



# The Baobab Tree

*Journal of the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California, Inc.*

## Joshua Lyles

### And the Free Black Settlers of Lyles Station

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**Montgomery County, Tennessee, court minutes for April 23, 1823, attesting that Joshua Lyles and his family are free. Joshua's name is on the left, seven lines from the bottom.**

**By Arlene Blanks Polk**

Joshua Lyles, an African-American who is credited with founding one of Indiana's earliest Black settlements, was born around 1800 in Henry County, Virginia, according to the Negro Registry of Gibson County, Indiana.<sup>1</sup> Numerous articles written about Joshua Lyles assert, without any evidentiary verification, that he was born a slave and freed when he reached 28 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

The particularly damning point about this insistence that Lyles was slave-born is that it may have first appeared in an Indiana newspaper article published in the early nineteenth century that also used the racially stereotypical jargon of the times in which it was written.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, modern day writers about the life of Joshua Lyles continue to repeat this newspaper writer's narrative that Joshua Lyles was born a slave, without providing any proof of the assertion.

Joshua Lyles was, in fact, born a free man. My cousins and I, who are Lyles descendants, have researched this matter and found no indication that Joshua Lyles was ever a slave. Rather, we have documentation that he was born free and lived in freedom his entire life.

His grandfather, James Lyle, was a free black man who was born around 1750 and farmed just north of Richmond, in Powhatan County, Virginia, in the 1790s. James Lyle's name appears on the personal property tax roll of 1799 for Powhatan County, Virginia, where he is listed as a free "mulatto" and is taxed \$1.50 for his ownership of one horse.<sup>4</sup> Around 1800, he moved with his children from Powhatan County to Henry County, Virginia. Fourteen years later, a James Lyle is listed on the 1813 and 1814 Free Mulattoes and Negroes schedules of

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## BAOBAB WRITERS' GUIDELINES



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**Write 1 to 3 pages.** We always need some one-page stories; more than three pages is too long.

**We may edit.** All submissions are subject to review by our journal committee and editors, and may be edited for clarity and to fit the space available.

**Send your bio** along with your story; include your contact e-mail and phone number(s). Bio should be in narrative form if possible, not a resume; we will still edit as needed.

**Send your portrait.** E-mail a JPEG photo of yourself along with your story or article. A good clear head-and-shoulders shot of you is best, in front of a solid color background that contrasts with your hair and skin tone. If you only have a shot of yourself with other people, we may be able to crop it (i.e. cut out the other folks).

**Photos, documents and other graphics** are always welcome, in JPEG format. Make sure pictures are sharp, clear and have enough contrast to show up well in black and white.

**Respect the deadlines** you're given for submissions and corrections. If your material is late, it might have to be held for the next issue or drastically altered to fit the space.

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**YOU ARE HISTORIANS**

We celebrate Black History Month every year in February, but for African-American genealogists, Black History is a year-round enterprise. We are the amateur sleuths who dig up facts that the professionals may have ignored, overlooked, or never imagined were possible. Such is the case in Joshua Lyles and the Free Blacks of Lyles Station. Writer Arlene Blanks Polk sets the record straight on whether her ancestors in Lyles Station, Indiana, were slaves or free, with documentation to back up her assertions. It's not the first time a family's dogged quest to know more has expanded and improved on local history. (See The Paul Family Reunion & The Mystery at Bull Hill Cemetery, Fall 2011 Baobab.) Your history is America's history. Keep digging, and keep sharing what you find.

*Charlene Brown*

*Annette Madden*

**Message from the President**

By M. Howard Edwards



**Oh, What A Year It Was, It Really Was, What A Year!**

AAGSNC had a busy and productive year in 2011. Here are some of the highlights:

**Launched A Study of Inter-Organization Cooperation**

Early in the year, Vice-President Carol Miller, M.D., began a project to evaluate our inter-organizational relationships to ensure there was a mutual benefit to each party. This effort is an ambitious one and it will be ongoing.

