—and one that allowed no "unemployment." Under such a system, the value of enslaved African Americans was

[13] DeBow, *Seventh Census*, 603-8.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Hudson, "African Americans in Louisville," 2-19

determined by what their labor produced and, in the case of enslaved black women, by their ability to produce new laborers. Thus, enslaved African Americans were put to work very early in childhood. Likewise, work, usually unskilled or semi-skilled, almost always in the service of whites, and almost always at pitifully low wages, was an unavoidable necessity in the lives of free African Americans. And, given the limited employment opportunities available to them, the vast majority of free African Americans were desperately poor, so each family depended on multiple small incomes.

Still, the opportunity for employment, even at the bottom of Louisville's burgeoning and vibrant economy, was one of the magnets that attracted free people of color to the city. Work was plentiful for laborers, draymen, teamsters, laundresses, and skilled tradespersons—and, given Louisville's role in river trade and travel, skilled work aboard the countless steamboats moving up and down the Ohio River offered an opportunity for higher wages and status. For example, some free African Americans worked as porters, cooks, barbers, and musicians on these vessels. In the city, such occupations were usually dominated by enslaved African Americans, but some free African Americans also filled these roles. Similarly, although no census data on the occupations of black women are available until 1860, city directories indicate that a few African American women found lucrative work as seamstresses and teachers.[16]

Opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship—beyond the subsistence level of street peddlers and hawkers—were far less common. Enslaved African Americans were classified legally as property and, therefore, could not enter into the contractual arrangements necessary to operating businesses. Free people of color were limited as a rule to the same occupations practiced by the urban slave population, but, unlike their enslaved kinspersons, could on rare occasions found and own businesses that were generally an extension of these occupations. For example, Shelton Morris owned and operated a barbershop and bathhouse "under the Galt House" in

[16] John B. Jegli, *Directory for 1851-1852 of the City of Louisville* (Louisville, 1851).

downtown Louisville in the early 1830s. Theodore Sterritt, Nathan Rogers, J. C. N. Fowles, and Austin Hubbard were also "prominent barbers." Madison Smith manufactured stoves before moving to Indiana. Green Smith was "a leading plasterer." Willis Talbot and John Jordan prospered as carpenters. James Cunningham prospered as a musician who led one of the most popular orchestras in the region. In later years, city directories, the U.S. census, and local tax records indicate that free people of color owned hauling and other businesses. In some cases, a laundress—or seamstress or cook—could also be considered a "business-person." A few, like Morris and Washington Spradling, also speculated in real estate.[17]

Nevertheless, free African Americans had little real freedom to compete in the free market economy as city ordinances were enacted, particularly after 1830, that prohibited them from obtaining licenses to engage in certain businesses and from owning such businesses as confectionaries, retail groceries, restaurants, and fruit stores.[18] Given such limited choices, the only business niche open to antebellum African Americans was, once again, that of providing the types of services to whites that were most often provided by enslaved African Americans. Consequently, the number of African American businesses in antebellum Louisville was small and nearly all were one-person or family enterprises.

These limited opportunities put capital accumulation and property ownership far beyond the reach of most free African Americans. However, a small but important black propertied "class" can be identified in Louisville by the 1850s—not wealthy by white standards but stable, as indicated in Table 4, on following page.[19]

[17] William H. Gibson Sr., *Historical Sketches of the Progress of the Colored Race in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1897), (quotes)28-29; Jefferson County Property Tax Lists, 1861, Jefferson County Department for Historic Preservation and Archives, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter Jefferson County Archives).

[18] "Ordinances of the City of Louisville" in James Harrison, *Collection of Acts of Virginia and Kentucky Relative to Louisville and Portland* (Louisville, 1839), 120.

[19] Curry, *Free Black*, 267.

Table 4
Free Black Real Estate Ownership in Fourteen Cities in 1850

Cities	Value of Real Estate	Number of Owners	Average Value of Holding
New Orleans	$2,354,640	650	$3,623
Philadelphia	327,000	77	4,248
Cincinnati	317,780	118	2,693
Charleston	200,600	47	4,268
Brooklyn	145,785	98	1,488
Baltimore	137,488	101	1,361
New York	110,010	71	1,549
Washington	108,816	178	611
Louisville	95,650	63	1,518
Pittsburgh	74,200	38	1,953
Buffalo	57,610	41	1,405
St. Louis	49,650	16	3,103
Albany	44,400	32	1,388
Boston	41,900	13	3,223

The Architects of Black Louisville

A growing black population, along with the powerful influence of geography and the dynamics of Louisville economic growth, created the preconditions for community formation. However, two unusual persons played pivotal roles in forging these raw materials into a community, a group of free African Americans conscious of their common interests—and in shaping its character, its human and physical geography, and its internal structure.

