Rockbridge Epilogues

African Americans at Lexington Presbyterian Church, 1789–1861

By Neely Young

DAVY'S STORY

WHEN IT WAS ESTABLISHED in 1789, the Lexington Presbyterian Church had no building. The congregation sometimes met in a grove of oak trees, sometimes in a tent, sometimes in the courthouse and sometimes at Matthew Hanna's home. Meetings of the denominational administrative authority for the area were also occasionally held at "Mr.

Above: Marker at the grave of Davy Buck in Oak Grove Cemetery. The longtime sexton of Lexington Presbyterian Church is buried near the site of the original church building.

Hanna's house." [1] In 1797, William Lyle, Arthur Walkup and Matthew Hanna, representing the congregation of Lexington Presbyterian, purchased land in what is now the northwest corner of the Oak Grove cemetery from James Barry,[2] intending to erect a church. Construction began in 1799 and was completed in 1802, and the church remained at this site until 1845, when the present church building was built at the corner of Main and Nelson Streets.

David Hanna — also known as David or Davy Buck — was born into slavery in Rockbridge County at some point between 1770 and 1776. There are conflicting

MATTHEW HANNA

One of the first two elders at Lexington Presbyterian Church was Matthew Hanna. He had been born in Northern Ireland in 1747 and came to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania before the Revolutionary War. By 1778 he was in Rockbridge County and became one of the "First Citizens" of Lexington, established in that year. Hanna helped lay out the town and began purchasing property in Lexington and the surrounding area.[3]

In 1785, Hanna purchased land on the southwest corner of Randolph and Henry Streets, where he later built a tannery. This tannery remained in the hands of the Hanna family

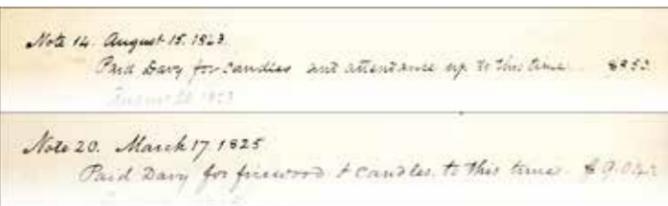

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and their heirs until sometime after 1815 and was still in existence after the Civil War. Before the War, a tanner's house was located on property adjacent to the tannery.[4]

Also in 1785, Hanna purchased the land now bounded by Main, Henry and Jefferson Streets and began to construct his home there. This home was occupied by Matthew Hanna and his heirs until 1848, when it was sold to James Clyce.[5]

The Matthew Hanna house, where Davy Buck lived, on Henry Street, next door to McKemy's Cash Grocery

reports about his exact date of birth, but this was not unusual, especially for slaves. Matthew Hanna did not own slaves when he arrived in Rockbridge County, but acquired Davy after his arrival and before the 1810 census, probably in the 1780s or early 1790s.[6] It appears that Davy worked in the tannery owned by Matthew Hanna and his descendants; his occupation is listed as "tanner" in local death records of 1855. After the original church building was dedicated in 1802, Davy worked as its sexton for 40 years. The final year in which Davy Buck is listed as sexton of the church is 1846, when he would have been 70 years old or older.[7]

Although Davy Buck was enslaved, he seems also to have been something of an "independent contractor" who enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. He appears to

Note 14. August 15, 1823.
   Paid Davy for candles and attendance up to this time . . . $2.52.

Note 20. March 17 1825.
   Paid Davy for firewood & candles to this time . $9.03½

Early Lexington Presbyterian Church records
of direct payment to Davy Buck:
August 15, 1823: "Paid Davy for candles and attendance . . . "
March 17, 1825: "Paid Davy for firewood . . . "

have been paid for his work in the tannery and was compensated directly for his work at the church as well. In his will, made in 1815, Matthew Hanna left the tannery to his son-in-law, John McKee, and stated that as long as McKee should own and operate it, he "should pay a reasonable hire" for Buck.[8]

Church records courtesy of Lexington Presbyterian Church

From the Lexington Presbyterian Church
Treasurer's Records:
"David Buck Sexton Prebyterian Church . . .
Due you this date"

At some point after 1815, McKee released his rights to the tannery to his brother-in-law, John Parry, who continued to employ Davy. In 1829, John Parry leased the tan yard to his son, Matthew Hanna Parry, and Davy was hired out to Matthew Parry. Davy was still in the service of Matthew Parry in 1842, when he was purchased by Parry from his father's estate.[9] In the church


Northwest corner of today's Oak Grove Cemetery, where the Lexington Presbyterian Church's first home stood and where Davy Buck was buried in 1855

session records are two early records from 1823 and 1825 that mention compensating Davy directly for services rendered. Further, in the church treasurer's book, there are numerous mentions from 1841 to 1846 of money owed to Davy Buck, sexton, and paid directly by Robert I. White, the treasurer. There is no mention of payments to the Parrys, showing that Davy was treated as a salaried employee or contractor, an unusual arrangement for the time. In addition, on two occasions in 1840 and 1841, Washington College paid "David Hanna, Sexton" for cleaning up the church after commencement exercises.[10] Thus Davy appears to have had two full-time jobs well into his late sixties or early seventies.

In his 1815 will, Matthew Hanna left his slaves to his wife, Martha. When she died in 1821, she bequeathed Davy to her daughter Martha and son-in-law, John

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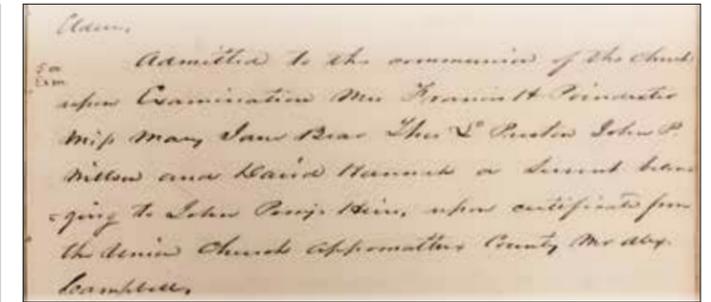
In 1852, three years before his death, Davy Buck (David Hannah) became a member of Lexington Presbyterian Church.