**Formed Outreach and Education Committee**

At a retreat suggested by Program Committee Chair Jackie Stewart, the Executive Committee established an Outreach and Education Committee. They charged it with developing and overseeing specific educational programs for the society and evaluating requests for services from other organizations for scope and pertinence, to see if they are within the society's charter and capabilities. The committee's first chairperson is Nicka Smith. Already the group has developed several new workshops to be held in 2012 and is studying other ideas for expansion.

**First Black Family History Day**

In February, Black History Month, Electra Kimble Price, one of the society

founders, arranged for the society to hold a very successful Black Family History day with the collaboration and cooperation of the Oakland Family History Center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This public event attracted a large number of curious attendees interested in pursuing greater knowledge about their families. For many this was their first exposure to the study of genealogy. Seeing the first written record of a long lost or unknown relative was a thrilling moment.

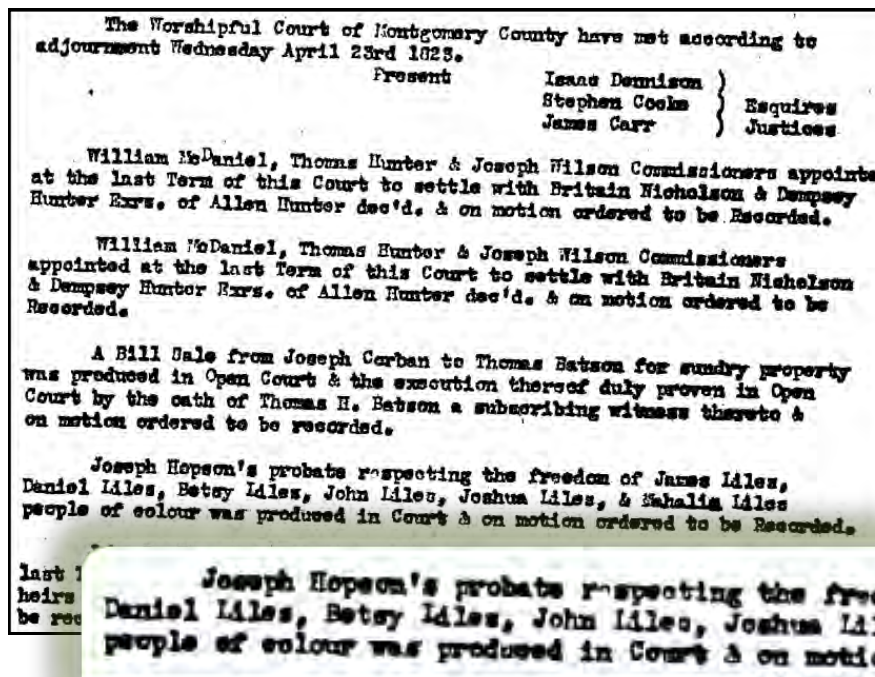
This success spurred the Executive Committee to approve a second such event in the fall. This one was executed by the new Outreach and Education Committee and included volunteers from the California Genealogical Society and the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group.

**The New Website**

Website Committee Chair Gerry Deberry led her committee's effort to redesign and implement a new web site the first of the year. Life Member Jim Neal, as contractor, pulled out all the stops to deliver an elegant, beautiful, and responsive place on the internet we can all be proud of. It is expertly functional,

*(Continued on page 10)*

## Joshua Lyles



Transcription of the 1823 Montgomery County Court minutes in which Joseph Hopson attests that Joshua Liles (Lyles) and five other members of his family are all free.