The first, Shelton Morris, was born enslaved in Louisa County, Virginia, in 1806. On April 2, 1820, his father and owner, Colonel Richard Morris, completed a will that, upon the elder Morris's death, emancipated his "mulatto woman Fanny and her six children, Shelton, Richard, Hannah, Elizabeth, John and Alexander." This will provided for the education of Shelton and his siblings and directed that each

receive six hundred acres in the "western country" and "one slave." On February 11, 1828, Shelton had this will entered in the records of Jefferson County, took "Morris" as his surname, chose not to become a slaveholder, and converted his claim to land into cash.[20]

Morris was a barber by trade and used his inheritance to purchase land and establish a barbershop on Main Street, between Fifth and Sixth Streets. In 1832, he opened a bathhouse adjoining (or under) the Louisville Hotel and, in all likelihood, he became the first black businessman in Louisville.[21] Morris also became a small-scale real estate speculator and one of Louisville's first significant black landowners, buying lots in early downtown Louisville, in the Preston's Enlargement area east of downtown, and in the area that would later become the eastern section of the Russell neighborhood west of downtown. However, although Morris prospered, he moved to Cincinnati in 1841 after the death of his first wife and, according to the recollections of his contemporaries, after he was accused of violating Kentucky law by voting in the presidential election of 1840.[22]

The second person was Washington Spradling Sr. (1802-68). As Spradling himself stated, "I was born a slave. . . . My father bought me, and I bought my own children, five in number." Like Morris, Spradling was also a barber and used his inheritance to speculate in real estate. Significantly, the Morris and Spradling families soon became allied by marriage when Shelton Morris married Evalina Spradling, Washington Spradling's younger sister, in 1828.[23]

William Gibson, a major figure in Louisville's black community for two generations, knew of Morris but remembered Spradling vividly. He observed:

> Washington Spradling was the leading colored man in business and the largest real estate holder. He was a barber by

[20] Jefferson County Wills, Book 2: 17 (microfilm), Jefferson County Archives.

[21] Ruth Morris Graham, *The Saga of the Morris Family* (Columbus, Ga., 1984), 15-19; Jefferson County Deeds, Book PP, 556 (microfilm), Jefferson County Archives.

[22] Gibson, *Historical Sketches*, 27.

[23] "Testimony of Washington Spradling," American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, November 26, 1863, 77, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky; Jefferson County Marriage Register, Book 2: 18 (microfilm), Jefferson County Archives.

> trade, but made his mark as a businessman by trading and brokerage, in connection with his shaving. His mode of making money consisted in buying and leasing lots in different parts of the city and building and moving frame cottages upon those lots. He also built several brick business houses on Third Street. Mr. Spradling had many peculiarities, his dress was very common, as he exhibited no pride in that direction. He loved to converse on law, and, though he was uneducated, was considered one of the best lawyers to plan or prepare a case for the court. He was very successful, and nearly every colored person who was in trouble (more or less) first consulted Washington Spradling; he selected the lawyer and prepared the case.[24]

Spradling amassed significant wealth, approaching by some accounts a net worth of one hundred thousand dollars (over $30 million in 2011 dollars) by the 1860s. Important beyond his obvious business savvy, however, was how he used his wealth. For example, Spradling loaned enslaved African Americans money with which to purchase their freedom, often purchasing and then freeing them himself. When interviewed in 1863 by the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, Spradling declared that he alone had purchased (at their request) and freed thirty-three enslaved African Americans and that he was still owed a total of $3,337.50.[25]

Because Louisville grew so rapidly in the middle third of the nineteenth century, the forested or marshy land on the outskirts of the city, purchased by men such as Morris and Spradling in the 1820s, appreciated significantly in value in the next decade and became choice property in or near downtown Louisville. By the 1830s and 1840s, this land had been cleared and subdivided. Dwellings had been built and an increasing number of African Americans had begun to reside in these areas—often because whites would not permit them to live anywhere else. Many of the early black churches also took

[24] Gibson, *Historical Sketches*, 25-26.

