**THE CONWAY COLONY OF YELLOW SPRINGS, OHIO**

**THE BEGINNING**

The Conway Colony began on July 21, 1862 when the Rev. Moncure Daniel Conway left Washington, D. C. with between twenty-nine and thirty-one of his father’s former slaves, bringing them to Yellow Springs, Ohio.

May 1862, Walker P. Conway (Rev. Conway’s father) wrote his wife complaining that their ‘orderly and obedient servants’ had shown their ‘true colors and scattered’. In fact, the intense fighting between the Union and Confederate soldiers in nearby Fredericksburg, Virginia and the arrival of Union troops, drove the former slaves to escape Falmouth and walk the more than 50 miles to D.C.

On July 13, 1862, while vacationing in Yellow Springs, Rev. Conway received a letter from his sister telling him some their former slaves had been located in Washington. Now that he knew where they were, Conway arranged to immediately leave for D.C. to find them. He traveled two (2) days by train, arriving on the 15th.

With the help of his fellow Unitarian Minister, William Henry Channing, Rev. Conway found Dunmore and Eliza McGwinn that first day. Although Conway had expected to find the former slaves floundering in their freedom, instead the couple had started a cake and candy store, were taking in laundry and had saved $60.00 in the months they had been in D.C. Unfortunately, the McGwinn’s could not direct Conway to the rest of the former slaves.

The next day, with a pass from Union General James Wadsworth, Conway planned to travel to Falmouth in search of missing slaves. However, that same night, he decided to search areas of Georgetown where the slave “contrabands” were living in shanties. The five (5) mile walk in the rain was productive. Approaching the only shanty with lights he heard singing. His first knock was met with silence, but in response to second someone called out, “Who is that?” “A friend! Moncure Conway. The doors flung open. There, whooping and clapping, were Walker Conway’s slaves.” Thus their journey began.

Over the next two weeks, Rev. Conway met with President Abraham Lincoln, Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War, and other Washington leaders, seeking their help to get the escaped slaves safely through Baltimore, a very pro-slavery city. Lincoln and Stanton, while sympathizing with Conway, didn’t offer a solution. However, Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, gave Conway a letter to Brigadier General James E. Wool, commander of Fort McHenry in Baltimore, authorizing Wool to provide military assistance to Conway as he transported his father’s slaves through Baltimore.

Reports of Rev. Conway’s efforts to bring his father’s former slaves to Ohio were reported in newspapers nationwide. One such article appeared in the August 1, 1862 Liberator: “A correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial writing from Washington, under date of July 17, says: "Rev. M. D. Conway, of Cincinnati, is here, providing for the welfare of his father's slaves, in number, who, by the fortunes of war, have escaped from Fredericksburg, and are among the contrabands in charge of the Government. He designs removing then to a country town in Ohio, where they may have a chance to improve their condition and take care of themselves. Mr. Conway, senior. is a leading revel of Fredericksburg. This is one of the multitude of curious incidents which the war constantly brings to light."

Rev. Conway and his father’s slaves left D.C. on July 21, 1862. In Baltimore, MD, they had to walk more than a mile from one train station to the other. First, free Negroes protesting what they thought was a slave owner taking his slaves south to escape the Emancipation Act, passed in the District of Columbia, accosted them. Then by proslavery whites who realized Conway was taking the slaves to a free state. When Conway showed the station agent the note from Brigadier General Wadsworth authorizing him to take his father’s slaves from Falmouth, the agent “thought” Conway was planning to sell the slaves that they were given shelter until the train left for Ohio, and freedom. After a three hour wait, Conway was able to purchase tickets on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B & O) train headed to Ohio.

The group traveled through Maryland and what is now West Virginia on to Ohio. They rode the B & O to the Dayton, Xenia and Belpre Railroad. After traveling for hours through slave territories, when the group realized they had crossed over the Ohio River into Belpre and safety, they relaxed and were able to get some sleep.

Twenty-nine people arrived at the Grove Street (now Corry Street) in Yellow Springs on or about July 23. 1862 with Rev. Moncure Daniel Conway:

Dunmore and Eliza (Humpstead) McGwinn and children Alfred, Jacob, and Isabel

Richard and Nancy (McGwinn) Herod and daughter Elizabeth

John Humpstead (Eliza’s brother)

Charles Wilson and Julia (McGwinn) Morgan and daughters Evaline McGwinn and Mary Morgan

James and Clarissie Parker and children Anna, David and Adelaide

Churchwill and Maria (McGwinn/Stokes) Taylor and children: Anne, May, Maria, Lucy, Susan, Willard, Richard, and Moncure/Martin

Maria Wormley

Once in the Springs, the group walked about a mile to a barn owned by Moses Grinnell that had been prepared for them. Local villagers had donated food, clothing and furniture. Moncure Conway had assured the village residents the former slaves were of good character and work ethic, and their farming and housekeeping skills would be an asset to the community.