(Continued from page 1)

the personal property tax lists for Henry County, which is southwest of Powhatan County and Roanoke, Virginia, and just north of the present day North Carolina state border.<sup>5</sup> In 1820, a free black man named James Lyle appears on the federal census for Montgomery County, Tennessee,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that James Lyle had moved across the state line. Contrary to the custom for that year's census, the entry for James Lyle does not include either the ages or number of individuals living in the household.<sup>7</sup>

Sometime prior to 1812, James Lyle's son, John Lile (several different spellings of the surname were used during this time), moved with his family from Henry County to Robertson County, Tennessee. James moved to Tennessee to rejoin his son sometime after 1814.

In 1820 and again in 1830, a John Liles appears in the census for Robertson County. He is a free man of color living in the town of Springfield in a household with five males (including John) and six females.<sup>8</sup> The range of likely ages for John

Liles provided by the census records indicates that he was probably born around 1774.<sup>9</sup> He had six children: James, Daniel, John, Joshua, Tabitha and Sanford.

Neither the 1820 nor the 1830 census provides the name of any individual in a household, other than its head, but a few of John Liles' older sons, including Joshua Lyles, are probably among the individuals enumerated in John Liles' household on the 1820 census. Their wives or sisters are probably in that enumeration as well.

The 1830 census reveals that there were eight individuals living in the John Liles household: a female near the same age as John, and six other individuals, more than likely the couple's younger children.<sup>10</sup>

The 1830 census also lists Joshua, Daniel and Tabitha Liles as free black heads of separate households, living at that time in Robertson County, Tennessee.<sup>11</sup> John Liles' children are the grandchildren of the James Lyle who appeared on the census for Montgomery County, Tennessee, ten years earlier.

More compelling proof that the members of the Lyles family were free is in the court records. The Minutes of the Court for Montgomery County, Tennessee, reveal that Colonel Joseph Hopson, a white Revolutionary War veteran, attested that James, John, Joshua, Daniel, Patsy and Mahala Liles were free persons when living in Henry County, Virginia. Like the Liles family, Hopson had lived in Henry County before migrating to Tennessee. On July 1, 1823, the Montgomery County court held that the named Liles family members were indeed free persons.

The Minutes of the Court for nearby Robertson County, Tennessee, for the years 1830 through 1836, reveal that John Liles' sons, James, Daniel, John and Sanford Liles, were charged on various occasions with rioting offenses.<sup>12</sup> The infractions, if charged today, probably would be tantamount to breach of the peace offenses. The Robertson County court minutes also make clear, however, that Liles' sons John, James and Daniel, were land owners and held deeds to real

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## Joshua Lyles

*(Continued from page 4)*

property in Robertson County prior to 1840.<sup>13</sup> The minutes for the court's December 1840 term additionally show that John Liles' son, James, testified as a free man that his wife, Rebecca White, was a free woman.<sup>14</sup>

Sometime prior to 1840, the elder James Lyles (John Liles' father), as well as John and his family moved from Tennessee to southwest Indiana. John Liles settled with his father, his wife, and their younger sons, Joshua and Sanford, in Patoka Township (the other children settled in Vandenberg County) in Gibson County where John's son, Joshua Lyles, purchased 1,200 acres of government land. They settled approximately five miles from Princeton, in what would later be called "Lyles Station" in honor of Joshua Lyles.

It is likely that the Lyles family and the other free black families that arrived in Indiana with them sold their personal belongings and realty, pooled their money, and selected a literate Joshua Lyles to purchase land for them in Indiana.

It is not known today exactly what circumstances prompted the Lyles family's moves to Tennessee and then to Indiana. However, a new Virginia tax levied against free Black males age 12 or older to support the War of 1812 may have induced both John and James Lyles, who each had a number of sons, to leave Virginia and its taxing authority and move to Tennessee.

The search for better farmland and the repeated rioting charges against John Liles' sons may also have motivated the moves. In addition, an 1834 Tennessee law mandating that free blacks had to leave the state may have motivated the families to move to Indiana.

