

HSGL Newsletter

Official Publication of the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing

January 1994

PLEASE NOTE...

The program this month will take place at the Lansing Public Library in the Friends Auditorium. This is different from what was published in our 1993-94 Program Calendar.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing EXECUTIVE BOARD

Officers

Linda Peckham
President
John Curry
Vice President
Diana Reedy
Secretary
Pat Heyden
Treasurer

Trustees

Dave Caterino
Richard Frazier
Hondon Hargrove
JoAnne Jager
Jim Lyons
Richard Racki
Philip Siebert
Michael Unsworth

Newsletter Editor
Craig Whitford

The Death of "Father Little"

As published in the Lansing Republican, March 12, 1884

DEATH OF "FATHER LITTLE."—James Little, better known as "Father Little," the aged colored man who has been the ward of the Industrial aid society for the past three years, died suddenly at the house of Lord Nelson Turner, corner of Michigan avenue and Pine street, at 6.35 Monday morning. Mr. Little has been feeble for more than a year, and his death, which resulted from heart disease, was not unexpected, although its suddenness was something of a surprise. He attended church on Sunday morning, walking to the Pine street church, about half a block, and returning alone. He appeared weak upon his return, and passed a bad afternoon and night, Mr. Turner attending him until about six o'clock A. M. Monday, when he retired, leaving Mr. Little feeling better and walking the floor, Mrs. Turner having arisen at this time. He walked from the kitchen into a front room, was taken with a spasm, caught on to a chair, and then fell to the floor, living about 10 minutes. Mr. Little, as is generally known, was born a slave, in eastern New York, but was manumitted and received a fair education. He came to Michigan about 35 years ago, opened up a new farm in Oneida, returned to New York and married, bringing his wife back with him. He has since resided in Michigan, most of the time in Lansing, and his history is well known to nearly every man, woman, and child, for "Uncle Jimmie" was a prominent character. He was a man of unswerving integrity, industrious, kind-hearted, cheerful, and patient under trials. With a keen sense of humor, no man more thoroughly appreciated a harmless jest, but he shrunk instinctively from any-

Continued on Page 2

INSIDE: The Funeral of "Father Little"

As published in the Lansing Republican, March 19, 1884

The HSGL Newsletter is published bimonthly from September through May.
Articles and news of historical interest may be sent to the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing, P.O. Box 12095, Lansing, MI 48901.
Linda Peckham, President. Tel: 517/372-3385.

Death of "Father Little," Cont.

thing that could give pain to the most sensitive person, and exhibited a Christian spirit which might well be imitated by many with whiter skins. Simple, pure-minded, and warm-hearted, "Uncle Jimmie" was a welcome guest wherever he went, and his cheery and homely words and ways made for him a host of friends among young and old, without distinction of color, who will greatly miss the old man's presence and daily greeting. The funeral services were held at the Pine street church on Tuesday at 2 o'clock p. m. under the direction of the Industrial aid society.

The Funeral of "Father Little"

As published in the Lansing Republican, March 19, 1884

Funeral of Father Little.

On Tuesday afternoon the last rites were performed over the remains of James Little, the aged colored man, whose death was chronicled in the Republican of March 11, and they were consigned to the bosom of Mother Earth.

The funeral was held at the Pine Street M. E. church, and the little chapel was crowded with friends and acquaintances of the deceased, among whom were some of our most prominent citizens. The services were held under the direction of the Industrial aid society and of the Central M. E. church, of which Mr. Little was a member. No attempt was made at decoration, but in the coffin flowers had been placed by kindly hands, together with a hymn book and some other articles which were buried with the dead at his request.

The services were opened with singing by a choir composed of singers from most of the churches of the city, led by Chas. H. Thompson. An earnest and eloquent prayer was offered by Rev. George Taylor, and a most appropriate sermon was delivered by Rev. W. H. Thompson, pastor of the Central M. E. church, from Zech. 1-5: "Your fathers, where are they?" The following was the substance of the sermon:

One by one the "fathers" are passing away. Our thought does not terminate upon the cold form. If we are true to our instincts and intuitions we cling to their memory, but more do we cling to the idea of their continued existence. The thought of what they are now is more than the thought of what they were, the thought of their present actual state overshadows even the memory of their lives as we saw it.