With the $60 saved from their Washington business, and a little help from Moncure Conway, Dunmore and Eliza were able to buy their 5 acre farm in 1866. He built a small home that had dirt floors, a fireplace for cooking and heat, and a lilac tree grew outside the front door. According to Bertha Morris Baber (a second generation descendant), the home was named “The Conway House” by Antioch College after the College purchased the land. Only a small part of the foundation is visible today. Dunmore and Eliza raised chickens and hogs, and grew vegetables to feed their family and support themselves. Dunmore and Eliza lived on their farm until their deaths, May 13, 1897 and May 28, 1889, respectively

Once settled in Yellow Springs, it was time to find the missing family members. In an August 17, 1868 letter to the Richmond, Virginia Freedman’s Bureau, Dunmore asked for help locating his children, Peter, Nellie and Dunnell and his sister’s children William and Winston Taylor because “he and his sister are poor and have not seen their children for nine years & that the(y) will do all they can to help themselves. Peter the oldest …, can see to the younger if sent.” A September 9th response stated that “Notices were read in all the churches and enquiries made but no tidings of any of the within names parties could be ascertained.”

After a second request, Lieutenant Robert Hamrick wrote the following on October 16. 1868 “I have the honor to state that in answer to enquiries made in communication dated Yellow Springs Greene Co, O. written by Dunnell Greene that all the parties enquired after have been found in this City. The reason they were not found before was on account of the names not being properly spelled instead of Dunnell Green it should have be Dunmore McGwin. Peter the oldest child is employed at Anderson Photography Gallery, Dunmore and Nellie both are in services so also Wm. and Winston Taylor. They express a desire to see their parents but are not able to get to them at present. Letters addressed (to) either of the children in care of the Bureau will be delivered.”

By the 1870 Ohio Census, the McGwinn’s last name had changed to Gwinn. However, Peter, who never moved to Ohio, kept the McGwinn surname until his June 20, 1911 death in Washington, D.C. Nellie also went by McGwinn until she joined her family in Ohio. Nellie’s certificate of marriage Charles Flynn December 25, 1877 in Champaign County, Ohio list her last name as ‘Gwinn’. Nellie Gwinn and her husband. Charles Flynn, inherited the farm upon Dunmore’s death. Nellie died May 3, 1899 and unfortunately, her husband lost the farm to back taxes.

Moncure Conway exchanged letters over the years with Dunmore Gwinn, Eliza Gwinn, Churchwill Taylor and James Parker. He continued to support them to their deaths. Once, Rev. Conway moved from Cincinnati, Judge George Hoadly (Governor of Ohio 1883 – 1885), acted as his emissary to get monies to the former slaves. Upon Rev. Conway’s death, Peter McGwinn sent a letter expressing his gratitude for all that Conway had done: ‘I have often heard them speak of the noble deeds of this grand man. I rejoice to know that my ancestors and my people as a whole had the protecting influence of so great a man.”

**A ROLE OF RELIGION**

As described in Rev. M. D. Conway’s Autobiography, Dunmore and Eliza were very spiritual people. Several members of the Conway Colony, including Dunmore and Eliza Gwinn and Churchwill Taylor, are listed as members of the Shiloh Baptist Church of Fredericksburg, Virginia from 1843 to 1856. They continued to practice their faith in Yellow Springs. Dunmore and Churchwill Taylor were two Trustees of the Anti-Slavery Baptist Church (First Baptist Church of Yellow Springs) established in 1863. Richard Herod was a minister of the gospel at the Baptist Church. His wife, and Dunmore’s daughter, Nancy was one of the founders of Central Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Yellow Springs. Colony descendants have maintained membership of the First Baptist Church over the years. In fact, per Rev. Conway, it was the “piety” and the vocal expression of their faith that caused some of the members to leave Yellow Springs.

**LIFE IN YELLOW SPRINGS**

James Parker and family had returned to Washington, DC by April 30th, 1879. While living in Miami Township, Greene County, James and his wife, Clarissa Ray had 3 more children – Frederick Douglas, Arabell and Clement Ray. The entire family moved to D.C and settled in the District of Columbia and Maryland. James passed August 8, 1891 and Clarissa died March 20, 1907.

The Taylor’s and Maria Wormley left Yellow Springs and moved to Mad River Township before July 14, 1870. There is no record of Maria Wormley after the 1870 Federal Census. Churchwill and Maria added a The Taylor family moved to Dayton where some of their descendants live today. Their son, William, remained in Virginia but his brother Winston joined his parents. Churchwill found work as a day laborer. Maria died November 28, 1883. Churchwill died about 1890. There’s no record of Maria Wormley after the 1880 Ohio Census.