What is known is that both John Liles and his son, Joshua, are accounted for on the 1840 federal census for Indiana.<sup>15</sup> There are eight other free black heads of household, some of whom were on the

earlier census in Tennessee, who are also listed with the Lyles family on the 1840 Indiana census.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the 1840 Indiana census listing for John Liles reveals that there was a male in his household at that time who was older than John Liles' estimated 66 years. That enumerated individual may have been his father, James Lyle, who appeared twenty years earlier on the 1820 census for Montgomery County, Tennessee.<sup>17</sup>

ROBERTSON COUNTY		
John Lile (m)	55-100	8
Bob Stewart (Free) (m)	55-100	9
Danl. Lyle (Free) (m)	24-36	5
Joshua Lile (Free) (m)	24-36	10
Tabitha Lile Cold (f)	24-36	9
Frank Newsham (Negro) (m)	36-55	1
Wilson Porter (m)	36-55	6
Harburd Stewart (m)	36-55	4
Edmund Stewart (m)	24-36	5
Harrison Chuvus (m)	24-36	5
William Silver (m)	24-36	5
Phillip Silver (m)	36-55	7
Patsy Chuvus (f)	55-100	5
Hennet Mitchell (m)	10-24	4

**Free black heads of household on the 1830 census in Robertson County, Tennessee, from the book *Free Black Heads of Household in 1830* by Carter G. Woodson**

In 1850, Joshua Lyles appears again on the Indiana census, this time in Gibson County.<sup>18</sup> The Agricultural Schedule for the 1850 census indicates that just a decade after his family's arrival in Indiana, Joshua Lyles owned 60 acres of improved land, 260 acres of unimproved land, a farm valued at \$500, and farm implements valued at \$10. The value of his livestock was estimated at \$247, while the value of the animals slaughtered was assessed at \$99. The schedule indicates that the previous year, in 1849, Joshua Lyles had four horses, 10 cows, and 50 swine. The Lyles farm produced 150 pounds of butter, 10 pounds of maple sugar, 60 pounds of honey, and 500 bushels of Indian corn.<sup>19</sup>

It is not likely that a Black man in America who had been enslaved merely twenty years before, would have been able to achieve so much so quickly. And if Joshua Lyles was not born a slave, then the

unsubstantiated but often-repeated story of a slave owner gifting the early settlers with the money to move to Indiana, should be put to rest.

In 1902, more than 62 years after the Lyles families moved to Indiana, and more than a generation after Joshua Lyles' death, the *Fort Wayne (Indiana) Evening Sentinel* reprinted an article reportedly written by a reporter with the *Indianapolis News*.<sup>20</sup> The reporter, who claimed to have visited the settlement, at first glance appeared to extol the virtues of an early Indiana Black settlement that could achieve some success without the influence of whites.

In the florid language of the time and region he said:

*"Here, nestled among the cornfields that skirt the song-historic Wabash, is Indiana's most unique town—it offers its inhabitants immunity from the "White Man's burden," writes a correspondent of the Indianapolis News from Lyles, Gibson County, Indiana. Lyles is a town in which a white man does not dwell."*<sup>21</sup>

In what may be the first written account that Joshua Lyles was born a slave, the writer asserts without providing any attribution to a source,

*"Lyles came into existence in the ante-bellum days. More than a half century ago, Joshua Lyles, a liberated slave, [italics added] came to Indiana from Tennessee. He had been given his freedom by a kind master and his first thought was to seek a home in Indiana, where the oppression of slavery was unknown. He journeyed to Princeton, the county seat of Gibson county, and with the money from his old master, he purchased a tract of land in the Wabash bottoms, four miles west of Princeton."*<sup>22</sup>

Using the racial stereotypes generally accepted during the period in which he wrote, the reporter goes on to describe the settlement in this way:

*(Continued on page 8)*

## ETHNIC RESEARCH IN WASHINGTON STATE



By Patricia Bayonne Johnson

Researching African-Americans in Spokane, Washington, has gotten a little easier with the recent publication of two books: ***Images of America: African Americans in Spokane*** by Jerrelene Williamson, and ***Northwest Black Pioneers, A Tribute*** by Ralph Hayes and Joseph Franklin. A third publication, ***All Through the Night: The History of Spokane Black Americans 1860–1940*** by Joseph Franklin, preceded the other two and remains a primary source of information on African-Americans in Spokane.



