

The Story of John Williams, Colored*

By LILLIE D. TRUEBLOOD

John Williams, familiarly known as "Black John", was a negro who probably came to Indiana with the Lindley family. William Lindley, father of William B. Lindley, was the sponsor of Williams in later years. It was not uncommon for Friends or Quakers who came to Indiana from North Carolina to bring negro servants with them. After settling in Indiana, it was often true that these pioneers made it possible for such servants to acquire land, clear it and make homes for themselves. Black John lived on a tract of one hundred sixty acres that he purchased of John Reyman, Sr., lying southwest of the present Legion Grounds. Mr. Reyman held a mortgage on the farm for a time but the buyer paid it off rapidly. He cleared fields, built a cabin and raised sufficient grain to fatten many hogs and cattle each year until the time of his death.

A short time ago the writer learned from Oliver Overman, whose memory travels back for more than a half century, information relative to the subject of this sketch. Mr. Overman's grandfather, Isaac Macy, lived on the farm adjoining that of Black John. Mr. Macy had intimate dealings with his colored neighbor. The mother of the writer lived with her sister who was a daughter-in-law of "Uncle Isaac", as Mr. Macy was called. She used to relate interesting stories about Black John that excited one's fancy. So vivid was her description of him that it is easy yet to picture him. He was a giant of his race—tall and sinewy with enormous feet, so large that it was necessary for him to have his shoes made to order. They were made of home-tanned leather, for there were many tanneries in this country at that time. Tanning was a pioneer industry of much importance. An aunt of the writer used to be employed by Black John to knit for him a supply of socks each fall. This she did from her homespun yarn, and huge things they were with long feet and such heels as were rarely seen.

John became quite wealthy for those days and being a negro some jealousy arose against him, accompanied by a desire to lessen his importance. One morning early in December,

* This article is based on a paper read at the Memorial Meeting, held at Old Blue River Friends Church on Sunday, October 2, 1932. The passages quoted from legal documents or statements made in regard to court action were copied from or based on the records of the Indiana Supreme Court and of the Washington County Circuit Court.

1864, the good people of the Blue River community were shocked and saddened when Thomas Rodman, spread the news that he had found the lifeless body of Black John in his own dooryard. Rodman had called at the home of the colored man to buy some cattle. After the discovery, he had cause for uneasiness as there was danger that he might be accused of the murder of the defenseless man.

A strong feeling against negroes existed among the proslavery element of Washington County during and just after the Civil War. Following the emancipation proclamation, this element felt sure that negroes would receive citizenship to which they were deeply opposed. Impelled by the heat of the situation, they proposed to destroy colored people who would not leave the neighborhood.

On the December night when the tragedy occurred, there was a light snow on the ground. The perpetrators of the deed came to the home of Black John and aroused him from his slumbers. He ran out into the yard in his night clothes throwing his purse, which contained a small amount of money, behind the wood-box as he passed. A shot rang out and the victim fell near his own cabin door, the fatal bullet having entered his back.

Since the slain man had just sold a number of hogs, a common belief, for a time at least, was that the motive for the crime was robbery. If so, there was disappointment, as Black John had left the larger part of the proceeds of the sale with William Lindley. There were those who believed robbery to be only the ostensible object of the killing, the real cause being race prejudice. It is believed to this day by one who well remembers the tragedy that the men who committed the crime were not after money, but just out to kill a "nigger", as they would have said it.

There were a number of colored persons living in the community and in the town of Salem near by. There was a darky meeting-house located on the southeast corner of the Joe Emmet Reyman farm with a cemetery close at hand where several colored people had been buried. It was in this burying ground that the dusky remains of our Old Blue River pioneer were laid at rest. They were conveyed to the cemetery by George Starbuck who received from William Lindley twenty-five dollars for the service.

The Blue River Friends who had interested themselves in the welfare of this worthy negro, who was never married, had counseled him to leave his property to his race to be used for the education of colored children in Indiana. Accordingly, Black John had made a will which was duly recorded in the County Clerk's office at Salem. The document was drawn up and signed on January 15, 1857. It was witnessed by E. K. Coffin and Edward B. Hagan. The will contained the following provision:

All of my property, both personal and real, I hereby bequeath to William Lindley, to be held in trust for the education of the colored race in the state of Indiana; and further I appoint the said William Lindley as executor of this my last will and testament.

The will was probated on December 22, 1864. On March 10, 1865, the executor reported the sale of the land for \$5,175. The total realized from the sale of all property was \$6,401.87. The final report of the executor was filed on April 13, 1867, which showed a balance, after deducting all expenses, of \$5,537.58. The report of the executor adds: "I release to the court the above amount and hereby relinquish my trust".

Though he had completed his duties as executor, William Lindley felt it to be his obligation under the terms of the will not only to act as executor but to hold and administer the fund after the settlement of the estate. In April, 1869, therefore, he asked the Court of Common Pleas to return to him the money coming from the sale of the property of John Williams in order that he might carry out the trust. The judge of the court refused the request and then Mr. Lindley appealed to the Supreme Court of Indiana which found for the appellant. He was required to give bond in the sum of \$12,000, after which he was authorized to hold the proceeds of the estate and administer the charitable trust. This settlement was made in 1870.

It is now possible after more than sixty years to throw further light on the use of this fund. The Trustee, William Lindley, or an heir, must have turned the fund over to the Indianapolis Asylum for Colored Orphan Children. Be that as it may, the custody of the funds and the use of the income therefrom were legally confirmed as vesting in the institution by the Washington County Circuit Court on June 1, 1926.

The Court's answer to the petition of the Indianapolis Asylum for Colored Orphan Children reads:

And the court having examined said petition and being advised as to said report [of the Executor, William Lindley], do now grant the power of said petition to the Indianapolis Asylum for Colored Children and approves of the report therein contained. It is therefore ordered and directed by the court that the Indianapolis Asylum for Colored Children, Be and is appointed Trustee under the Will of John Williams deceased, to have and to hold the fund in trust provided for in said will according to the terms thereof. That said sum consists of principal of \$5,000.00 now held in cash by said asylum together with accumulated interest amounting to \$750.00. And in the management of aforesaid trust, the same shall be in all things under control of the Indianapolis Monthly Meeting of Friends Church, to which church the directors of the asylum shall make annual report, and to the Washington County Circuit Court every five years. And it is further provided that the Indianapolis Asylum for Colored Children shall bear all expense of administration including a fee of four (\$4.00) dollars to this court.

The present generation of Washington County have been wholly ignorant of the existence of such a fund and of its intended purpose until the writer of this paper searched the records and published her findings in one of the local County papers. This was only a beginning. Much light has been added by more recent research. Such mystery seldom shrouds the last will and testament of one of the citizens of our community, and it is altogether an unusual circumstance. It may be said in conclusion that while Black John did not wield a great influence when alive, rather the opposite, the circumstances connected with his untimely death, the way he was guided in disposing of his earthly belongings, the discovery of how his bequest is being used in our commonwealth—these things may make their impress on future generations. The provision which he made to aid in the education of colored children, makes it the concern of the Society of Friends at Blue River to work for the education and uplift of backward races.

He was a man of quiet mien and lowly birth,
Who dwelt among our fathers long ago;
Only a rough stone marks his resting place,
But memory is more than monument of stone.