Dunmore Gwinn and his immediate family stayed in the Yellow Springs area. The children married - Isabell to Mack Ford; Nellie to Charles Flynn; Jacob to Lavinia Boyd; Alfred to Ella McMurtry. Isabell’s daughter, Lottie, married and settled in Springfield, Ohio. Alfred and Ella raised 3 daughters in Springfield, Ohio where the eldest, Odella, lived to be 102 years old (11-5-1906 to 5-16-2009).

Julia Gwinn Morgan, Dunmore’s sister, died May 30, 1871, just days before her daughter, Evaline’s marriage to Isadore Morris. Julia’s husband, Charles Wilson remarried and left Yellow Springs after 1880. He passed before 1900 in Madison County, Ohio.

Evaline and Isadore Morris had 5 children and lived in Yellow Springs until their deaths, 1890 and 1928 respectively. They, like most of the original Conway Colony members, are buried in Glen Forest Cemetery, Yellow Springs, OH. Louella Morris married Lafayette Henry, Bertha married Madison “Matt” Baber, and Estella married Samuel “Sim” Mills. Only Clarence Isadore Morris left Ohio. He moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he married and raised his family. Bertha Morris Baber remembers attending the “Confer School” (Hyde Road) as a child.

Nancy and Richard Herod had 10 children, 9 of whom were born in Yellow Springs. Alfred, Mary and Dunmore, all died as infants. Anna married James Thomas, Henry married Lucy Ramsey and moved to Oberlin, Ohio. Pearl married Sandy Hill and lived in Indianapolis, IN. until her death 1962. After leaving Yellow Springs, Richard C. Herod married in Detroit, MI.. then moved to Columbus and Cleveland, OH. Elizabeth, the eldest, was barely 6-weeks old when she and her family rode that train to Yellow Springs. She died in 1885 of diphtheria.

Richard Herod (1836 – 1908) served one year in the War of the Rebellion, Company M, Fifth Regiment of the U. S. Volunteers Colored Heavy Artillery. After his service, he supported his family as a day laborer and as minister of the gospel at the First Baptist Church. Only their daughter, Gertrude Herod White stayed and raised her family in Yellow Springs. While the other Herod children stayed in Ohio, none are living in the area today. Richard died June 16, 1908, and Nancy passed 14 years later on July 17, 1922.

**COLONY LEGACY**

Beginning with Dunmore and Eliza Gwinn, they were landowners. They built homes and raised families. They showed entrepreneurial spirit, raising animals and growing produce to sell to local families and grocers. They moved from day laborer and domestic to working for pioneering entities including Antioch College, Antioch Publishing, Yellow Springs Instrument Company, Fels Research, Vernay Laboratories, and the Village of Yellow Springs. Their extended families supported the area automotive, plumbing, and construction companies. They have completed advanced degrees and were award winning athletes. They supported the creation of and attended the first colored school, “Confer School” on Hyde Road. Socially, several, including Bertha and Matt Baber, were active in the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows Lodge 1979 (warranted August 11, 1879) and House of Ruth Lodge 246 (warranted April 10, 1882). One lasting legacy is the creation of the local black churches, First Baptist and Central Chapel Churches.

In summary, they are integral to the fabric of Yellow Springs, OH.

**CONWAY COLONY DESCENDANTS LIVING IN GREENE COUNTY, OHIO IN 2017**

3rd Generation: Willa Jean Logan Blackmon; Isabel Adams Newman

4th Generation: Stanley Edwards, Annette Valey, Karen McKee, Ellen Edwards, Sterling Wright, Timmy Edwards, Sandra McKee Smith, Robin Jordan-Henry, Cathy Hill, Tracy Hill, Matt Hill, Todd Hill

5th Generation: Melodie Ann Wright

6th Generation: Trinity Edwards

*Jean McKee*

Sources:

The Autobiography, Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway by Moncure D. Conway, 1904, Cassell and Company

Testimonies Concerning Slavery by Moncure Daniel Conway, 1864, Chapman and Hall

The Southern Emancipator – Moncure Conway The American Years 1832 – 1865 by John d’Entremont, July 30, 1987, Oxford University Press

“The Speech of Rev. M. D. Conway” – The Liberator, August 6, 1862 page 3

Letters; Dunmore Gwinn to Moncure Conway, November 10, 1891, Columbia University; Eliza Gwinn to Moncure Conway, May 17, 1881, Columbia University; Churchill Taylor to Moncure Conway, June 3, 1879, Columbia University; Peter McGwinn to Peter V. D. Conway, December 19, 1907, Columbia University

United States Federal Censuses – 1870, 1880, 1900, 1920, 1930, 1940

Ohio Birth, Marriage and Death Records, State of Ohio

Greene County Ohio Birth, Marriage and Death Records, Greene County Room, Greene County Public Library, Xenia, Ohio

Newspaper Articles: The Liberator, Aug 1, 1862, page 123;