To-day we have come together as Christian citizens, to pay our tribute of respect to the memory of a man, venerable by the years he had lived, and whom a generation has, under a common impulse of esteem, called "father." This title was given him not by reason of his age merely. Age stands for something. It marks the narrowing margin of life, and is suggestive of discipline, of opportunities, of experience, but not necessarily of paternal virtue. It is the *kind* of man that makes the aged a "father." There was that in the departed which excited the respect of old and

young alike. Small in stature, unpretentious in manner, there was nothing specially noticeable in his exterior except as he gazed (I will not say that), as he glanced at you. Father Little never gazed: but there was sympathy, keenness, light, fire in the quick, restless, searching gleam of his eye, and a stranger felt as though that old man had seen through him. None ever caught that glance for the first time without turning to look after the man.

Now behind the mystic influence exerted by our venerable brother was that which was its cause, namely, character. A genuine noble, disinterested, ingenuous character. Still further back behind character, which is the sum of qualities merely, lay that spirit and faith which constituted James Little a Christian. To speak of him in any other light and ignore this, would be an affliction to his soul, if he knew it, and an affront to his saintly memory. To him Christianity, or rather Christ, was everything. He drank deeply of Christ's spirit. He had experiences to which ordinary Christians are strangers. He saw things that many eyes see not. He heard things that many ears hear not, and which it would not be lawful for many of us to utter. He walked on high, His place of defense was the munitions of rocks. The secret of the Lord was with him.

Born, probably, in 1803, he was unfortunate enough to inherit a dark complexion, and for that became a chattel, a piece of property of marketable value. How much his several owners realized on him, as each year of his early life he became heavier and stronger and of enhanced value, we are not told, but that he changed hands frequently is certain. As a thing, a chattel, a brute, he changed hands frequently and no doubt at a profit to his owner in each transaction. He finally attained a valuation of \$65—possibly \$150 or \$200 as money is now.

During the agitation of 1821 which brought the country upon the verge of a premature civil war, which conflict, by the Missouri compromise, was postponed 40 years, during that agitation our brother was liberated by Mr. Hart. The red tape through which that freedom was attained required that his age be known, and it is by this data that the time of his birth is approximately fixed, giving his age as at least 81, possibly 82. For a period of 26 years we have but a few bare incidents of his life, but these are in themselves suggestive of the spirit of the man. He went to school and to the academy, showing aspirations not born of his lowly birth nor kindled by dignified surroundings. He was a type of that large class of colored people out of whose natures the quenchless fires of immortal longings, not slavery, with all its man degrading and mind cursing power, could extinguish. What school attainments he reached we have no means of knowing; but we know this, that he was a man of strong mind, of lofty conceptions of life and its privileges as also of its duties, and that there was enshrined in that skull a brain which was the throne of a mind little short of genius itself.

But leaving school as a freeman he set him self about the work of illustrating his right to freedom by his industry and frugality. He was no spendthrift, but carefully and prudently saved his precarious earnings, and in 1847—37 years ago—secured a piece of land in Eaton county. For 20 years he tilled the soil on his farm. They were years during the whole of which the colored man was under the social ban, as were any disposed to befriend him. They were years during which the sum of all villainies struggled to capture the country and menaced, if it did not intimidate, the friends of the colored man. During these years our friend and brother wrought and toiled.

In 1867 he removed to this city, an old man after the average age of men, some 64 years of age. But it was not long ere those who saw him and heard him became impressed with the fact that a remarkable man had come to the city. By eye and voice Father Little soon established for himself a

place in the confidence and hearts of all who knew him.

Now the place he gained in the attentions of people was not a transient one. It was not the result of any one special act of heroism, or because he was once a slave, but it was because of his sterling integrity and genuine character. It was a progressive and increasing hold upon the confidence of the citizens.

You gave him a cottage home. To him it was a palace, and, so far as his increasing infirmities would allow him, he labored to turn its surroundings into a paradise. He tried to justify your benevolence and to show his profound appreciation of your kindness.