[25] "Testimony of Washington Spradling," November 26, 1863, 77, Filson Historical Society.

root on land owned by Spradling and Morris—at little or no cost. Spradling even helped to build at least one early church himself.[26]

Institution Building

In the 1830s and 1840s, the African American presence in Louisville underwent a fundamental transformation from a scattered community of the excluded into an African American community comprising urban slaves and free people of color. Central to this transformation was the establishment of independent black institutions and organizations. Although by the 1850s, fraternal organizations such as the Masons and Odd Fellows had established lodges in the city, the most important black institutions in early Louisville were African American churches. More than any other institutions, these churches were the glue that held the free-black community together, and their establishment marked its the coming of age.[27] A few were especially important.

The first Baptist church in the area was founded in 1784, and in 1807 the Baptist churches in the region voted to allow the admission of enslaved African Americans. The First Baptist Church of Louisville was established in 1815, and under this dispensation the first enslaved African Americans were baptized and admitted in 1822. As black membership in the congregation grew, Reverend Henry Adams was called to serve as a pastor for the African American section of First Baptist in 1829. Adams proved an exceptional minister and became one of the foremost African American religious leaders in the history of Louisville and Kentucky.[28]

Initially, the First African Baptist Church was located near Eighth

[26] Curry, *Free Black*, 49-80.

[27] J. Blaine Hudson, "African American Religion in Antebellum Louisville, Kentucky," *The Griot: Journal of the Southern Conference on African American Studies* 17 (1998): 43-54.

[28] F. M. Masters, *A History of Kentucky Baptists* (Louisville, 1953), 10; Homer E. Nutter, "A Brief History of Negro Baptists," in *Baptists in Kentucky, 1776-1976* , ed. Leo T. Crismon (Middletown, Ky., 1975), 66-78; Harold J. Sanders, "The Kentucky Baptist Heritage," in ibid., 1-24; William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (1888; repr., New York, 1968), 798; Homer E. Wickenden, "History of the Churches of Louisville with Special Reference to Slavery" (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1921), 4-39.

and Market Streets in a small frame building on rather swampy ground; it was moved in 1834 to a new site at Fifth and York Streets. The church operated under the oversight of First Baptist and enslaved African Americans could not attend without their owners' permission.[29] In 1841, Adams petitioned the First Baptist Church to organize a truly independent church, and in April 1842 the 475 African American members of the First African branch of the First Baptist Church were released, and they founded the First African Baptist Church. On January 13, 1845, the church paid five thousand dollars for a building owned formerly by the Christian Church on Fifth Street between Walnut and Chestnut Streets. However, not all church members supported this move; a small contingent chose to remain at the old Fifth and York Street site. This splinter congregation came to be known as York Street Baptist Church and was renamed Calvary Baptist Church in 1883.

Membership in the First African Church increased during the remainder of the antebellum period, and by 1860, the 929 enslaved or free African Americans who belonged to the First African Church represented 35 percent of Louisville's 2,656 Baptists of all races. Consequently, not only was the First African Church the largest African American church in Louisville, it was the largest Baptist church in the city. First African was renamed Fifth Street Baptist Church in 1870.[30]

The AME, AME Zion, and CME churches were independent African American denominations, not merely African American offshoots, however large, of white churches. By 1838, some African American Methodists began meeting in a livery stable near Second and Main Streets, across from the old Galt House. This became the birthplace of the Bethel House of God, soon renamed Bethel AME Church. AME bishop William Paul Quinn visited southern Indiana in 1838, worshipped with Louisville's African American Methodists, and was arrested for leading such a meeting. African American Methodists used the livery stable for a few years under the leadership

[29] Henry C. Weeden, ed., *Weeden's History of the Colored People of Louisville* (Louisville, 1897), 38-39.

[30] Hudson, "African American Religion," 45-46.

of the Reverend John Johnson. By 1840, the church both moved and split, with Bethel AME relocating to Ninth and Green (Liberty) Streets and the splinter congregation, which became Asbury Chapel, to a building at Fourth and Green Streets.