Parry. Both Martha Hanna and the Parrys continued to live in the house near the corner of Main and Henry that Matthew Hanna had constructed. It is likely that Davy resided somewhere on that property, at least until the death of John Parry in 1840 — although he may have lived somewhere else, such as the tanner's house, for at least part of this time or later. After all, Davy was earning regular money and may have been given considerable latitude. At some point after Davy's transfer to him in 1842, Matthew Parry moved from Lexington to the southern part of Rockbridge County. Davy remained in Lexington and was the Presbyterians' sexton until 1846. Where he lived during the last few years of his life is unknown.
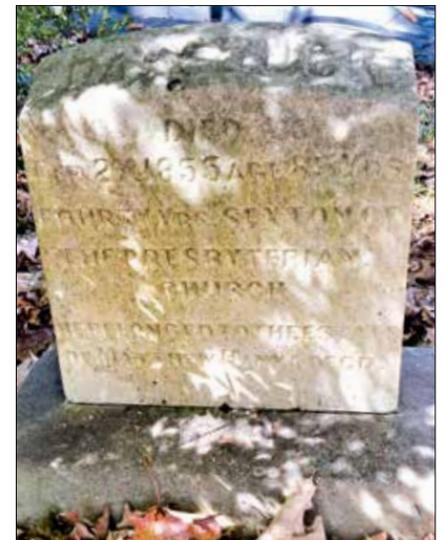
Previously, he had been associated with the Methodist Church,

Davy Buck's grave

but Davy Hanna/Buck apparently became a member of the Lexington Presbyterian Church before the end of his life. In early 1852, a collection was taken by the church for its "former sexton," and later that year he joined the church as David Hanna, in recognition of his first owner. To become a member of the Presbyterian Church, Davy would have had to meet strict requirements and

demonstrate his knowledge of the Bible and other aspects of Presbyterian beliefs and practices. In April 1854 the number of "colored communants" of the church was 13.

In February 1855 the session records indicate the following: "Died February 27, 1855, David Buck, st. [servant] of M. Hanna est. [estate], 85 years of age, 40 y., sexton." [11]

Clearly, David's service to the young church, both as sexton and later as a member, was significant.

Church records noted
the sexton's death in 1855.

MANY YEARS AFTER Davy's death, Sallie McDowell Miller, the daughter of Governor James McDowell and was raised in the Lexington Presbyterian Church, wrote fondly of him:

By the bye, he was an institution in the church. I don't think he was ever young. He seemed to have been born old, and never to have grown any older. He made the fires in the huge ten-plate stoves on either side of the pulpit, with which the attempt was made to warm the church. They were insufficient, of course; but Davy was equal to the emergency. Before the hour of worship, he would pack bricks within and on top of them, which, when thoroughly heated, he, with a long pair of tongs, would capture and distribute through the pews as the service proceeded. He was a very black man, bent nearly double, and as his huge feet turned straight out, his step was slow and heavy, and this scene enacted every Sunday in the winter must have been strangely ludicrous. . .

I cannot but feel kindly to the old sexton — not sexton of the church only, but the gravedigger for the town. His quaint figure and reverend air, as he stood leaning on his spade at the head of the grave, asserts its place in my memory, while the preachers and pallbearers and other conspicuous attendants have entirely faded from it. How long ago he died I do not know; but he buried generations of the people before a younger hand performed that last service for him. [12]

At Davy's death, a notice was placed in the Lexington Gazette of March 1, 1855. An obituary was also given for Duke, former servant of the Rev. George Baxter. There do not appear to have been obituaries of any other Blacks, much less enslaved Blacks, in the early history of the Gazette. Duke's mention was probably due to his having been the servant of the former pastor of the church, who was also president of Washington College. David Buck, on the other hand, was honored in his own right for his services to the church and community. According to the Gazette of June 7, 1888, David Buck's grave site was originally unmarked, but it appears that the church congregation marked the grave in the late 19th century. The stone reads "Davy Buck, died February 27, 1855, Age 85. Fourty Years Sexton of The Presbyterian Church. He belonged to the estate of Matthew Hanna, dec'd."

The story of David Hanna/Buck is incomplete. We know some facts about his life, that he remained enslaved all his life, that he had three occupations — tanner, sexton, gravedigger — and that he became a church member. But many other things we do not know: whether he was married, had children, lived on his own. This sparse historical record is typical of African Americans from the period, both enslaved and free. Many records, such as those of marriage, were not kept for them. Often their names were not even mentioned in local, state or national censuses. Free Blacks had more latitude than those enslaved — for example, they could own property — but there were not as many of them, and they were generally treated as second-class citizens.

So a key question remains unanswered: How the story of David Hanna relates to the broader story of African Americans at Lexington Presbyterian Church and in the Lexington Presbytery.
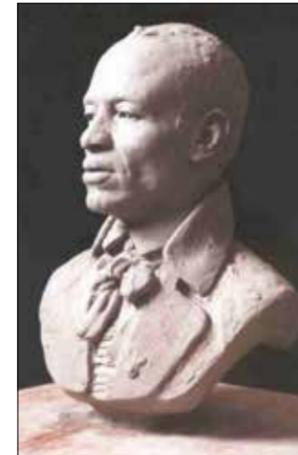

Davy Buck's death warranted an obituary in
the *Lexington Gazette,* unusual for that time.

II. AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE LEXINGTON PRESBYTERY

THE RECORDS of the Lexington Presbytery date to 1786. The Presbytery was formed from the Hanover Presbytery, and stretched from Winchester to Botetourt County, including some parts of what is now West Virginia. The Lexington Presbytery existed until 1970, when, with some geographical modifications, it became the Shenandoah Presbytery. The Lexington Presbyterian Church has been within the boundaries of the Lexington/Shenandoah Presbytery throughout its existence.* Throughout the period leading to the Civil War, the Presbytery wrestled with the issues of slavery, emancipation, abolition, colonization and the role of African Americans in the denomination.

In the late-18th and early-19th centuries, the Black and slave population west of the Blue Ridge was modest compared with those in the Piedmont and Tidewater areas. At the time, there was some strong anti-slavery sentiment in the Presbytery and some participation by Blacks in denominational leadership. An example of the latter is John Chavis, a Free Black who graduated from Washington Academy, now Washington and Lee University, in 1799, becoming the first African American to graduate from any college or university in the United States. In 1800 he passed a theological exam and was licensed to preach by the Lexington Presbytery. He served as a missionary to Blacks in the Lexington Presbytery and elsewhere until 1807, when he moved permanently to North Carolina and established a ministry there. [13] Another Free Black minister, John Erskine,

Washington and Lee University

John Chavis
(conjectured)

preached at the Lexington Presbyterian Church in 1819 and solicited funds to purchase and free his wife and children. In 1829, he preached again at the Falling Spring Presbyterian Church, which then was part of the Lexington Presbytery. [14]

Anti-slavery activity in the late-18th and early-19th centuries was often associated with revivalist efforts, which tended to be egalitarian in nature. There were several such revivals in the Presbytery from 1789 to about 1830, and many of these affected Lexington Presbyterian Church. [15] The ministries of John Chavis and John Erskine were a part of this revivalist/missionary effort, in which Blacks and Whites participated.

EARLY ON, some Presbyterian leaders supported "immediatism," the immediate emancipation of slaves in place or "on the ground." Zechariah Johnston provides an example. Originally from Augusta County and a member of Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church there, he moved to Rockbridge County in 1792 and joined Lexington Presbyterian Church. In 1788, as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates for Augusta County, he had argued that "if it [slavery] were totally abolished, it would do much good." Andrew Moore belonged to another Presbyterian church in Rockbridge and was a member of the House of Delegates from 1785 to 1788. In 1785–86, Moore voted with Johnston and other delegates from west of the Blue Ridge to support manumission of slaves on both an individual and a collective basis.

By 1795, however, attitudes had begun to change, and Johnston joined with others in signing a petition to the state legislature calling for elimination to take place gradually. Although they saw slavery as an "odious degradation of human nature," the petitioners conceded that immediate and general emancipation would be problematic and called for emancipation on the "post nati" basis, with the children born of current slaves after the passage of the act becoming free upon reaching maturity. The signers also called for the education of slaves to prepare them for citizenship, and they continued to support

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* In Presbyterianism, a session, consisting of those admitted to membership, governs each local church. Churches belong to an area Presbytery, which in turn reports to the regional Synod, which is governed at the top by the General Assembly.

emancipation in place.[16] This shift from "immediatism" to gradualism was soon accompanied by condemnation of the radical aspects of a new movement called abolitionism. The best example of this shift in attitude regarding slavery within the Lexington Presbytery is found in the case of the Reverend George Bourne, first raised in 1815 and ultimately adjudicated in 1818 by the General Assembly, the final Presbyterian Church authority.

Bourne, a native of England, left his country sometime after 1805 and settled first in Rockbridge County. At first, he was a minister of the Independent Churches of England, non-conformist Protestants who broke away from the established Church of England. In 1811 he joined the Lexington Presbytery and in 1812 became a minister of South River Presbyterian Church in Port Republic, Rockingham County. He was elected a Commissioner to the Presbyterian General Assemblies

George Bourne

of 1813–15. Starting in 1815, within both the General Assembly and the Lexington Presbytery, he attacked slavery and slaveholders, even ministers who held slaves. Bourne became known as an "ardent abolitionist," and at the fall 1815 Presbytery meeting, his congregation brought charges against him for his attacks on individual slaveholders, both lay and clerical.

George Baxter, then serving as pastor of Lexington Presbyterian Church, was also moderator of the Presbytery and a member of the committee established to try Bourne, who was eventually condemned and removed from his pastorate. The Presbytery did not attack Bourne for his abolitionism but for his immoderate behavior toward anonymous slaveholding clergy and the Presbytery as a whole. At a second trial for Bourne, in 1817, witnesses indicated that the Presbytery "had no quarrel with him on the subject of slavery and asked him if he could retain his sentiments and use language more consistent with harmony." Bourne appealed his case to the ecclesiastical General Assembly of 1818, which upheld the judgment against him, but which also issued

an anti-slavery resolution. The resolution, in the writing of which George Baxter had a significant role, called for gradual emancipation combined with colonization or re-colonization of former slaves in Africa. Although Bourne was not removed for his views on slavery, there would be no further call for immediate emancipation on the ground within the Lexington Presbytery. After the trial, Bourne moved to Philadelphia, where he remained an ardent abolitionist, condemning both gradualism and colonization.[17]

IN THE EYES OF MANY Presbyterians, the abolition movement became increasingly strident and uncompromising in the years after 1818 — a threat to decency and order. Among the most vocal was George Baxter, pastor of the Lexington Presbyterian Church from 1799 to 1831. Baxter was a moderate who opposed slavery on both moral and practical grounds. In 1818, he viewed slavery as a violation of natural rights and Biblical principles and called for instruction of slaves in preparation for freedom, voluntary manumission and gradual emancipation. In 1820, however, the Virginia legislature passed a statute prohibiting slaves from being taught to read and write. The Lexington Presbytery adopted a resolution condemning the law, saying it was "at direct variance with the commands of God, which requires all to 'search the scripture'." The resolution was favored by Baxter and by Henry Ruffner, a new minister in the Presbytery who would soon serve as its moderator and later as a supply minister at Lexington Presbyterian Church between 1835 and 1840.[18] From 1836 to 1848 Ruffner was also president of Washington College and in 1847 wrote the last anti-slavery tract published in the South.