***Images of America: African Americans in Spokane*** was published in 2010. It documents the area's Black history through photographs gathered from the Spokane Northwest Black Pioneers, the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, and photographer Wallace "Wally" Hagin.

Author Jerrelene Williamson is the president and a founding member of the

Spokane Northwest Black Pioneers. Her father was born in Spokane in 1899 and she has lived here since she was two years old. She grew up in Spokane before the civil rights era, during a time in which African-Americans experienced racial discrimination in every aspect of their lives. Mrs. Williamson has made it her mission to tell the stories of the black settlers who came to Spokane, "The Lilac City," seeking a better way of life, and who triumphed against all odds in a city where they were not welcomed.

In 1888, Black men from the South were brought to Roslyn (200 miles west of Spokane) to break a strike by white coal miners, a fact they only discovered when intense violence greeted their arrival. After much bloodshed, the strike was settled and all the men, Black and white, returned to the mines. The book begins with the migration of Blacks to Spokane after the mines were closed in 1899. The author relates the story of their lives and struggles in Spokane, and more.

Other topics covered are the colored military, Black churches, social clubs and organizations and businesses. In Chapter 10, "The Notables," Mrs. Williamson includes more recent distinguished African-Americans, including James Chase, Spokane's first African-American mayor

and his wife, Eleanor Barrow Chase, a descendant of one of the oldest black families in Spokane; Carl Maxey, a civil rights lawyer; Wallace "Wally" Hagin, musician, photographer and Washington's first African-American licensed commercial pilot; and Francis Nichols Scott, Spokane's first African-American woman attorney.

***Northwest Black Pioneers, A Tribute*** is the history of black pioneers in the Pacific Northwest beginning with the territorial days. Black pioneers of Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, Tri-Cities and Yakima are featured in the book as well as pioneers from the Oregon Territory. Did you know that a slave by the name of York accompanied Lewis and Clark in their exploration of the Northwest? Did you know that George Bush, a free man, formed a community that was at first called Bush Prairie and later became Thurston County? Did you know that George Washington, a former slave from Virginia, is the founder of Centralia? Did you know there was a Chinatown in Spokane? All this and more is found in this publication.

*Northwest Black Pioneers, A Tribute* is published as a booklet, thus it contains no table of contents or index. Sponsored by

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WASHINGTON STATE

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Macy's, it has been distributed to over 100,000 schools and other institutions. I purchased a copy at the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) in Seattle while attending the Eighth Annual West Coast African American Genealogy Summit in October 2008.

**All Through the Night: The History of Spokane Black Americans 1860-1940** by Joseph Franklin is highly recommended for researching African-Americans in Spokane. First published in 1989, it is currently available for purchase only at used booksellers, such as Amazon or Alibris. The Seattle Public Library has a copy that it displayed at the African American Genealogy Summit mentioned above.

Joseph Franklin, a native of the Northwest, specializes in the African-American experience in the Northwest. As a historian, Franklin has taught or lectured in many Pacific Northwest colleges and universities. His book covers the Black pioneers who arrived in Spokane before the influx of the Black miners from Roslyn.

Of the three books, *All Through the Night* is the most scholarly and the most comprehensive in scope. It includes interviews with people who were living in Spokane in the early 1900s. Malbert Montgomery Cooper, one of those interviewed and quoted in the book about

his life in Spokane, is the man I chose for a "cold case genealogy" research project, simple research on a family that's not your own. After reading his interview in *All Through the Night*, I decided to research Malbert Cooper because of his unusual first name.

