



From the Baobab Tree

Volume III, Issue 2

May 1, 1999

The Founder of the Order of True Reformers.

The Story of William Washington Browne
by Anita Wills, guest columnist



NOTE: As an African-American writer and columnist I feel a duty to share inspirational stories with readers. One of the writing projects I worked on required me to do research on "The Order of True Reformers." Since February is African-American History month I felt that William Walker Browne's story achievements should be highlighted. I hope that the readers will be as inspired as I was.

The Order of True Reformers was a Fraternal Organization of African Americans organized in southern states after the Civil War. The intention was to set up business and social avenues in which Negroes could participate. By taking up the task of insuring the lives of these members, several of these societies became prosperous business enterprises. These orders began to sell Negroes insurance when well established companies refused. William Washington Browne, a Methodist Minister of Richmond, Virginia organized the association in 1881.

Against the back drop of many misconceptions (i.e., blacks were inferior), Self Help Organizations sprang up after the Civil War to address the needs of the newly freed slaves. One of the most successful was The Grand Fountain of The Order of True Reformers, founded by William Washington Browne, an Ex-slave from Georgia. Browne set up a beneficial society which blacks could join out of which insurance companies, businesses and banks were formed. W.E.B. Du Bois characterized Browne's Fraternal Organization as "Probably the most remarkable Negro organization in the country." Young African Americans Entrepreneurs would do well to study Brown's successes and failures - yet little is known of him or his organization. Browns' early childhood was spent as a slave on a Georgia plantation. He was born October 20, 1849 and was given the name Ben Brown. His parents were field slaves who were sold from Virginia. He became a house servant, and a companion of his owner's son. After his first owner died Brown was taken to Rome Georgia and hired out. His new owner changed his name to William Washington Brown. He was sold out, first to a shopkeeper, then to an attorney. Brown was to be sold again, this time to Tennessee where he became a Jockey. He was now far away from his family and anything that seemed like home.

When the Union Army occupied Memphis during the Civil War, Browne was placed on a plantation in Mississippi for safekeeping. That did not deter the young man who escaped and made his way to the Union forces. When he learned that the Union were surrendering escaped slaves he ran away and worked for a Jewish family. From there he went to Cairo, Illinois and worked in a saloon (and acquired a life long horror of drinking). In 1864, when not yet fifteen, he joined an infantry regiment in the Union Army as a paid substitute and served until 1866.

He returned to Wisconsin to work as a farmhand and resume his schooling. In September 1869, not quite twenty years old, he went back to Georgia to see his mother. After the sermons of a Georgia preacher occasioned his conversion, he briefly studied for the ministry at Atlanta at a school which later grew into Gammon Theological Seminary. On the basis of his limited education in Wisconsin, he made his living as a school teacher in Georgia, then in Alabama. In 1873 he married Mary A. Graham and in 1876 was ordained a Minister in the Colored Methodist Church. This is a man who never gave up no matter what

Looking Back

By AAGSNC Member, Shirley Evans

When I was in school, I loved history. However, the history I loved had nothing to do with my family or me. For over 130 years, my family has lived in Marion County, Florida. I was born and raised there, but truth be told, I know very little about the county. This became evident, when I became interested in genealogy.

I recently read a book about Marion County that actually threw me for a loop. Cotton and rice were grown in the county. I knew about sugar cane, watermelons, tomatoes, Okra, peanuts, oranges and even the rattlesnakes, but not cotton and rice. Why there was even a Black town marshal.

The famed Seminole Indian chief Osceola lived and fought in the county. Two of the communities, Micanopy and Emathla are named after Seminole chiefs. Many of the streets bare Seminole names and runaway slaves often took refuge with the Seminoles.

his circumstances.

While in Alabama Browne became active in the temperance movement. He worried that many Alabama blacks were disenfranchised because they had been convicted for drunkenness and also wasted money that poor people could not afford. "All the masses of our Race own is [a grave of] three by six feet of earth." Looking for an effective temperance organization, he hoped that he and other blacks could join the Good Templars. When the Grand Lodge of Alabama rejected the notion of permitting the organization of black lodges, he accepted the alternative offered by Good Templars, the True Reformers.