Despite the opposition of Baxter, Ruffner, and other members of the Lexington Presbytery, the Virginia law stayed in effect until the Civil War. This led to a change in tactics by the Presbyterian denomination in the South

George Baxter

and in the Presbytery, which thereafter relied on the oral instruction of slaves in matters of religion.

It also led to an increasing condemnation of northern abolitionists who had little sympathy for their fellow ministers in the South. On October 16, 1835, the Lexington Presbytery specifically condemned "the abolitionists" and in 1836 George Baxter wrote "An Essay on the Abolition of Slavery." He continued to condemn slavery — but now on practical grounds, as a threat to free labor. He stated that immediate abolition would be disadvantageous to slaves who were not yet prepared to exercise freedom.[19] But he offered no practical answer as to how this education would take place in the face of Virginia's laws regarding the instruction of slaves. Therein lies the conundrum faced by Valley Presbyterians after about 1820: How to oppose slavery in a manner that did not result in their being labeled as abolitionists themselves? How to bring about the end of slavery in a way that would not disrupt the entire fabric of society? How to find practical ways to end slavery while constrained by restrictive Virginia laws and harsh "Black Laws" in many of the free states? How to promote a cause that would benefit all of Virginia despite increasing sectional differences between the western and eastern areas of the state?

The situation became even more difficult after the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831, which had led to a backlash against anti-slavery activity, particularly east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The response in the Lexington Presbytery was uneven, and shifted over time. In 1815, one of George Bourne's most loyal supporters in the Presbytery had been the Rev. A. B. Davidson, a native of Botetourt County and graduate of Washington Academy. He apparently shared many of Bourne's views on abolition and was forced to resign his position as pastor of the Mossy Creek Presbyterian Church in Augusta County, although he remained in good standing with the Presbytery. He returned to Rockbridge, taking no further part in the Bourne controversy. He became secretary of the Lexington Presbytery Missionary Society in 1820 and maintained a school for Black and White

students in Lexington in the 1820s, an indication of his progressive attitude.[20]

The Presbytery and the Synod, which embraced the Lexington and other regional Presbyteries, continued to emphasize missionary activity and religious education for Blacks. On October 3, 1840, the Presbytery appointed Samuel D. Campbell to serve as a "missionary among the negroes," but not much came of this initiative. In 1841, Campbell abandoned his missionary effort and became the pastor of High Bridge Presbyterian Church in southern Rockbridge County. In 1845, the General Assembly passed a moderate statement that was both anti-slavery and anti-abolitionist, emphasizing the responsibilities of individual masters to their slaves in areas such as religious instruction. On August 17, 1845, the Presbytery passed its own resolution concerning the religious instruction of the "colored people", and in 1857, another resolution on this subject was passed.[21]

Despite these resolutions, much of the responsibility for religious instruction remained in the hands of individual churches or their members. Some churches, such as Lexington Presbyterian, took this responsibility seriously, while others did little. Over all, the Presbyterian mission to Blacks was limited, not only within the Lexington Presbytery but across the South more generally. This reaction was due partly to the increasing popularity among Blacks, enslaved and free, of the more-evangelical denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists, which had fewer requirements for congregants and ministers than did Presbyterians.

Because of the difficulties associated with freeing slaves in place, the Lexington Presbytery began to look to the colonization movement with increasing sympathy. In 1806, the Virginia legislature had passed a law requiring newly emancipated slaves to leave the state within 12 months or risk being sold back into slavery. Those freed after 1806 had to petition the legislature to remain in the state. The law was selectively enforced, particularly west of the Blue Ridge, but this "Sword of Damocles" continued to hover over the heads of free Blacks. As a result, manumissions declined after 1806, and the growth

of the free Black population in Virginia slowed. At first, owners who emancipated their slaves tried to send them to free states in the North, but soon many free states in the North and Northwest severely curtailed the freedom, movement and marriage of their Black residents through so-called "Black Laws." Some states attempted to bar Black immigration altogether.[22]

The American Colonization Society, A.C.S., was founded in 1816. Its philosophy and policies were similar to those of the moderate anti-slavery members of the Lexington Presbytery and the Lexington Presbyterian Church. In 1830, the A.C.S. issued a statement: "The society has expressed the opinion that slavery is a moral and political evil, and that it has regarded the scheme of colonization as presenting motives & exciting a moral influence at the South favorable to gradual and voluntary emancipation."[23] The idea of colonization, which allowed free Blacks to return voluntarily to their ancestral home in west Africa, seemed at the time to be a way out for those concerned about the place of Blacks in Virginia and in America more generally. It was also a rebuttal to the more radical views of abolitionists and was soon embraced by many in the Lexington Presbyterian Church, the Lexington Presbytery and the Shenandoah Valley more broadly. In 1823, the Virginia Colonization Society was founded, followed in 1826 by the Rockbridge Colonization Society, R.C.S. The latter organization included many

prominent Presbyterians, both lay and ministerial. There were other colonization societies throughout the Lexington Presbytery, which in 1844 passed a resolution in support of the A.C.S. and the colonization effort.[24]

After about 1850, there was less discussion within the Presbytery about emancipation, whether sudden or gradual, and a sort of fatalistic acceptance of the "peculiar institution" set in. Pro-slavery arguments that were prevalent in other parts of the South were never popular in the Shenandoah Valley; yet in some cases, slavery came to be viewed as a necessary evil for which there was no easy, practical solution. In addition, during the decade before the Civil War, the conversation began to shift to the issues of unionism, secession and states rights.