Cooper was a member of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry at Fort George Wright in Spokane. I visited his gravesite at Spokane Memorial Gardens in Cheney and discovered that he has no headstone. I am working with Mr. Chuck Elmore of Veterans Affairs in Spokane to locate Malbert Cooper's discharge papers, so he can qualify for a government-issued headstone. Cooper is featured in all three of the books referenced here.

*All Through the Night* also helped me research Rudolph Bowman Scott, the man assigned to me for the Eastern Washington Genealogical Society's first "Walking with Ancestors" event in 2010. Scott, an early black pioneer, came to Spokane in 1883 and was involved in farming, real estate and mining. He also established a fire and life insurance company that paid all claims arising from the 1889 fire that destroyed most of Spokane's downtown commercial district.

Scott was a Spokane County delegate to the convention assembled to organize the state of Washington in 1889; he was a friend of Chief Joseph, a famous Nez Perce Indian leader; and, he was appointed

U.S. Chinese Inspector in Spokane. As a recent newcomer to Spokane, I have found these three publications invaluable in getting to know the people who came here before me and the contributions they made in the development of the Pacific Northwest.



Patricia Bayonne-Johnson is a lifetime member and past First Vice-President of AAGSNC. In 2004, she moved to Spokane, Washington, joined the Eastern Washington Genealogical Society (EWGS) and served as First Vice-President for three years. Currently, she writes the EWGS Newsletter, Washington Ethnic Research column for the EWGS Digital Digest and a column for the African American Voice. Pat is the family historian for both sides of her family and her work can be viewed at <http://africanroots-pbj.blogspot.com>. Pat can be contacted at: [Pbj524@aol.com](mailto:Pbj524@aol.com).

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## Joshua Lyles



Some descendants of Joshua Lyles remained in Lyles Station for generations. Above: Catherine Cole Gooch, born 1863 in Lyles Station, Indiana, and died there in 1958. She was the daughter of Joshua's oldest child, Susan Ann Lyles, and her husband, Thomas Cole. Right: Tamar Gooch, daughter of Catherine Cole Gooch and Robert Gooch, born in Lyles Station in 1892. Photographed around 1910 in Princeton, Indiana.

Photos Courtesy Arlene Blanks Polk



"Lyles is a northern picture of southern types and customs. When the sun made its good-night rays along the rippling Wabash one may wander through this quaint town and hear the folk songs of the sunny south. Seated on the stoops, the old negro 'mammys' croon their grandchildren to rest, while the voices of the mammy's children are lifted in songs of praise and thanksgiving."<sup>23</sup>

In the 1980s, Carl C. Lyles, Sr., a direct descendant of Joshua Lyles, and a self-professed lover of all things Southern, appeared to adopt verbatim and without confirmation, the newspaper's version of Joshua Lyles' origins when he penned his own story of the beginning of Lyles Station.<sup>24</sup> Carl Lyles may also have been heavily influenced by the research he had conducted on his maternal grandmother's family, the Greens, who did indeed arrive in Lyles Station as slaves almost a decade after its founding.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, those who followed Carl Lyles, and certainly the reporter for the *Fort Wayne Evening*

*Sentinel*, simply repeated the story of Joshua Lyles' supposed slave origins in their own writings, without first determining whether it was true.<sup>26</sup>

In researching the family of Joshua Lyles, documents provide definitive proof that he was born a free man. Thus far, however, we have uncovered no evidence proving that Joshua Lyles was born a slave. I would therefore suggest that the documentation available, particularly the Tennessee censuses and the court minutes from Montgomery and Robertson Counties, Tennessee, reveals that Joshua Lyles was born a free man. Any further mention that Joshua Lyles was a former slave, without the required research and solid evidence, should immediately cease; to do otherwise is a disservice to history and to the generations of descendants of the free settlers of Lyles Station, Indiana.

<sup>1</sup> The Registry of Negroes and Mulattoes in Gibson County, Indiana (Patoka township), ca. 1852.