In 1848, Bethel AME moved again, this time to Ninth and Walnut. This move, however, was a change in location as opposed to a change in actual church facilities since the existing church building was moved to the new site using a team of eight oxen. Bethel was dedicated officially by Bishop Quinn and the Reverend Daniel A. Payne in 1854. As an AME church, Bethel attracted a number of free people of color and created an environment in which its members had greater freedom to articulate a religious message with antislavery and racial-justice overtones. Consequently, Bethel came to be known as "the abolition church" and was reputed to have ties to the Underground Railroad. Because of Bishop Quinn's contributions to the formation of the church, Bethel was designated eventually as Quinn Chapel.[31]

By the 1850s, the following churches formed a small institutional network in Louisville in or near the old downtown area:

- Founded in 1829, the First African Baptist Church
- Founded in 1831, Centre Street Methodist Episcopal Church, later renamed Chestnut Street Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, founded with the assistance of Washington Spradling
- Founded in 1832, Jackson Street Methodist Church, later renamed R. E. Jones Temple, once known as the "Frog Pond" church
- Founded in 1833, York Street Baptist Church
- Founded in 1838, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, later renamed Quinn Chapel AME
- Founded in 1839, the Second African Baptist Church, later renamed Green Street Baptist Church

[31] Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality* (Princeton, 1965): 53; Wickenden, "History of the Churches of Louisville," 40-52.

- Founded in 1842, Asbury Chapel AME, led for a time by the Reverend Hiram R. Revels, who was later the first African American to serve in the United States Senate
- Founded in 1847, a small Presbyterian congregation that evolved into Ferguson Memorial[32]

The Catholic Church played a much more complex role in the lives of Louisville African Americans and in the lives of persons of African ancestry globally. In Louisville, Catholic clergy, laypersons, and the diocese itself owned slave property. For example, when Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget died in 1849, the diocese owned twenty enslaved African Americans. His successor, Bishop Martin John Spalding, was a slaveholder, having inherited enslaved African Americans from his father. He condemned the abolition movement while supporting the right of Catholics to own enslaved African Americans. Two thousand enslaved African Americans were thought to be owned by Louisville Catholics, but of this total the number of African Americans who were themselves Catholics or attended Catholic worship services was quite small. For example, church records indicate that only 275 enslaved African Americans were baptized as Catholics between 1835 and 1866. Those who were active in the church worshipped at the Cathedral of the Assumption, seated in a gallery set aside for their use.[33]

By 1860, only 42.5 percent (2,902 of 6,820) of Louisville's African Americans actually belonged to any known religious denomination. Because some African Americans held in bondage in Jefferson County outside the Louisville city limits were also known to have attended services in town (with the permission of their owners), the percentage

[32] *History of the Ohio Falls Cities and their Counties*, 2 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio, 1882), 1:362; Victor B. Howard, "Kentucky Presbyterians in 1849: Slavery and the Kentucky Constitution," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 73 (1975): 117-40; Henry W. Jones, *First Hundred Years + 35* (Louisville, 1978), university archives, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky; Minutes, Green Street Baptist Church, ibid.; Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 798; J. E. Thompson, *Hiram R. Revels, 1827-1901: A Biography* (New York, 1982); Weeden, *Weeden's History*, 41, 52.

[33] Clyde Crews, *Presence and Possibility: Louisville Catholicism and Its Cathedral* (Louisville, 1973), 32, 49.

of the resident city population of African Americans attached to a church was probably somewhat lower than that reported.[34]

Table 5
African American Church Membership in Louisville: 1860

	Independent Black Churches	Black Sections of White Churches	Total
Baptists	1,649	----------	1,649
Methodists	500*	683	1,183
Other	20**	50***	70
Total	2,169	733	2,902

*Estimated total for Bethel AME, Asbury AME, Centre Street CME, and Jackson Street ME.
** Estimate for early Ferguson Memorial
*** Estimate based on Catholic slave baptisms
See Hudson, "African American Religion in Antebellum Louisville, Kentucky," 50.

Still, African American churches were far more than mere religious institutions. They were, in essence, all-purpose community institutions and differed more from white churches in this crucial respect than in matters of religious doctrine and practice. Churches established missions and appointed deacons to minister to African Americans in the surrounding county and in the various wards of the city; some of these missions evolved into separate churches after the Civil War. Church members visited the sick and shut-in, assisted the poor, buried those without sufficient means, took in and placed orphans with local families, helped care for the aged, and provided wholesome Christian social activities.[35]

Perhaps the most important secular need addressed by the antebellum churches was that of providing educational opportunity. The

[34] Hudson, "African American Religion," 49-50.