III. AFRICAN AMERICANS AND WHITES IN THE LEXINGTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

THE LEXINGTON PRESBYTERY (1786) predated the Lexington church (1789), but from its inception, the church played an important role in the local community, in the Presbytery and throughout western Virginia. Several factors were involved. First, Liberty Hall, later called Washington Academy and still later, Washington College, was located in Lexington. One of the oldest colleges in the United States, it was the second-oldest in Virginia and the oldest west of the Blue Ridge. The school was, to all extents and purposes, a Presbyterian institution. Its president, formally called rector, was always a Presbyterian minister, often associated with the Lexington Presbyterian Church, as were most of its faculty. The first and second rectors, William Graham and George Baxter, were both pastors of the church, and another, Henry Ruffner, was a supply pastor at the church. Second, many church members were active in the political, economic and social life of Lexington, of Rockbridge County, of Virginia and of the nation. Finally, many individuals, both lay and ministerial, played key roles in the Presbytery. It is not coincidental that the name of the church and the Presbytery were the same.

From the beginning, the church had strong ties, both positive and negative, to the local African American community. The original church was designed with a balcony or gallery where Blacks, both free and slave, would be seated. When the church moved to its current location in 1845, the balcony was replicated. Most Blacks who attended the church were not members, and many were probably not there of their own will but rather because their masters required it. Still, attendance among Blacks seems to have been strong throughout much of the pre-war period, consisting of perhaps 100 worshipers or more. In 1834, many Blacks, with the encouragement and support of White members, attempted to form their own Presbyterian church, located just outside the town. According to visitors from England who observed services at both the White and African churches in the summer of 1834, Blacks attended services first in the morning at Lexington Presbyterian, sitting in the gallery, and then in the afternoon at their own church. Because Virginia law prohibited Blacks from assembling for worship unless a White person was present and presiding, elders from Lexington Presbyterian attended the Black church by turn. At the time, Lexington Presbyterian had about 500 attendants in all, 300 of them members and 10 who were Black. The African church had 150 in attendance, 60 of them members. Some of these overlapped.[25] In addition, there may also have been Blacks from other churches or unaffiliated individuals who worshiped at the African Presbyterian church.

By 1833 the Synod was recommending that churches undertake the regular religious instruction of the Blacks, and Lexington Presbyterian appointed several members to this end. Religious instruction for Blacks, free and slave, began at the church in April 1833 and continued for some time. Two of the members appointed for this purpose were known opponents of slavery: John W. Paine and Alfred Leyburn.[26] An irony is that they, like many other church members, were also slaveholders. This situation seems unfathomable now, but they were trying to find a middle way between northern abolitionism and the increasingly pro-slavery, nullifying voices of eastern Virginia and the Deep South. William Henry Ruffner, who was raised in the Lexington Presbyterian church and supported gradual emancipation, colonization and Black education, wrote of his father, Henry Ruffner, sometime pastor of Lexington Presbyterian, that he "was an anti-slavery man as were James McDowell, Samuel McDowell Moore and David E. Moore and many others of that day, but they were slaveholders and not fanatical. Dr. Ruffner, although a slaveholder, considered slavery in this age and country as bad economically, and also as bad socially and politically; in which views he did not differ from most of the leading men of Rockbridge County."[27] All those named by Ruffner were Presbyterians and all except Samuel McDowell Moore were members of Lexington Presbyterian Church.

In the 1830s, the instruction of Blacks took place both at Lexington Presbyterian and at two other locations in or near the town. The establishment of the African church seems to have developed from this initiative. Unfortunately, Lexington Presbyterian support for the Black church was short-lived. On March 5, 1836, the Session reported that the Blacks were meeting on their own without White supervision and were also baptizing people and administering the Lord's Supper. These were violations of the laws of both the state and the
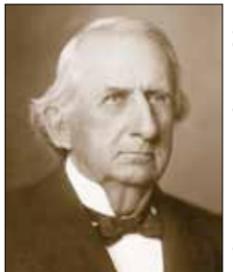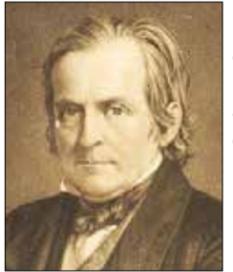
Father and son, emancipationists: Henry Ruffner, top, and Wlliam Henry Ruffner
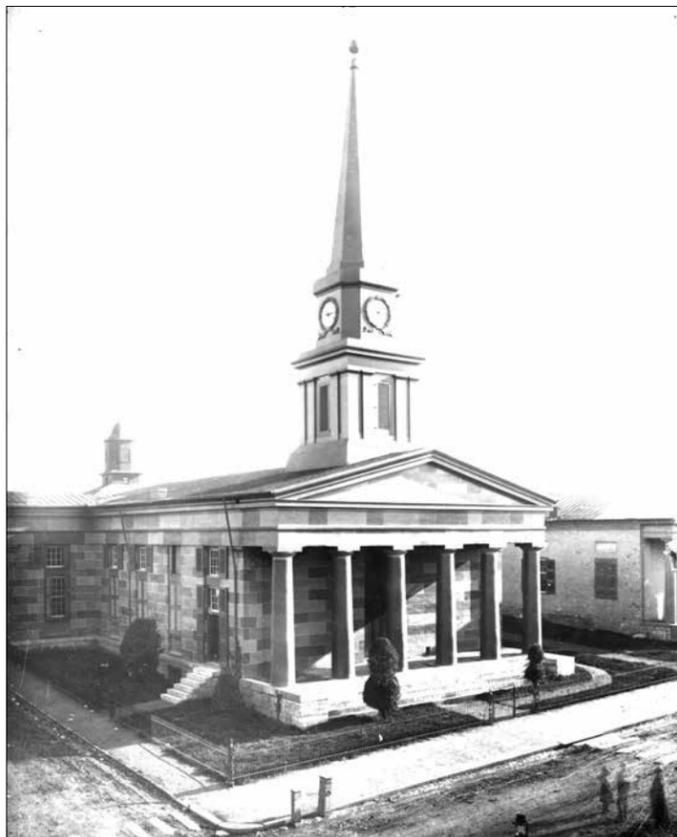
denomination, and the session said it could not "countenance" this disorderly behavior. Still, church leaders allowed the semi-autonomous meetings to continue so long as White church members were present and the Blacks did not continue to perform baptisms or distribute communion.[28] This compromise demonstrated the limits placed on Black education and worship at the time and reflects the paternalistic attitude of church members and many others in the White community. By 1840, apparently, the African church either ceased to exist or was foundering, and the session called for religious services for the "coloured people" to be held every other Sunday in the church lecture room. The session also encouraged slaveowners to furnish themselves with the catechism of the pro-slavery Presbyterian minister Charles Colcock Jones and to instruct their slaves in the "fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion."