The last earthly tie which bound him to earth was broken nearly three years ago. April 1, 1881, his wife was taken. The tie was not broken, only transferred to the higher home. Earthly possessions lost their charm. He resolved to dedicate his home to the benevolent purposes of the ladies' aid society. He did so, and in doing that he shed upon it a perpetual halo, and it remains, homely, humble, but through your benevolence and his self-denying act, a monument to the genuine character of the man whose death we mourn to-day. Dedicated "to the use of the Lord's poor." What James Little did he did as a religious act. Never was church made more sacred by religious service than the little home which, amid prayer and praise, was solemnly set apart as a "home of the poor." May it long remain; may it grow into an asylum for aged and needy ones. After all, perhaps it was not much to do. Certainly it was not much for such a man—a man who knew what it was to be enslaved for his color, to be insulted for his color, a man who walked among men of fairer complexion, but who set no price upon citizen privileges, who have not patriotism to use a cheap vote, even to save their country. James Little once paid, so he said, \$250 to vote. It was not much for a man who set such a value on the paltry privilege of voting to give away his house. Ah! behind all this in our brother's soul was a longing, an expectation of a better home. He has reached it: a mansion, a "building of God," an eternal home.

Now in placing James Little among the fathers, and inquiring "where is he?" it is not to be inferred that we do not know. We need no bible assurance that this venerable man is in heaven. It is well to know that "in Jesus Christ is neither bond nor free," that in every nation he that "feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted." We may or may not be interested in the conversion of the Ethiopian church showing that a colored man may be saved. It is certainly inspiring to contemplate the anticipations of prophecy, "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands." There is a city somewhere whose walls are four square, with gates on every side, and nations walk in the light of it and bring their glory and honor into it. Then somewhere there is a multitude of every nation and kindred and tribe and tongue. So cosmopolitan are the forecastings of scripture truth; but if none of these things were revealed there would not be one here with a single doubt concerning the destiny of this brother. We all somehow feel if anybody deserved heaven, he did, and we are just as sure he is gone there as though we had seen the chariot of flame descend and bear him away.

But if you had lived with James Little the whole sixty years of his Christian life, you would never have heard him claim heaven in that way. He was a Christian, and by that law of paradoxes which marks the experimental features of that life, his strength lay in his weakness, his merit in trusting the mercy of God, and his chief virtue was humility. He lived at the foot of the cross. He had two terms in prayer which revealed the spirit in which he discharged that duty,

"Father!" Who has not seen him bending lowly yet speaking so familiarly as though God were close by, "Father!" "God of Israel!" "Father!" How tender; how important; how confident! I don't wonder his prayers were prized. Another term frequently upon his lips in prayer was "Savior!" James Little was a Christian; his Savior was divine. "Father," "God of Israel," "Savior" were synonyms on his lips, but the word Savior to him had vast meaning. It had in it the thought of sin and its turpitude, its consequences as an eternal catastrophe, the atonement, its vicarious character, the spiritual renewal of the nature, and an adoption of a divine relationship. In a word the thought of a Savior to him signified salvation from peril by divine power.

To him Christianity was a conscious experience; it was self-evidenced, and to others who knew him it was self-evident. In his presence the skeptic had nothing to say. The gleam of another world was in that eye, and through that dusky face shone the sunlight of eternity. He had no argument; he was himself the living logic of Christian faith. He was a living epistle. The spirit of God told him he was a "child of God." His life told those who knew him. Men with whiter skins have wished they had as white a soul as James Little. Now, whatever there is in theory or in figures of speech, to him there was everything in the fact of spiritual purity as attained by the atonement, by being "washed in the blood of the Lamb."