Eventually Browne would leave Alabama and settle in Richmond, Virginia where he formed the Order of True Reformers. The Browne who built a powerful Grand Fountain (GFUOTR) in Virginia was a product of the Post-Reconstruction South. Black powerlessness against growing white racism increased his innate caution. He tried to appease the whites who controlled government and business because he knew he needed sympathetic white judges, legislators, and bankers. A few years after his death, The Order's weekly Newspaper, The Reformer, editorialized: "While we shall never stoop to kiss the hand that smite us, yet we do not believe we can accomplish as much by extreme radicalism as by conservatism." Accepting white supremacy and racial segregation as facts of life beyond immediate amelioration, Browne preached a gospel of money, morality, education and family, racial solidarity and self-help. While whites were quarreling over the Negro problem, Browne urged his fellow blacks, "Let Us Work It Out Ourselves."

Below are listed some of the achievements of The Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers:

FROM SLAVERY TO BANKERS:

With one hundred members, the relict of an old organization, bearing nearly the same name, and one hundred fifty dollars, he (William Washington Browne) launched the Grand Fountain, asking at the same time the prayers and confidence of the race. He was looked upon by many as an impostor, and by others as demented, because he proposed to reform the hole [insurance] society management of the Negro race.

The Savings Bank of the GFUOTR was incorporated in Virginia on March 2, 1888 and in 1892 the real estate department was established. By 1900 they owned 15 halls, 3 farms, 2 dwellings, 1 hotel and leased 14 halls. Total value of property was \$223,500. In January 1893 they began publishing a bimonthly newspaper. Eventually it became a weekly and by 1900 had a circulation of over 8,000. In 1893 they began fund raising for Old Folks Homes. In 1897 they purchased a farm near Richmond for

\$14,400 for the first home. In 1899 the Order received a charter for the Reformers' Mercantile and Industrial Association, the purpose of which was to manufacture, buy and sell, at wholesale or retail, or both, groceries, goods, wares, implements, supplies, and articles of merchandise of any and every description etc. and included the insurance feature in Organizing the Order known as the True Reformers.

The object of the organization is:

"To unite fraternally all colored persons of sound bodily health and good moral character, and who are socially and otherwise acceptable to each other. And to give all moral and material aid in its power to its members and those dependent upon them. To educate its members socially, morally and intellectually. To establish a fund for the relief of sick and distressed members, or for such other purposes as the Association may determine. To establish a benefit fund, from which on satisfactory evidence of the death of a member, who has compiled a sum with all its lawful requirements, a sum not exceeding five thousand dollars shall be paid to the family, heirs, blood relatives, affianced husband, affianced wife, or to persons dependent upon aid member as the member may direct. To secure for its members such other advantage as are, from time to time, designated by the Constitution and Laws of the Association."

In 1885 there was organized and put in operation a department for the children known as the ROSEBUD DEPARTMENT.

The object of this department was:

"To discipline the young, to train them to practice thrift and economy, and to give lessons early in the business methods of life, to establish a fund for the relief of sick members and a mortuary fund from which, on satisfactory proof of death, of a benefited member a sum not exceeding thirty-seven dollars shall be paid to parents or guardians." This was the beginning of the Negro businessmen in insurance and banking. Other associations affiliated with the Order were St. Lukes, the Good Samaritans, the Galilean Fishermen, and the United Brothers of Friendship. Mrs. Maggie L. Walker, the head of St. Lukes, established a bank for that order and thus became the first woman in the United States to be the president of such an institution. Raleigh, North Carolina and other parts of the south had similar organizations patterning themselves after Browne's success. In 1910 the bank set up by The True Reformers collapsed and with it the popularity of William Washington Brown. However, William Washington Browne will go down in the annuals of African-American History as a leader, visionary and "True Reformer."

1Fahey, David M.: (1994): The Black Lodge In White America: "True Reformer" Browne and His Economic Strategy: Maryland: University Press of America
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Many planters came to Marion County in the 1850's from Georgia and the Carolinas. They came because of the Arredondo Grant. They bought their slaves with them; thus many Black people in the county originate from Georgia and the Carolinas. Part of the 289,000 acre Arredondo Grant was west of Orange Lake, the area in which many of my relatives still live.

