



center city

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BUS ME TO NASHOBA AND BACK

by Pat Waters

In November 1825 Frances Wright came to Memphis and later purchased some 2000 acres near present day Germantown in order to institute "A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States without Danger of Loss to Citizens of the South". By January 1830 Wright had dissolved the Nashoba community and was accompanying some thirty slaves to free colonization in Haiti. This episode in Memphis history has been known thereafter as the "Nashoba Experiment" because the plan did not work.

The most common causes of the plan's failure have been found within the Nashoba community itself: the absenteeism of Frances Wright, the incompetence of underlings, the radicalism of the competent members, the poor quality of the land, and the indiscriminate goals of the community. Wright worked alongside the slaves in the clearing and planting of the land and contracted malaria. To regain her health and obtain additional funding she had to leave the community for long periods of time. Her sister, Camilla Wright, Richeson Whitby, a former Shaker, and James Richardson, a Scot physician and free-thinker, were left in nominal charge of the effort. Camilla and Whitby, who subsequently married to the regret of both, lacked the force of will and strength of character necessary to successful organization. Richardson, who had both qualities, was singularly indiscreet. He caused to be published the Nashoba Book, a diary of the community's daily life. Unfortunately Richardson's "views on color and on the sexual

relation" hardly met the approbation of mid-nineteenth century American society. The fact that he was openly living with the daughter of an octoroon brought down such epithets as "one great brothel" upon Nashoba.

Ostensibly the community was founded to accomplish emancipation by means of slave labor: slaves would earn their freedom by working out their purchase cost. In 1826 Wright signed a deed of trust conveying property and holdings, including slaves who had the legal status of chattel, to ten trustees. Black self-emancipation was still the goal, but now it was concomitant to a white commune or cooperative community based upon shared property and labor: a community acting from rational principles of equality and free thought which would by example and education prepare Blacks for political and intellectual freedom.

In January 1828 Wright published her "Explanatory Notes..." on Nashoba. Recognizing the repressive forces--such as unequal division of labor, sexism, popular prejudices, etc.--that make up society as a whole, Wright gave up self-emancipation as impracticable: America had political freedom but not moral freedom. Individuals must learn "to view each other as members of one great family, with equal claims to enjoyment and equal capacities for labor and instruction--admitting always the sole differences arising out of the varieties exhibited in the individual organization." Wright foresaw the economic unfeasibility of slave labor and knew slavery would soon be abolished, leaving a bitter residue of racial hatred and mis-

(continued on page two)

trust. She thought the only solution--the only guarantee to racial harmony--to be amalgamation of the races: intermarriage. And lo the hot breath of Southern outrage blew upon her. She became a "bold blasphemer and voluptuous preacher of licentiousness", "a female monster whom all decent people ought to avoid."

If I may borrow the thesis of Stanley Elkins' book, Slavery, perhaps we shall see why Nashoba was bound to fail. Great Britain had no historical tradition of slavery, hence the definition of slavery in America arose from local economic necessity. The first Blacks arriving at Jamestown were not slaves but indentured servants--perpetual was not legally determined until 1671 in Maryland. Once slavery as an institution was legally defined, it soon incorporated its own traditions. Slaves had no legal rights as to marriage, parenthood, education or the ability to earn one's freedom. There was no institutional church to recognize a slave's right to a soul. Economically, legally, and socially slaves were chattel: goods, things with no personhood involved, with no right to personality. For the white world this situation inspired a curious psychological result: to be Black was to be nothing. If the white world had recognized the humanness of being Black, then it would have had to realize its own inhumanity. So rather than look inward, white America chose not to recognize Black as synonymous with person. White America saw Black, and the color alone decided status; hence American slavery was unique.

Frances Wright had a typically British point of view: if a society had to change, what better way than in and through the buffer zone of its institutions. Abolitionists, American and radical, cried sin; they saw an evil that must be cast out whatever the cost or consequences. Wright doubtless viewed slavery as an evil but without the ravaging sense of Abolitionist guilt. Wright knew morals could not be legislated, therefore she sought an economic solution to a problem born of economic expediency. But what she did not reckon on was the double nature of American freedom.

