

Father Dickson Cemetery

'Graveyards Are For The Living, Are They Not?'

Story by Robert Tabscott

Photo by J.B. Lester

My reverence for black history takes me often to Father Dickson Cemetery on Sappington Road in Crestwood. It is a historic place, originally used for slave burials in the mid-19th century. The cemetery was officially dedicated to Moses Dickson in August, 1903.

Dickson, a native of Ohio, settled in St. Louis in the 1840s and lived here as a freed man. An ardent anti-slavery man, he was one of the architects of the underground railroad that flourished on both sides of the river for more than a quarter of a century.

Tradition has it that Dickson, with 12 lieutenants, secretly organized and trained an underground army of 47,000 men scattered in eight southern states. From a house on Green Street in St. Louis, he laid plans for an armed insurrection, "to break, he said, the bonds of our slavery." There is a strong conjecture that Dickson and John Brown were in league with each other.

With the failure of Brown's insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Dickson issued orders for his to "hold their place and wait." When the Civil War began, he and many of his followers entered the ranks of the Union army and fought with distinction.

Following the war, Moses Dickson became a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and organized the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, a fraternal group that claimed



FATHER DICKSON CEMETERY. "What we want is the same political freedom that is but justly given all citizens of the country, the right of representation. The right to vote, to uphold the honor and dignity of our common country."

— Moses Dickson

thousands of members across the country. Under the auspices of the Equal Rights League which he helped organize, Dickson traveled across Missouri urging passage of a state constitutional amendment giving Negroes the right to vote.

"What we want," he said, in Sedalia, Marshall, Independence and Kansas City, "is the same political freedom that is but justly given all citizens of the country, the right of representation. The right to vote, to uphold the honor and dignity of our common country."

While the vote for suffrage failed,

the passage of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave blacks the ballot that Dickson had sought.

Moses Dickson died in 1901 and was buried in St. Peters Cemetery on Lucas and Hunt Road. Shortly thereafter, the body was moved to its present resting place. In 1915, a monument to his memory was raised by the Knights and Daughters of Tabor in the cemetery that bears his name.

But what gives Father Dickson Cemetery its greatest distinction is James Milton Turner. Born a slave in St. Louis County, he bought his

freedom for \$50 and had the rare privilege of attending Oberlin College in Ohio which had opened its doors to blacks.

During the Civil War, Turner was a valet for a Union officer. He was at the battle of Wilson's Creek and was wounded at the bloody siege of Shiloh. Following the war he came home to help black refugees find land and a new future. Known for his passion for human rights, he joined Moses Dickson, George Weldley and Jeremiah Bowman working tirelessly for suffrage.

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Turner was the chief architect in developing public education for blacks in Missouri. He helped organize Lincoln University in Jefferson City and represented the claims of former slaves and displaced members of the Cherokee, Choctaw and Chickasaw nations.

In 1871, President Ulysses Grant appointed Turner minister to Liberia, the first black man to be honored with such a position. He served with distinction until 1878.

James Milton Turner died in November of 1915. Thousands of people paid their respects and followed the cortege to Father Dickson Cemetery. But in spite of the outpouring of public sentiment, the black patriot was virtually forgotten. His grave was never marked. Moreover, the cemetery itself was neglected, ravaged by time and vandals.

It was not until 1979 that Turner's grave was rediscovered. Two law students from St. Louis University at the urging of Professor Gerald Dunn, found the burial site and erected a stone with a simple inscription: James Milton Turner — Slave, Educator, Ambassador.

Therein lies another story. In 1882, James Milton Turner, in an unprecedented action, was invited to speak to the Missouri Historical Society on the occasion of the presentation of an oil painting of Dred Scott.

Mr. Seever, secretary of the Society, inquired of Turner, "Where were the late Mr. Dred Scott's remains interred?" "I have to inform you," replied Turner, "that I am almost unable to answer your question. However, from what I have been able to gather, I am of the opinion that interment took place in St. Peter's Cemetery . . . else at Bellefontaine."

But Turner was incorrect. Dred Scott was first buried in the old Wesleyan Cemetery at Grand and Laclede. When that burying place was abandoned, Taylor Blow, once Scott's owner and a Catholic, had the remains removed to Section 1, Lot 177 in Calvary Cemetery. The grave was never marked.

In 1957, Rev. Edward Dowling S.J., along with John Madison, a descendant of Dred and Harriet Scott, set a stone to mark the grave of the famous American. The marker reads:

Dred Scott

Subject of the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in 1857 which denied citizenship to the Negro. Voided the Missouri Compromise Act. Became one of the events that resulted in the Civil War.

There is no record of where Harriet Scott is buried. Perhaps she lies in the undergrowth of some forgotten field waiting to be found again. In his speech before the Missouri Historical Society in 1882, James Milton Turner said:

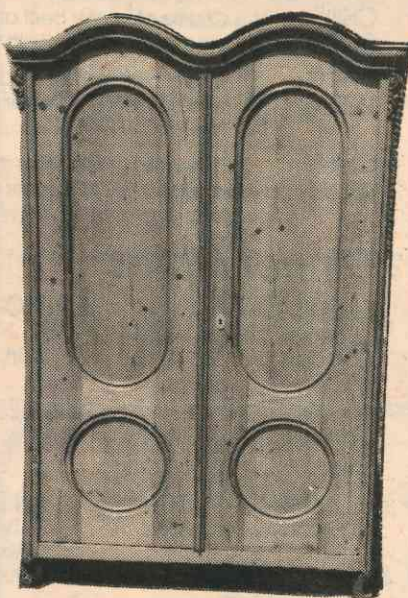
"The Negro has been with us from the beginning of the history of our state, and indeed, of the nation itself. Surely he must somewhere, at some time and somehow, have carved his humble niche in the temple of time. Certainly I may take this audience to witness that no history of the state of Missouri, nor of the United States, can be complete without mention of Dred Scott, the poor slave, who had but one ambition, but one aspiration in this life, the freedom of himself, of his wife and of his children."

Cemeteries tell us something about ourselves. I visit the graves of men and women who have touched my life, even though I may never have known them. I once poured a bottle of ink on Elijah Lovejoy's grave. I left a rose on Annie Hutchenson's plot and placed a flag where Dred Scott rests. Graveyards are for the living, are they not?

Go walk in Father Dickson Cemetery in Crestwood and see what I mean.

(Friends of Father Dickson Cemetery is encouraging citizens to preserve the heritage of the cemetery. Families, churches, scout troops or civic groups interested in adopting a section of the cemetery to maintain or support with donations can call 965-7184, 694-1141, or write to Friends of Father Dickson Cemetery, P.O. Box 26645, St. Louis, Mo. 63122.)

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