I found a deed of my great-grandfather's purported slave owner, Joel Lowman, showing that he owned 320 acres of the Arredondo Grant. Joel Lowman came from Lexington, SC. My maternal and paternal grandparents were farmers.

Marion County was second in the value of its farms in the 1860's and ranked fifth in population. Slaves were very instrumental in the development of the county. The 1867-1868 Voter Registration List shows that out of the 2,017 registered voters, 1,473 (73%) were Blacks.

Not only was Marion County known for its agriculture, livestock was plentiful. Brahma cattle were transported from the East Indies to South Carolina, and on the Marion County. I remember my aunt raising some big beautiful cows; at least they looked beautiful from afar. Today, horses are king. The county even produced a Kentucky Derby winner. There are probably more horse farms than agricultural farms.

The first educational institution in Florida was established in Marion County. I attended one of the oldest Black schools in the county, Fessenden (1868-Academy). It was integrated in the early 1970's. No matter what the trials and tribulations are or were, history is fascinating. In order to appreciate your ancestors you must be aware of the history of the places where they were born and/or lived.

My appetite has been whetted. Reading about Marion County has given me a different insight as to how to trace my roots.

From the April 1999 Edition of the Newsletter of the Bay Area Roots Group (BARUG)

Family Search® Internet Genealogy Service

March 4, 1999

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints released the following statement regarding current speculation about an Internet Genealogy Service sponsored by the Church:

'Sometime in March or April 1999, the Church Of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will conduct a brief beta test of a new genealogical service for the internet. The church believes this service will greatly enhance the way people trace their family history. A formal Announcement and launch is expected in the Spring or

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Fred Blanchard
California African American Genealogical Society (CAAGS)
Geoffrey N. Carter
Flo Pierce
Yvonne M. Vincent
Mignon M. Brown
Dawn Akrie-Edwards
Dwight Bethely
Lilafay Hunter

THE NUMBER OF LIFE MEMBERS CONTINUES TO INCREASE

Rev. Adolph Kelly
Thom Allison
Shirley Evans
Electra Kimble Price
Karim Aldridge-Rand
Charles L. Robinson
Sarah A. Robinson
Charlesetta Braggs-Ford

BIRTHDAY GREETINGS!

APRIL

7 Charles T. Brown
10 Roger L. Hall

MAY

1 Charlene Stewart
12 Vernon Taylor
23 Mildred Taylor
23 Thom Allison

JUNE

12 Sarah Robinson
17 Jesse Warr
22 Charlesetta Braggs-Ford
24 Katherine Allman
25 Evelyn Mayfield
26 Karen Francisco
29 Lilafay Hunter
30 Yvonne Vincent

Calendar of Events

May 6, 1999, Thursday, 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 pm

Electra Kimble Price is available at the Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave, Oakland, CA, on Thursday evenings to assist with your research questions. This is a recurring event. If you would like to check with the center before you visit, the number is (510)531-3905

May 13, 1999, Thursday, 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 pm

Electra Kimble Price is available at the Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave, Oakland, CA, on Thursday evenings to assist with your research questions. This is a recurring event. If you would like to check with the center before you visit, the number is (510)531-3905

May 15, 1999

The regular meeting of the AAGSNC will **not** be held on May 15. Instead, please join us at a **special meeting on May 22.**

May 20, 1999, Thursday, 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 pm

Electra Kimble Price is available at the Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave, Oakland, CA, on Thursday evenings to assist with your research questions. This is a recurring event. If you would like to check with the center before you visit, the number is (510)531-3905

May 22, 1999, Saturday, 1:00 p.m. - Special Meeting

Topic: Researching in Virginia. Geography, Customs and Migration.

Speaker: Karen Clifford, AG. Ms Clifford is an Instructor, Hartnell and Monterey Peninsula Junior College, Author of several books, frequent lecturer, Vice President of Federation of Genealogy Societies, 1998 Vice President of the Utah Genealogy Society (UGA), 1999 Director of the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy and founding President of Monterey County Genealogy Society.

Place: Mills College, 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, CA 94613. Admission is Free.