Frances Wright loved America as only a European can: for its promise, for its fresh start, for its energetic assumption of democratic idealism. She saw America in a messianic light, as a proving ground of philosophic ideas and as an example for the rest of the world. America, free from the corruption of European prejudice and habit, would be naturally receptive to new ideas. But she failed to see that because America lacked such regulatory institutions as church, bar and trade associations, that her effort was just one more

anarchic action splintering, veering and ricocheting off the myriads of other actions in this land. There was no reason why Nashoba should have worked. The government, state or federal, was the only institution strong enough to initiate any action and it was not about to rend its fabric over this--that would come some 35 years later. Having felt the force of public opinion, Frances Wright was somewhat bitter and somewhat more realistic about America. But she was confident that America would fulfill its promise and would do what no nation heretofore had done. "It is much to have declared men free and equal, but it shall be more when they are rendered so - when the means shall be sought, and found, and employed to develop all the intellectual and physical powers of all human beings, without regard to sex or condition--class, race or color."

 * RETRACTION *
 * In response to our October 30th issue, in *
 * which we communicated a report on the Edu- *
 * cation Task Force, CENTER CITY has received *
 * a courteous letter from Mr. George Hardin, *
 * Public Relations Specialist with the Memphis *
 * Housing Authority. Mr. Hardin pointed out a *
 * substantial discrepancy in the Downtown Pop- *
 * ulation Table of that report as it relates to the *
 * Public Housing Projects. The MHA official *
 * figures are given below in the corrected table. *
 * PUBLIC HOUSING *
 * Hurt 717, Dixie Homes 1,995, Foote Homes *
 * 3,298, Lauderdale 993, *Venson 221, *Borda *
 * 206, *Jefferson Sq. 221, *Barry Homes 223. *
 * Total 8,874 *Exclusively for the elderly. *
 * In the absence of the principle author of *
 * said report, I speculate that the figures reported *
 * in CENTER CITY represented the population *
 * profiles of general areas. If I am not mistaken *
 * the information was obtained from City Hall and *
 * was an analysis by tract of 1970 Census Data. *
 * The figures themselves were not erroneous, but *
 * the mistake was made in ascribing them as the *
 * characteristics of specific projects rather than *
 * of downtown tracts. Nevertheless, the essence *
 * of the report stands unaltered. *
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THE TRIAL OF WM. PETERSON CONTINUED
 dence, had yet in reserve an eloquent witness against him, whose integrity could not be bought with gold, whose ear was deaf to the voice of the seducer, whose faithful heart was as steel to the wiles of the corrupter, and whose testimony fell upon the astounded ears of the jury, as

"Confirmation strong
 As proof of Holy Writ."
 (To Be Concluded Next Week.)

The Trial of Wm. Peterson

Part 7

by J. T. L. Sneed, Esq.

Reprinted from the MEMPHIS DAILY APPEAL
November 29, 1855.

It had been proven in the course of the trial that about 8 o'clock on the Sunday morning that the deceased and the prisoner left Mr. Hammel's, a gentleman coming toward Memphis met the horse proven to have been Mr. Merriweather's, on the Hernando road, about two thousand yards from the scene of the murder, and South of the same, galloping at full speed in the direction of Hernando, and appearing to be exceedingly frightened; with difficulty the gentleman intercepted and caught him. There was a saddle and bridle and pair of saddle bags upon him. The rein of the bridle was upon his neck. The gentleman finding the animal almost uncontrollable from agitation and fright, had some difficulty in retaining the rein in his hand, until a young man came forward and claimed him. The young man who claimed the horse, was recognized by the gentleman upon the trial as the prisoner at the bar. He came forward, said the gentleman, claimed the horse, thanked him gracefully for catching him, mounted and rode hurriedly off in the direction of Hernando. The prisoner's clothes were observed at the time to be covered with dirt as if he had been rolled upon the ground – but supposing the horse had thrown him, the gentleman went on his way thinking nothing of the circumstances. The facts here submitted to the jury, in reference to the wonderful instincts of the horse, are these: It will be remembered that the noble animal in question was of extraordinary intelligence, and singularly attached to his master, whom he was in the habit of following about whenever he came to the pasture or the farm yard where he was. Thomas Merriweather had owned the horse for several years, and had taught him many of the various little feats of intelligence, which add to the character of that noble animal so great an interest.