In 1843, Black Presbyterians asked the session to appoint someone to attend and conduct services "in order to legalize the same." The session complied by appointing two individuals, one of whom was the new pastor, John Skinner, to arrange "worship and service of the coloured members of the church on Sabbath nights." These services probably included non-members as well, and appear to have been held at the church. In the spring and summer of 1845, before he entered Union Theological Seminary, William Henry Ruffner led a Black Sunday School class. In 1846, the session passed a resolution in support of the "oral instruction of the coloured youth" in a " coloured Sabbath School."[29]

Thus it appears that there were two efforts to educate Blacks in religious matters before Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's famous Black Sunday School of the 1850s, which consisted of boys and girls between the ages of six and fifteen. Jackson's class is alleged to have provided not only oral instruction to slaves and Free Blacks, but also instruction in reading the Bible, in contradiction to Virginia law. His seems to have been the most successful class to that time, with between 80 and 100 members. Jackson resigned from the leadership of the class in 1858, but it continued through the Civil War and beyond. Its last superintendent was J. T. L. Preston, Jackson's former brother-in-law, whose classes sometimes had as many as 200 to 300 students. The class was disbanded in 1887, having produced three Black ministers of the Presbyterian and Methodist Episcopal churches.[30] In short, during the years from about 1830 to 1860, the religious instruction of slave and Free Blacks was a high priority at Lexington Presbyterian.

ALTHOUGH THERE APPEAR to have been Black attendees at Lexington Presbyterian from its inception, our knowledge of these individuals is scant, and some remain anonymous. The majority of the African Americans who engaged with the church were not members, and no records of them were kept. Some of these may not have been members of any church.

Amy Hill provides an example of the limitations on records regarding Blacks associated with the church. Born in 1759 and died in 1839, she was a free Black who stated in her will that she wished to be buried near the Presbyterian church. She charged her executor to set over her grave a set of tombstones.[31] She was clearly a member or attendee of Lexington Presbyterian, but there

Amy Hill's grave in Oak Grove

is no mention of her in church records. Samuel Hayes (1805–65), another Black Lexingtonian, is not listed in the Rockbridge County Free Black Register and yet is buried in the family plot of Robert I. White, longtime member of Lexington Presbyterian and sometime treasurer. Hayes was most likely an attendee or member of the church.

Beginning in the 1820s, the Session began to keep better records of Black membership. From 1834 through 1859, the number of Black communicants was recorded every year. That number was usually in the range of 10 to 15. The first Black member recorded was Samuel, a "slave" of the Parrys in 1822. In September 1833, "Jane, Susan, Ann, Rosanna, and Agee, black" became members. In September 1834, three "servants," as the record termed them i.e., slaves, were received into communion by examination: James Alexander, Susan —, a "servant" of David E. Moore, and Susannah Lyle, a "slave" of Captain William Lyle. Session records note that "the right hand of friendship" was extended to them. In November 1842, other "persons of color" met with session for admission: George —, Ann Eliza —, Eliza —, a servant of Dr. Henry Ruffner, and Maria —, a free woman of color. Also, in November and December 1842, Mary — and Amanda —, women of color belonging to Dr. Estill, were admitted, along with several Whites.[32]

On one occasion in 1834, a free Black man and church member, Henry Alexander, who had been admitted as a servant of the Hamilton family in 1831, was suspended from church services for "lying and dishonesty."[33] The punishment may sound harsh, but similar punishments were handed out to White members for the same or lesser offenses. The church records for Blacks, though sparse, indicate that many of them were actively involved in the life of the congregation. From 1822 to 1852, a total of 27 Black members were admitted to membership. The majority were slaves or servants, but a few were free people of color. Three Blacks were admitted to membership after the Civil War, the last two in 1879. Records do not indicate any Black members after then.[34]

One of the few accounts of Black participation at Lexington Presbyterian comes from Sallie McDowell Miller. Having related information about Davy Hanna/Buck, she recalled another prominent Black in the church:

Speaking of him [Davy Buck] recalls another one of his race conspicuous in her zeal for church decorum. There were no negro churches in those days, and the Presbyterian colored people came and occupied the right hand gallery of that in which their masters worshiped. Colonel Reid's Winnie, a solemn old woman scowling under a big bonnet, sat just above the preacher at the end of a long bench full of children, armed with a switch of great length and most venomous look. Woe betide the little urchin who grew restless or yawned under the long sermon! At the least noise she would rise, and with a precision of aim truly wonderful, bring down her rod upon the offender with such effort as to restore order immediately.[35]

BY THE 1840s, several of Lexington's other denominations appear to have had Black attendees and members, including the Episcopal, Methodist and Baptists churches. These churches arrived on the scene later, and seem to have attracted fewer Blacks. Still, some Blacks were prominent in these denominations. Isaac Liggons, a free Black man, was selected by the Methodists in 1832 to be an exhorter to the Black community and seems to have been successful. At their first meeting in Lexington, the Baptists baptized Milton Smith and appointed him a deacon to the Black members of the church.[36]

Several White members of Lexington Presbyterian were supporters of gradual emancipation and the efforts of the A.C.S. to repatriate Blacks to Africa. Alfred Leyburn, longtime church elder, was also a member of the Virginia House of Delegates from 1835 to 1842. He was a supporter of gradual emancipation and a member of the R.C.S. In 1835 he voted to affirm the right of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and in 1836 he opposed a resolution to suppress abolitionist publications and organizations in the state of Virginia.[37] Samuel McDowell Moore, son of Andrew Moore, was also anti-slavery and pro-colonization. At the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829–30, he stated:

Our slaves are by nature equally as free and independent as ourselves or, in other words, that they are by nature entitled to equal rights and privileges. . . It would be both our interest and our duty to send them out from amongst us, if any practicable scheme could be suggested for effecting this object.[38]

In January and February 1832, the last open discussion in Virginia for the elimination of slavery took place in Richmond. Delegates from

all over the state came to express their views. Samuel McDowell Moore and James McDowell, the representatives of Rockbridge County, were among the most outspoken supporters of a plan for general emancipation. Moore continued to espouse anti-slavery views and was a signatory to the famous Ruffner pamphlet of 1847 which called for the end of slavery in western Virginia.[39]

James McDowell, a member of Lexington Presbyterian Church and of the R.C.S., was perhaps the best-known politician from Rockbridge County and western Virginia before the Civil War. He was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates from 1831 to 1835 and again in 1838, Governor of Virginia from 1843 to 1846, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1846 until his death in 1851. In the 1830s and '40s he was a consistent supporter of a plan that coupled general emancipation with colonization. In his private notes from this period, he stated that a plan for emancipation in Virginia was but the first step: "It is not disguised that the partial if not the entire abolition of slavery in the United States is the ultimate effect at which we aim."[40]

Henry Ruffner, the president of Washington College and sometime supply pastor of Lexington Presbyterian, published *An Address to the People of West Virginia* in 1847. This was the culmination of the emancipation and colonization argument in the South and was widely supported in the Rockbridge community at the time. John W. Paine, another member of Lexington Presbyterian, had proclaimed in 1832 that the people of Rockbridge were ready "to a man to go to any lengths in the bounds of reason and prudence to effect a relief from this overwhelming evil." As late as 1849, Paine wrote that "this part of the state is already ripe for scheme of gradual emancipation."[41] Unfortunately, the pamphlet also represented the last gasp of the anti-slavery movement

Ruffner's 1847 pamphlet to western Virginians "shewing that slavery is injurious to the public wefare"

in the Upper South and was later repudiated even by some of those who had initially supported it.

Despite their support for emancipation, very few members of the Lexington Presbyterian Church freed their slaves during the pre-war period. There were exceptions. Susan McDowell Taylor, sister of James McDowell, freed her slave, Othello Richards, in 1849. Richards then purchased the freedom of his wife and children, and the family departed for Liberia in 1850, where he became a Methodist minister. Samuel McDowell Reid, another supporter of the Ruffner pamphlet, also freed some of his slaves. George Dabney, a professor at Washington College and fellow Presbyterian, freed seven slaves who emigrated to Liberia in 1846.[42] Altogether, almost 200 slaves were freed in Rockbridge County between 1831 and 1860, and more than 100 former slaves and freedmen departed for Liberia during the period. On December 22, 1849, the Lexington Gazette announced that a meeting had recently been held at the Lexington Presbyterian Church to honor and bid farewell to some 30 emigrants to Liberia from the Lexington and Rockbridge area — the largest single group to depart for Liberia before the Civil War.

Education of Blacks, manumission and colonization continued up to the Civil War — and Lexington Presbyterian was a significant part of this effort.

IV. CONCLUSION

THE LEGACY OF Lexington Presbyterian Church with regard to African Americans from 1789 to the beginning of the Civil War was certainly a mixed bag. Many White members of the church supported emancipation, but they were also slaveholders. Despite that support for emancipation, they were also opposed to abolitionism and the abolitionists. Black members, slave or free, were greeted with the right hand of fellowship when they joined — but then relegated to second-class status. At one point, White church members even supported the establishment of an African church, only to decide later that the services being conducted there were disorderly and unacceptable. Some individuals, such as David Hanna, were much loved and respected, but Blacks overall were patronized. After the war, Blacks began to drift away from Lexington Presbyterian and move toward the more evangelical denominations, particularly the Baptist church. Ironically, religion in Lexington became more segregated to the point that there are no African American members of Lexington Presbyterian church today.