Notes: This event is co-sponsored by AAGSNC and the East Bay Genealogical Society

May 27, 1999, Thursday, 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 pm

Electra Kimble Price is available at the Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave, Oakland, CA, on Thursday evenings to assist with your research questions. This is a recurring event. If you would like to check with the center before you visit, the number is (510)531-3905

May 28, 1999, Friday, 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 pm

Electra Kimble Price is available at the Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave, Oakland, CA, on Thursday evenings to assist with your research questions. This is a recurring event on the fourth day of each month. If you would like to check with the center before you visit, the number is (510)531-3905

June 5, 1999, Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Anita Walls Genealogy Columnist for the AAGSNC will hold a Genealogy Workshop through Cal State University Hayward's Extended and Continuing Education Program. The workshop will be held on the Cal State Hayward Campus.

June 20, 1999, Sunday

The Berkeley Juneteenth Festival

October 17-24, Sunday - Sunday

Salt Lake City, Family History Library Research Tour. Watch the newsletter or the AAGSNC web site (www.aagsnc.org) for further information.

Recurring Events

Bay Area Roots User's Group (BARUG)

Software: The Ultimate Family Tree

When: 3rd Saturday of Jan, Apr, Jul and Oct, 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Place: LDS Temple Building, Oakland, CA

Contact: Judy Lanphear

Notes: Publishes newsletter and holds special classes/workshops. Membership \$10.00 per year.

San Francisco Bay Area TMG User's Group

Software: The Master Genealogist

When: 2nd Saturday of each month, 9:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

Place: 1611 Telegraph Ave., Room 1015, Oakland, CA 94612-2152

Contact: Kathleen Watson

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e-mail: newsletter@aagsnc.org

Editors: Ranie G. Smith

Thom Allison

1999 Publication Schedule:

Quarter	Deadline	Publication Date
First	January 25	February 6
Second	April 26	May 1
Third	July 26	August 7
Fourth	October 25	November 6

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

African-American Genealogical Society of Northern California
A Non-Profit Organization

Rev. 9/30/97

[Please Type or Print]

DATE: _____

LAST NAME: _____ FIRST NAME: _____

STREET ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

E-MAIL: _____

TELEPHONE: () _____

BIRTHDATE (for birthday club information only): [Month] _____ [Day] _____

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY AND ANNUAL FEE SCHEDULE

- REGULAR (Single, 17 & over) \$20/year
- FAMILY MEMBERSHIP (spouse) \$30/year
- YOUTH MEMBERSHIP (16 & under) \$10/year
- ORGANIZATION \$40/year
- LIFE TIME MEMBERSHIP \$200 (\$300 for married couple)
- New Member Renewal

Total Enclosed: \$ _____ for calendar year [January-December of current year]

Payable to: **African American Genealogical Society of Northern California**
 P. O. Box 27485,
 Oakland, CA 94602-0985

E-Mail: baobabtree@rocketmail.com

LIST YOUR AREAS OF FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH AND SURNAME STATE

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

I volunteer to help with (check all that apply):

- Fundraising
- Program Planning
- Newsletter
- Membership Publicity
- Technical Support
- Research Education
- Other _____

AAGSNC
PO Box 27485
Oakland, CA 94602-0985

The
Mailing
Address
Goes
Here

INSTANT WHITE PEOPLE

Contributed by:

AAGSNC Founding Member Kay Smith

In 1831 a royal edict to the King of Denmark actually made it possible to legislate people in the Danish West Indies from one color to another - for deserving Blacks to become officially "declared white."

It read: "Where free people of color, of both sexes, assimilate in color to the whites and they otherwise, by a cultivated mind and good conduct render themselves deserving to stand, according to their rank and station in life, on an equal footing with inhabitants, all the difference which the color now causes ought to cease."

Further: "The right of deciding thereon must be left with the Governor-General, who will direct the names according to their rank and station in life, on an equal footing with the white of such persons to be struck off

the protocols for the registry of the Free Colored Population, and to be entered, as white inhabitants, in the congregation to which they 1831 a royal edict of the King of Denmark actually made it possible to legislate

people in the Danish West Indies from one color to another – for deserving Blacks to become officially "declared white."

It read: "Where free people of color, of both sexes, assimilate in color to the whites, and they otherwise, by a cultivated mind belong."

Source: The Virgins: Magic Islands by Jeanne Perkins Harman (Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., New York, 1959)