Some several months after the prisoner had been committed to jail under indictment, William Merriweather, accompanied by a number of gentleman witnesses in the case, came from their homes in Mississippi to attend the trial. William Merriweather was riding the horse of his deceased brother, which had by this time been recovered

into the family. Their journey lay along the Hernando road, and by the spot where the body had been found. About one or two hundred yards before the party reached the scene of the murder, the horse which William Merriweather was mounted, began to exhibit symptoms of alarm and excitement, which considering his ordinary gentle and tractable character, much surprised his rider and the gentlemen who were with him. There was no apparent cause of alarm, and the several other horses of the party betrayed none. His agitation increased as the party approached the fatal spot; and when they had reached a point in the road opposite to it, the excitement of the horse arose to so furious a pitch, that he became almost unmanageable. The whole party checked their horses, and for a moment regarded the strange conduct of the horse with profound astonishment. His flesh quivering – his nostrils distended – his eye glancing into the wood where his noble master had met his horrible fate – he stood for a moment snorting and neighing – a sublime picture of wild-est excitement. One of the party suggested to Mr. Merriweather to give him the rein, which meanwhile had been tightly drawn. This was done, and instantly the noble animal rushed into the wood, and down to the identical tree under which the body had been found, and commenced pawing at its root. After a moment, he trotted out further into the wood, and after making a semi-circle in his course, returned to the same spot, and there stood neighing, trembling, and pawing until he was forced away. Similar exhibitions were made by the horse several times afterwards in passing the spot.

At this startling development in the testimony, a thrill of feeling ran through the court room, like an electric shock. Thus far the proof had traced out the history of this mysterious murder with a certainty too fearful to be doubted, and had pointed to the pallid youth who sat in the prisoner's dock as the guilty agent thereof. Justice tempered even with an unstrained mercy, seemed impatient for the sacrifice, when the strong arm of the law interposed in its might and majesty to shield him. The venue, unproven or even in doubt, would have left to the tribunal of justice no other alternative than to bid him go out again a free wanderer upon the earth, with the blood and guilt thick upon him. But the God who "marketh the sparrow when he falls," in His inscrutable Provi-

The Day Care program at First Presbyterian is in need of the following items: used tricycles in good working order, balls, items for the "dress-up" box, dolls, childrens' books (in good condition), stuffed toys, cotton blankets, games suitable for use by children aged four to eight, and old shirts for making painting smocks. Your contributions will make it possible for us to offer a better program at the same cost. Items may be left in the Church Office.

Contributions in excess of our needs will be turned over to the Goodfellows.

MEMPHIS FILM SERIES

Lyceum Film Theatre

November 26 - "The African Queen"

MSU

November 27 - "Lady Sings the Blues"

Memphis Public Library

November 29 - "The Mouse on the Mayflower"

Brooks Gallery

December 1 - "A Wall in Jerusalem"

Jewish Community Center

December 3 - "Images"

The Wesley Foundation will act as the local sponsor for the nationwide "Fast for a World Harvest" on November 20-21. Beginning at 5:00 p.m. on November 20, well-fed Americans will be invited to share hunger for twenty-four hours.

Memphians who observe the fast are asked to give the money saved by going hungry for one day to help small farmers in Asia, Africa and Latin America grow more food. The money can be turned in at the Wesley Foundation, which is the MSU campus center for the United Methodist Church, 3625 Midland Avenue.

Center City

**First Presbyterian Church
166 Poplar Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 38103**

CENTER CITY invites all individuals, organizations, and institutions to utilize its services for any pertinent, non-commercial announcements to be made to the downtown community. Most of the work on CENTER CITY is performed by volunteers; even the tasks of the editor-layout person are of a part-time nature. Therefore, articles, and announcements must be mailed c/o the Editor, to CENTER CITY, First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar, 38103.

If our readers think that there are areas of interest and importance which CENTER CITY has overlooked, perhaps they would do well to make an effort to communicate such ideas. And on our part, CENTER CITY will make the effort to pass on these ideas to the community.

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR NOVEMBER 21 - NOVEMBER 29

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21

Ham, Sweet potatoes, Lima Beans, rolls

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22

Turkey and Dressing, English Peas, Cranberry Sauce, rolls

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 25

Salmon Croquettes, Hash Browned Potatoes, Tossed Salad, rolls

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, English Peas, rolls

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28

Closed, Happy Thanksgiving

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29

Closed

*Second-class
postage paid at
Memphis, Tennessee*