How much is such a man worth to a city? Did you ever hear him pray? If you never did you know nothing of the man whose remains lie before us. We look upon the broad river without a thought of its rivulet source; upon the tree without thinking of the subtle forces that cause it to grow. So we look upon such men without asking after the secret of their power. Father Little was a man of prayer. He had contact with a battery of divine power; this made him electrical, mighty, moving. He was familiar with the way into the audience chamber of God, and he often went there. We never heard him without calling to mind one of the ancient patriarchs or prophets pleading for his people. There was the audacity of unswerving faith, the presumption of familiarity; yet there was also the tender pathos of the penitent sinner, and the humble plea of a wretched suppliant. As a man of prayer the death of this interceding patriarch is a loss to the city of Lansing. His power in prayer was at once the source and strength of his own character and a revenue of blessing to the city.

Then notice his love for his own people. A welcome caller at the homes of white people. When exhausted he would call at my home. We deemed it a delight to spread before him refreshments. His expressive gratitude was a lesson to the children, and his conversation a benediction. There is more than one home that prized the privilege of ministering to his necessities. His calls were always marked with propriety, and a politeness born of his Christliness. His denominational relations were with the Central church since his coming to Lansing, but while we prized him as an honored member, we felt that he belonged to all; and especially did he cultivate the religious association of his own people. Often would he excuse himself to his pastor from the meetings to aid his struggling colored brethren. He desired their prosperity. He lived with them and died among them.

Yet above the love of self, of kindred, and of people, was his love of man. Some of us will never forget his often repeated anxiety for the young men of our city. The last time he was at my house his burden was for our young men. He had watched the doors of the saloons. Seen our young men enter the billiard halls and seen them fall until his

heart ached. He would speak kindly and entreatingly to the young men on the street. Behold this venerable old man like one of God's detectives shadowing those gates of death and of hell in the vain hope of snatching some brand from the burning. His memory should be cherished by the young men of our city. There lie the remains of the best and the sincerest friend the young men of Lansing ever had or ever will have.

And more, his scathing, scalding, and graphic denunciations of the liquor traffic will never be forgotten. The picture of this aged colored man hovering about the dens of vice in our city, like an angel of mercy, is worthy of immortal canvas. To the evil doer, the saloon keeper, the memory of that old man may be a haunting spectre.

We forbear to speak of things so familiar to you—of the groups of children he would gather in order to sow in their minds the seeds of truth and duty; of his missionary zeal and labors—these are known to you all so well.

But he is no more; his voice is hushed; the gleam is gone from the eye; the glory no longer lights up the countenance. He no longer prays for us, nor is he any longer dependent upon your clarity; he needs it no more.

"O, happy, happy soul,
In ecstasies of praise,
Long as eternal ages roll,
He sees his Savior's face."

Mansion, robe, crown, and palm are all his now. He is in the city whose builder and maker is God. He hungers no more, he thirsts no more, neither does the sun light on him nor any heat. He is indeed free now, out of the house of bondage, his narrow house of clay. We care for the sacred dust, we gather up the mantle that fell from his ascending shoulders and fold it away. But even that shall rest in hope. We cannot away with the idea that again that eye shall see and that voice speak. To the grave we bear these atoms of dust and reverently inter them.

"Grave, the guardian of our dust,
Grave, the treasury of the skies,
Every atom of thy trust
Rests in hope again to rise:
Hark! the judgment trumpet calls,
Soul! rebuild thy house of clay;
Immortality thy walls,
And eternity thy day."

Enough there is a day for the reknitting and a recognition of the friendships of life, when we may meet this now canonized saint again. Not as we have seen him, aged and worn. The vile body will be changed and made glorious.

We bury a prophet, an Elijah. The chariot and horses of flame have borne him away, but he has left to us his mantle. May we catch his spirit, his vigorous love of right and hatred of wrong, his fidelity to God and man, his faith, self sacrifice, his noble Christian character. Where are the mourners today? Does she mourn who three years ago left his side and to whose eternal companionship he has now gone? Does he mourn that he has cast off the clay, the pain, the sense of dependence? Nay! "absent from the body he is present with the Lord." You mourn, my colored brethren and sisters. Your Jacob has been taken from you. But his life and name are to you a precious, a holy legacy. Fellow citizens, you mourn. We all have our measure of mournful interest in the death of this patriarch. But his life is a benediction. Death came to him suddenly, as it often does to God's own; but he was a servant at the door, ready to open on hearing the approaching footsteps of his Master. May it be yours and mine to be ready as he was ready. May we die the death of the righteous and our last end be like his.