[35] Minutes, Fifth Street Baptist Church; Minutes, Green Street Baptist Church, university archives, University of Louisville.

first school for African Americans in Louisville opened on December 7, 1841, in the basement of the First African Baptist Church. This school served free people of color and enslaved African Americans with written permission from their owners. Because whites feared educated African Americans and were inordinately hostile toward efforts to provide educational opportunities for them, the pupils attending this and other black antebellum schools were often compelled to hide their slates and primers under their coats lest they be attacked in the streets. Still, by the Civil War, First African Baptist, Green Street Baptist, Jackson Street Methodist, Centre Street Methodist, and Quinn Chapel AME had established schools, the only viable black schools in Kentucky, and many of the children educated in these schools, such as Horace Morris (eldest son of Shelton Morris) and William Steward, would be among the most important of Louisville and Kentucky's African American leaders in the next generation.[36]

This combination of roles, while it heightened the discomfort of whites, rendered the churches all the more central to the African American community.

Interracial and Intraracial Relations

A community comprises not only physical structures but also a shared sense of place and purpose mediated through a network of overlapping and interlocking relationships between its members, and between itself and others outside its boundaries. In this respect, the free African American community stood at the center of a web of human interactions between African Americans—and between blacks and whites. These interactions and the relationships they made possible were complex—and existed in multiple contexts.[37]

Relations with the local white community were difficult and strained, at best, for reasons written into local and state law. For example:

[36] Simmons, *Men of Mark,* 798; George D. Wilson, *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1941), 1-7; Yater, *Two Hundred Years*, 42-43.

[37] Hudson, "Diversity, Inequality, and Community," 147-48.

> Kentucky laws were stricter for free Blacks than for whites. The free Black was not allowed to hold slaves other than his own relatives; nor was he allowed to hold any white person as bondsman. A 1798 statute allowed the free black householder to keep one gun, powder and shot to protect his home in case of Indian attack. But if he were caught carrying a gun in the streets, he was subject to a five dollar fine.
>
> Some punishments were more severe. He was subject to the death penalty for burning public buildings, tobacco houses, warehouses, or stables; for conspiring rebellion; or for rape of a white woman. If he were convicted of keeping a disorderly house or loitering about without visible means of support, he could be sold into servitude for not less than two nor more than ten years. Although in most other cases he was subject to the same punishments as a white man, the punishments the black man actually received were frequently more severe than for whites committing the same kinds of crimes.[38]

The ambivalence and often outright hostility of whites toward both free people of color and the loose restraints of urban slavery were captured in the memorable language of an occasionally incoherent but profoundly revealing newspaper editorial in 1835, entitled "Local Evils," quoted below in part. It should be noted that these sentiments were expressed when the free-black population of Louisville was still very small but also only a few years after the Nat Turner revolt in August 1831 and the beginning of the militant phase of the abolitionist movement.

> We are overrun with free negroes. In certain parts of our town throngs of them may be seen at any time—and most of them have no ostensible means of obtaining a living. They lounge about through the day, and most subsist by stealing, or receiving stolen articles from slaves at night. Frequently, they are so bold as to occupy the side-walks in groups, and compel passengers to turn out and walk round them. Their

[38] Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, *Kentucky's Black Heritage* (Frankfort, 1971), 14.

> impudence naturally attracts the attention of slaves, and necessarily becomes contagious. In addition to this, free negroes are teaching night schools. Slaves are their pupils and, to the extent of the tuition fees, are induced, in most instances, to rob their masters or employers.[39]

If anything, this attitude hardened over time, particularly as the free-black community became a more visible presence. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, free blacks became even more vulnerable in the border states and the Lower North, and many migrated from the border region to the more northerly states or to Canada. William Gibson describes the panic that spread through Louisville's free-black community, noting that "an exodus took place" and that "families left this city to look for other quarters of freer soil. Some went to northern Ohio, Michigan, Canada, and others left in groups, prospecting for a place to settle."[40]

Officially, free African Americans belonged to a pariah caste—and were watched and regulated carefully. Unofficially, the laws governing relations between blacks and whites were both selectively obeyed and selectively enforced. Put simply, interracial relations in antebellum Louisville were complex. For example, there were some local whites in the middle and upper classes who were disposed more favorably toward black attempts at social uplift—although in a slave state in the late antebellum period such a disposition could not be expressed publicly. Most of the true upper-class whites were staunch defenders of slavery but often acted kindly toward their lowly and benighted "servants" out of a sense of noblesse oblige. At the bottom of the economic order, free blacks and enslaved African Americans hired-out for their labor often worked alongside poor whites, sometimes recent immigrants. These groups often lived in the same neighborhoods. They did not always like one another; the racial attitudes of Irish immigrants were notoriously antiblack. Yet, at the same time, they often drank and gambled at the same grog shops, frequented

[39] *Louisville (Ky.) Public Advertiser*, November 30, 1835.
[40] Gibson, *Historical Sketches*, 49.

the same brothels, and had illicit sexual relations and racially mixed offspring with one another.