<sup>2</sup> Carl C. Lyles, Sr., *Lyles Station, Indiana: Yesterday and Today*. Evansville, Indiana: University of Southern Indiana (1984). Bill Shaw, *A Beacon of History*. The Indianapolis Star, February 2, 1997, p. 3. Rebecca C. Zorich and Cornelius O'Brien, *Our Historical Perspective*, The African-American Landmarks Committee of the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana (1995), vol. 1, issue 1, p. 3. Princeton Indiana Genealogy, *Slaves Sought Freedom*. Lyles Station Historical Preservation Corp. (2000), p. 1. Lyles Station Historical Preservation Corp., *The Story of Joshua and Sanford Lyles*. Black History News and Notes. The Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis, Ind., August 2002, vol. 1, issue 89. Randy K. Mills, *They Defended Themselves Nobly: A Story of African American Empowerment in Evansville, Indiana, 1857*. Black History News and Notes, The Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis, Ind., August 2005, vol. 1, issue 101, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> The Fort Wayne Evening Sentinel, *No Whites Live There*. July 26, 1902 (Ind.).

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## Joshua Lyles

<sup>4</sup> 1799 Powhatan County, Virginia, Personal Property Tax List (Library of Virginia microfilm reel 57).

<sup>5</sup> Free Mulattoes and Negroes Schedules to the Henry County, Virginia, Personal Property Tax Lists for 1813 and 1814 (Library of Virginia microfilm reel 194).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census of 1820, Montgomery County, Tennessee, roll M33\_122, page 234, image 197, household of James Lyle. The failure to identify the ages and enumerate the individuals in the households of free blacks was not rare on this census (e.g., see U.S. Census of 1820, Montgomery County, Tennessee, roll M33\_122, page 233, image 192, household of Thomas Allcock).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census of 1820, Springfield, Robertson County, Tennessee, roll M33\_125, page 35, image 49, household of John Lile. U.S. Census of 1830, Robertson County, Tennessee, M19\_179, page 376, household of John Lile. Carter G. Woodson, *Free Negro Heads of Families In the United States In 1830*. The Assoc. for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., Washington D.C. (1925), p. 161. Woodson lists the other free black heads of household for Robertson County, Tennessee on the 1830 census as Bob Stewart, Frank Newdium, William Portee, Herbert Stewart, Edmund Stewart, Harrison Chavous, William Silver, Phillip Silver, Patsey Chavous and Bennett Mitchell. *Ibid* at p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Research indicates that John Liles' children were likely James b. 1792, Daniel b. 1795, John b. 1798, Joshua b. 1800, Tabitha b. 1812, and Sanford b. 1813.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census of 1830, Robertson County, Tennessee, roll M19\_179, page 376, households of Joshua and Tabitha Lile and Daniel Lyle. Terry Houtaling Nolcox, *Pro-Slavery Settlers Found Ways to Evade the Law*. Princeton Daily Clarion's Today section, February 10, 1992 (Ind.), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> The Attestation of Col. Joseph Hopson that Liles were Free Persons dated April 23, 1823 at p. 169, and Judgment of Liles family members as Free Persons entered July 1, 1823, Montgomery County, Tennessee Probate Court Minutes, vol. 2, 1823-1824 (maintained

by the Montgomery County, Tennessee Archives). Robertson County, Tennessee Court Minutes (1830-1836), Book 9 at p. 543 and Book 10 at p. 33 (Genealogical Society of Utah microfilm reels).

<sup>13</sup> Robertson County, Tennessee, Court Minutes, Deed Book Z, August 23, 1836 at pp. 29-30 (purchase of land by Sanford Lyles from John F. Johnson) and Deed Book Z, November 4, 1837 at pp. 353-354 (purchase of land by James Lyles from Lorenzo Hox). Robertson County Court Minutes, December Term 1836, Book 11 at p. 168 and Book 12 at p. 43, for Court Road Orders impacting land held by John and Daniel Lyles (Genealogical Society of Utah microfilm reels).