NOTES

1. James Wilson McClung, *The Historical Significance of Rockbridge County* (Staunton: The McClure Company, 1939), 33.

2. Rockbridge County Deed Book A, June 7, 1785, Rockbridge County Courthouse, Lexington,VA, 521; George West Diehl, "The Saga of a Frontier Church," *Rockbridge Notebook,* chapter VI, compiled from articles in *The News-Gazette by* A. Maxim Coppage III (Utica, N.Y.: McDowell Publications, 1982), 134, Special Collections, Washington and Lee University; Rockbridge County Deed Book KK, 434-36; "Blandome," National Register of Historic Places Form, January 12, 2001.

3. Mrs. Charles McCulloch, "Hanna House Withstood Fire of 1796", *Rockbridge County News,* February 28, 1952, in Withrow Scrapbook, v. V, 12, Special Collections, W&L; "An Old House and a Notable Family," *Lexington Gazette,* January 5, 1898.

4. "Churches of Rockbridge County," The Genealogy History Group, https://genealogytrails.com/vir/rockbridge/church_earlychurches .html; Diehl, "The Saga of a Frontier Church," 134.

5. Rockbridge County Deed Book C, April 5, 1797, 390–91.

6. In the 1810 Federal Census for Rockbridge County Matthew Hanna is shown as owning three slaves.

7. U.S. Death Registers, Rockbridge County Virginia, 1853-1912; Lexington Presbyterian Church Treasurer's Book, 16-17, 52-56, Lexington Presbyterian Church, Lexington, Virginia.

8. Matthew Hanna Will, April 14, 1815, Rockbridge County Will Book 4, 224, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

9. "Matthew H. Parry, plaintiff, vs. Heirs of John Parry, etc.", Chancery Court Records, Rockbridge County, Library of Virginia, Richmond, 24-7, 74, 140.

10. Lexington Presbyterian Session Records, 1789-1845, v. I, 22, 32; L.P.C. Treasurer's Book, 16-17, 52-56, Lexington Presbyterian Church; Trustee Papers, Record group 1, Special Collections, W&L.

11. L.P.C. Session Records, 1845-1859, v. II, 200, 214, 216.

12. Sallie P. McDowell Miller, "A Virginia University Town," *The Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine,* v. 1, issue 5 (May 1883), 499.

13. Neely Young, *Ripe for Emancipation: Rockbridge and Southern Slavery from Revolution to Civil War* (Buena Vista: Mariner Publishing, 2011), 45.

14. *Ibid.,* 63.

15. Howard McKnight Wilson, *The Lexington Presbytery Heritage* (Staunton: McClure Press, 1971), 80-81.

16. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 42-3.

17. *Ibid.,* 48-52.

18. *Ibid.,* 57-8.

19. *Ibid.*; Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery, 1786-1847, vols. I and II, 462, Special Collections, W&L.

20. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 49-50.

21. Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery, 1786-1847, 541, 619-20; Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery, 1848-1880, 171.

22. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 47-8.

23. *Ibid.,* 3, 12.

24. Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery, 1786-1847, 605-6.

25. Andrew Reed and James Mattheson, *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches by the Deputation from the Congregational Union of England and Wales* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), v. 1, 150-55; The English visitors were also recorded in the *Lexington Gazette,* October 23, 1835; L. P.C. Session Records, vols. 1 and 2, 115.

26. L.P.C. Session Records, v. 1, January 3, January 7, and January 12, 1833, 64-68, and April 2, July 6, 1833, 74.

27. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 69.

28. L.P.C. Session Records, vol. I, March 5, 1836, 128-9.

29. *Ibid.,* v. 1, February 4, 1840, 171-2, and July 12, 1843, 252, v. II, 1845-1859, October 12, 1846, 27-28; Katherine L. Brown, "Stonewall Jackson in Lexington," *Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society,* v. IX (1975-1979), 200; H. Waddell, "Dr. William Henry Ruffner," *The Virginia Teacher,* nos. 10-11 (October-November 1924), 469.

30. James Robertson, "Stonewall's Sunday School," radio program aired on WVTF, August 6, 1996, wvtf.org/civil-war-series/2019-10-23/stone-walls-sunday-school; L.P.C. Session Records, v. II, June 12, September 11, October 2, December 3, 1858, 299-301, 303; Robert F. Hunter, *Lexington Presbyterian Church, 1789-1989* (Lexington: Lexington Presbyterian Church, 1991), 68; Theodore C. DeLaney Jr., "Aspects of Black Religious and Educational Development in Lexington, Virginia, 1840-1928," *Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society,* v. 10 (1980-1989), 139-151; Larry Spurgeon, "Major Jackson's Sabbath School" (unpublished essay, Lexington, Virginia, 2019), 12-28.

31. Amy Hill Will, Rockbridge County Wills, 1809-1874, 32.

32. L.P.C. Session Records, v. 1, September 20, 1833, 80-81, September 20-1, 1834, 102, November 11 and 13, 1842, 217-18, and December 9, 1842, 220-21.

33. *Ibid.,* February 8, 1834, 83.

34. Presbyterian Church Lexington Church Register, vol. 1 contains records of the church from 1789 to the 1920s. It is located at Lexington Presbyterian Church. On pp. 122-23, it indicates that David Buck became a member of Lexington Presbyterian in 1852 and before that he had been a longtime member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was the last Black to join the church before the Civil War.

35. Miller, " A Virginia University Town," 499.

36. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 63; DeLaney, "Aspects . . .", 134-35.

37. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 66, 101.

38. *Ibid.,* 72.

39. On the slavery debate of 1832 and Samuel McDowell Moore see *Ibid.,* 75-96.

40. 40. *Ibid.,* 85.

41. *Ibid.,* 85-6, 115, 116.

42. On Othello Richards see Neely Young, *Trans-Atlantic Sojourners: The Story of an Americo-Liberian Family* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2017); Young, *Ripe for Emancipation,* 109, 180.