Further, the free-black community created the possibility for a much broader range of relationships among African Americans themselves. For example, because the size of slaveholdings was typically small (an average of between 5.5 and 6.5) and population density was relatively low, most African Americans lived in some degree of relative isolation until the black population of Louisville grew significantly after 1820 and a viable community evolved after 1830. This community provided a site of identification and support for enslaved as well as free African Americans, particularly through social activities, churches, and fraternal organizations. The free-black community also provided some insulation and protection from its rather unfriendly white neighbors. Thus, on the most basic level, community formation was a humanizing force and intraracial interactions that might have been random and sporadic otherwise became more structured, more frequent, and more meaningful.[41]

Still, intraracial relations within the free African American community were unusually complex as well. Despite being bound together by race, the limitations imposed by law, and the hostility of local whites, there were nonetheless many areas of difference and divisions within the African American community itself. Among the most obvious were predictable differences related to property, wealth, and education that, however slight, could become magnified in a generally impoverished and illiterate group. In this regard, it is more appropriate to define these distinctions as status rather than class differences since a true class structure, based on unequal income and wealth distribution, can only evolve when groups have reasonably free and equal access to all the opportunities and rewards available in a given society—which were unavailable to free African Americans.

Other differences and the intraracial fault lines they created were more subtle. For example, while a free-black community was, by definition, an aggregation of free people of color, enslaved African

[41] Aubespin, Clay, and Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville*, 60-61.

Americans—who were far more numerous—interacted with free African Americans on multiple levels. Many attended the same churches and, as mentioned, did the same work and often lived in the same neighborhoods as free African Americans. Still, the difference and sometimes the distance between those who were free and those who were not, even in the same racial group, could be an immense chasm. Additionally, related to status differences was the extent to which free African Americans had made the adjustment to living as free persons. Since slavery was exceedingly poor preparation for freedom, this adjustment was a function of the length of time since manumission—or whether one had achieved economic independence and even the degree to which one was acculturated to the norms, values, and worldview of the larger black community.[42]

Color differences at times played a role as well. Persons of mixed race were a much larger segment of the free African American community than of the black population as a whole and, in practical terms, mixed parentage often derived from family relationships with locally influential whites—as in the cases of Morris and Spradling—that contributed to their economic opportunities. Still, while the existence of a color line in the United States, in contrast to the color spectrum common in the Latin America, Brazil, and the Caribbean, worked against the creation of legal and other barriers based on gradations of color within the race, the perception—if not, sometimes, the reality—that fair-skinned African Americans enjoyed advantages and privileges denied to darker-skinned African Americans could create a sense of color hierarchy and all of the divisive attitudes implied thereby.[43]

Finally, free people of color in the antebellum West were not numerous in absolute terms and they created a close-knit regional community that was instrumental in founding and sustaining local free-black communities, in establishing African American institutions, in assisting fugitive slaves, and in the struggle against slavery. Return-

[42] Curry, *Free Black*, 196-215.

[43] Frederick J. Davis, *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (University Park, Pa., 1991).

ing to the example of Shelton Morris, he and his family belonged to and linked Louisville to this regional community. As mentioned, Morris's first wife was Evelina Spradling (married January 24, 1828) who bore him three children: one who was short-lived, Horace (1832-97), and Benjamin (1838-71).[44] After leaving Louisville in 1841, Morris transferred his business interests to his younger brothers and moved to Cincinnati. There, his sister, Elizabeth (or Eliza), lived with her first husband, Michael Clark, the black son of Louisville's William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.[45] Clark and Morris worked as barbers near the Cincinnati riverfront and Morris became a key collaborator with Levi Coffin in the work of the Underground Railroad—and, years later, was remembered by Coffin's son as the "most careful operator" in the black community of Cincinnati. He also worked as a barber and steward on steamboats plying the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and, on one of these journeys, met his second wife, Mary (b. 1831), in Natchez, Mississippi. Mary Morris bore him two daughters: Catherine F. (b. 1850, died young) and Mary Leona (1856-1936).