At the close of the solemn ceremonies the coffin was conveyed to the hearse by six pall-bearers, three of whom were white and three colored, the following gentlemen officiating: George F. Strong, Robert Foster, H. G. Willard, N. E. King, Arthur Berry, and William Allen. The remains were conveyed to Mt. Hope cemetery, followed by a large concourse of citizens in carriages, and were deposited in the lot owned by the Central M. E. church, beside those of his wife, who had preceded him by about three years.

**PLEASE RENEW
Your
HSGL Membership
TODAY!**

BLASTS From The Past

The following 'news' items have all been taken out of issues of the **Lansing Republican Weekly**, written in the style of the time.

Write 1884(Oops . . .1994) and don't you forget it.

And now is the season when your boy can't go to church because he has a microscopical blister on his heel, and it was only last summer that that self-same boy took a pure, unalloyed delight in walking on top of a picket fence, where the pickets were sharp enough to impale a fragile June bug. *LRW 1/9/1884.*

A load of hay anchored at right angles with the avenue, and a binding-pole extending towards the middle of the street ten feet back of the load, at about the right height to swat an incautious driver out of a cutter backwards and cave in his mansard, may look picturesque to a pedestrian, but it would be mighty tough on the friver. That is what they have to dodge, though, almost every day, on Washington and Michigan avenues. *LRW 1/16/1884.*

BLASTS From The Past

The following 'news' items have all been taken out of issues of the **Lansing Republican Weekly**, written in the style of the time.

A man never truly realizes how painfully inadequate is the English language until an avalanche of snow slides off the roof of some building and flops down upon his new sealskin cap. *LRW 1/9/1884.*

If there is anything in this wide, wide world that causes a man to lose faith in human nature it is to meet the man he swore off with New Year's day coming out of the back door of a saloon just as he is going in. *LRW 1/9/1884.*

With the thermometer 20 below zero snake stories are just a little out of season yet the Reading Telephone says that a few days ago "a snake was seen crawling in the snow and making for a brook to cool off." There was nothing in the Telephone to show what particular brand of whiskey Readingites use. *LRW 1/24/1883.*

The Historical Society seeks donations of local historical materials, such as papers or photos, especially of those related to our programs. **This month we are interested in obtaining photographs of Lansing Churches** which will be made available to the public in the Local History Room at the Lansing Public Library. Please contact the Historical Society at 372-3385.

Board Meetings are held on the third Wednesdays of October, February, and April. Any business may be addressed to the Board before or at the meetings. All are invited.

Who do you know who should belong to the Historical Society? Send in your membership, and recruit a member.

*Give a Gift that Gives All Year . . .
Membership in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing*

Membership Application

*Historical Society
of Greater Lansing*

P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

Annual membership in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing is due by October 1, 1993 for the 1993-1994 program year. Please clip and return this coupon with payment.

New **Renewal**

Enclosed: \$10 Individual \$15 Family \$150 Life Gift

Name _____

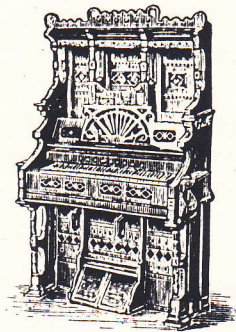
Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

The *Historical Society of Greater Lansing* is a non-profit corporation, and we appreciate your support.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

proudly presents



**A History
of
Trinity AME Church
By
Hondon Hargrove**

Hondon Hargrove, noted historian of African-Americans in the military, will present a history of this congregation begun in 1866, the oldest African-American church in Lansing.

7:30 P.M.

Wednesday, January 19, 1994

Friends Auditorium

Lansing Public Library*

** PLEASE NOTE: This is a different location than listed in the 1993-94 Program Calendar*

The Public Is Invited

Lansing Public Library
401 S. Capitol Avenue
Lansing, MI 48933

*Historical Society
of Greater Lansing*
P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lansing, Mich.
Permit No. 636

**PLEASE
RENEW
Your
HSGL
Membership
TODAY!**