After remarrying and becoming a widower yet again, this now "courtly gentleman" followed his sister Eliza who, after Michael Clark's death in 1849, married the Reverend Daniel A. Payne and moved with Payne when he founded Wilberforce College, near Xenia, Ohio, the first black-controlled higher educational institution in the United States. There, Morris farmed and operated a barbershop and grocery.[46]

Morris's older sons, Horace and Benjamin, returned to Louisville in the 1850s, probably after his third marriage. Horace was appointed cashier of the local branch of the Freedmen's Bank after the Civil War and led the effort to found Central Colored High School,

[44] Jefferson County Marriage Register, Book 2: 18 (microfilm), Jefferson County Archives, Louisville, Kentucky; Ernestine G. Lucas, *Wider Windows to the Past: African American History from a Family Perspective* (Decorah, Iowa, 1995), 88-97.

[45] *St. Louis (Mo.) Argus*, June 21, 1925; *St. Louis (Mo.) American*, September 22, 1964.

[46] Lucas, *Wider Windows*, 88-97; Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad*, (quote)120.

and he and his family became some of Louisville's most influential black leaders for generations. Although Benjamin died on the Kansas frontier in 1871, one of his children, Charles Satchell Morris, preceded the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Sr., as pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City and was a participant in the Niagara Movement, precursor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Other Morris grandchildren married into the families of prominent African Americans, such as Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. DuBois. Shelton Morris died in 1889 in Xenia, Ohio—and descendants of his daughter by his second marriage, Mary Morris Wright, still live in Louisville today.[47]

Taken altogether, the free-black community of Louisville created a network of relationships, locally and nationally, that was far more than the sum of its parts.

Politics and the Underground Railroad in Louisville

The presence of a free African American community in slave territory was, by virtue of its very existence, something of a political statement. However, such a community could not engage overtly in politics, certainly not if it wished to survive in an era of lynching. There was a gruesome lynching in Louisville in 1857 and mob violence, such as the mass attack on blacks in Cincinnati in 1829.[48] There were, however, means of covert political engagement.

For reasons as much geographic as demographic, the role of Louisville was critical both to the flight of fugitive slaves and to the work of friends of the fugitive slaves in the trans-Appalachian West. As William Cockrum observed:

> There were probably more negroes crossed over the Ohio river and two or three places in front of Louisville than any place else from the mouth of the Wabash to Cincinnati. The reason for this was that the three good sized cities at the Falls

[47] Ibid.

[48] *Louisville (Ky.) Daily Courier*, December 24, 1856, and May 15, 1857; *Cincinnati (Ohio) Commercial*, May 20, 1857.

> furnished a good hiding place for runaways among the colored people. Those crossing at these places were all conveyed to Wayne County, Indiana, and thence on to the Lake.[49]

By 1860, in addition to 1,917 free blacks in Louisville, there were 757 African Americans in Floyd County, Indiana (New Albany), and another 520 in Clark County, Indiana (Jeffersonville and Clarksville). In other words, the Greater-Louisville free-black population approached that of Cincinnati and other larger cities. Thus, the location of Louisville on the border between free and slave territory, on the banks of the major river in the trans-Appalachian West, made the area a major refuge and crossing point for fugitive slaves.[50]

Not coincidentally, the same community leaders and unifying community institutions discussed above figured prominently in the work of assisting fugitive slaves. For example, Washington Spradling and other free blacks were deeply involved in the movement of enslaved African Americans along the illegal path to freedom. When Wilbur Siebert was researching his major study of the Underground Railroad in the 1890s, he found former runaways who, a generation after Spradling's death in 1868, recalled that, "At Louisville, Kentucky, Wash Spradley, a shrewd negro, was instrumental in helping many of his enslaved brethren out of bondage."[51] Further, based on court records alone, a great many others in the Louisville region were deeply involved and were convicted of violating the law by helping fugitive slaves. A few of these friends of the fugitive, black and white, included: John Cain, Elisha Hillyer, William Jeter, John Knight, John C. Long, J. R. Sprinkle, William Tatum, and Ed Williams.[52]

One of the more important men in the free African American community of Louisville was tried in City Court in April 1855. The report of this case, quoted below in its entirety, offers unusual in-

[49] William M. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad, As It Was Conducted by the Anti-Slavery League* (1915; repr., New York, 1969), 21.

[50] Hudson, "In Pursuit of Freedom," 11-30.

[51] Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898; repr., New York, 1967), 151.

[52] Hudson, "In Pursuit of Freedom," 71-92.

Grave Stone of Washington Spradling. *Collection of J. Blaine Hudson.*

sights into how some Underground Railroad agents operated in the Louisville area:

> James Cunningham (f.m.c. [free man of color]), the musician, was arrested on suspicion of running off slaves [helping slaves escape]. Kirkpatrick [the arresting officer] has suspected him ever since Mr. Shotwell's slave was run off three years since. Letters from [Reverend Calvin] Fairbanks addressed to him and his wife were found in his possession. K. had reason to suspect that the clothing of Shotwell's slave was deposited there. Other negroes belonging to Mr. Thomas, Capt. Rudd, and Mr. Brannin had been run off since, and some of their clothes were found in Cunningham's house. The latest case occurred about a year ago. . . . Officer Hamlet arrested a negro named Shadrach Henderson a year or two ago for running

away negroes, and Henderson, in his statement, implicated Cunningham.[53]

While Cunningham's history was problematic in the eyes of local authorities, there was no specific crime for which he was arrested in April 1855. Kirkpatrick, claimed, in essence, that he "meant to arrest Cunningham sometime before" but had not done so—as "he had been waiting for a more favorable opportunity to send both Cunningham and his wife to the penitentiary." In the absence of a specific, actionable charge, Cunningham was still held to bail in the amount of five hundred dollars "to be of good behavior for one year."[54] Cunningham posted bail promptly. Cunningham's profession enabled him to travel and acquainted him with African Americans and whites throughout the region. Also, the significance of finding the clothes of fugitives in Cunningham's house was that provision was made for clothing changes or disguises in the early stages of these escapes. Although convicted of no crime, his profession and some circumstantial evidence incurred suspicion.

Further, in such a densely populated urban area, fugitive slaves could cross the Ohio River only at certain spots, under certain conditions, such as the right river level and with some degree of active or passive assistance. The most important and best-documented crossing point in the Greater-Louisville area was located west of Portland—leading from Louisville across the Ohio River to New Albany. Using this crossing point required considerable planning and coordination. After negotiating a river crossing, fugitives could follow several routes leading from New Albany and Jeffersonville to the nearby town of Salem or an alternative station, and then northward. Cooperation and coordination between African Americans on both sides of the Ohio River made such escapes possible.

According to local news reports, by the 1850s one or two fugitive slaves escaped from or through the Louisville area each day.[55]

[53] *Louisville (Ky.) Journal*, April 6, 1855.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Hudson, "In Pursuit of Freedom," 109-16.

Conclusion

In summary, free African American communities in the antebellum era originated typically as communities of the excluded. Because whites had the power to restrict the roles and places that could be occupied by free African Americans, African Americans usually found themselves barred from white communities altogether or consigned to the outer margins of or least-desirable areas near white settlements. However, in Louisville this community of the excluded grew as Louisville grew and, by the 1830s, achieved the critical mass of population size and density that, with strong leadership and a growing sense of shared identity, made possible the development of its own institutions, infrastructure, social system, and social relations with the surrounding white community.

From the perspective of white Louisvillians, who were aware of only the surface features of the free-black community, it seemed to be only a nest of troublesome misfits that, if watched closely and policed properly, was otherwise wholly unimportant in the scheme of their concerns. In fact, given the prevailing racial attitudes of the time, that African Americans could be capable of self-sufficiency as free people, let alone capable of building a viable community, was unthinkable. However, this is precisely what occurred in Louisville—with by far the largest concentration of free African Americans in Kentucky and the largest free African American community in a slave state—west of Baltimore.[56] It was not an earthly paradise by any means, but it was a community that was both a refuge and a singular achievement that would enrich and empower African Americans in Louisville and beyond. Although lacking in power and wealth, this evolving community created opportunities for its residents to occupy roles and statuses, and to create institutions that were closed to them in the larger society. As a consequence, recent historians have judged:

> For nearly a century, between roughly 1840 and 1930, the African American community of Louisville was one of the most unusual, vital and influential centers of black popula-

[56] Bigham, *On Jordan's Banks*, 13-32.

tion in the United States. For another three decades, this community remained significant.[57]

Thus, while the history of African Americans in Louisville begins with slavery, the history of the African American community of Louisville begins with the emergence of the antebellum free-black community. This community was the rock on which black Louisville was built and its establishment yielded advantages that would accrue to African Americans locally and nationally for generations.

[57] Aubespin, Clay, and Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville,* 37.