<sup>14</sup> Robertson County, Tennessee Court Minutes, *Free Person Attestation of James Liles for Rebecca White Liles*, December Term 1840, Book 11, p. 355 (Genealogical Society of Utah microfilm reels).

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census of 1840, Patoka Township, Gibson County, Indiana, roll M704\_81, page 19, households of John and Joshua Liles. It appears that by 1880, the variant spelling of the last name ceased and the family consistently spelled the surname "Lyles." The remaining free African Americans appearing as heads of household on the 1840 census, are Nelson Bass, Joel Stewart, Robert Cole, Banister Chaves, Thomas McDaniel, Isaac Williams and Duke W. Anderson.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Census of 1850, Patoka Township, Gibson County, Indiana, roll M432\_147, page 6, image 12, Joshua Lyles household.

<sup>19</sup> Agricultural Schedule to U.S. Census of 1850, Gibson County, Indiana, *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> The Fort Wayne Evening Sentinel, *No Whites Live There*, July 26, 1902 (Ind.).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Carl C. Lyles, Sr., *Lyles Station in Indiana: Yesterday and Today*, *ibid*. The author, Carl

Lyles was the grandson of Jonathon Lyles, a son of Joshua Lyles and the husband of a Greer.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. The writer, Carl C. Lyles, correctly noted that there were ex-slaves living in Lyles Station, particularly the Greer family who arrived in Gibson County from Alabama after 1840, headed by a white slave master, Levi Greer, and his female slave with their children. Once in Indiana, however, Greer emancipated the family. *Ibid*. at p. 4. It appears that when writing his book, Carl C. Lyles, Sr., relied heavily, but without attribution, on a paper written December 1, 1938, by William H. Roundtree, the first black postmaster of Lyles Station. Roundtree, however, never asserted in his paper that Joshua Lyles was a slave, but at page 2, Roundtree did erroneously indicate that Joshua Lyles came to the settlement from Canada. Roundtree's paper, *The History of Lyles, Indiana*, was printed May, 1941, in the Indiana Negro History Society Bulletin.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 2..



Arlene Blanks Polk and AAGSNC President Howard Edwards, are direct descendants of Joshua Lyles. She says she and her cousins have been researching the Lyles family for about seven years and wanted to know for sure whether Joshua Lyles had been slave or free. They were overjoyed to finally have an answer and to have documentation that the Liles family was free. Arlene is a member of the Indiana African American Genealogical Society and the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California. She is an attorney in Houston, Texas.



## President's Message

(Continued from page 3)

suits all the needs we have now, and those we will have in the future ([www.AAGSNC.org](http://www.AAGSNC.org)).

### Volunteer Youth Outreach

Alameda County Supervisor and member Keith Carson solicited the society's help in establishing the first *Family Journeys Youth Ancestry Project* in the Oakland Public Schools. Through this project, interested high school students would study how to research their family stories. Member Nicka Smith volunteered to help over several months. Despite this not being a sanctioned society activity, our members stepped forward to help her in a big way. The students that volunteered to attend enjoyed the time spent and embraced the knowledge about their families acquired in the process.

### Field Trip To Salt Lake City To The FHC

Several members accompanied Founder Electra Kimble Price to Salt Lake City last spring on a field trip to the Family History Center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This trip is always an enlightening experience for first-timers and old-timers as well. Research facilities and resources are so extraordinary that one cannot help but find something new about one's family with each visit.

### San Francisco Public Library Exhibit

Kheven LaGrone attended a meeting early in the year and announced that he was curator of an art exhibit at the San Francisco Public Library. The exhibit, *I Am America: Black Genealogy Through The Eyes Of An Artist*, was to portray African-American history through the story of black families. He was seeking volunteers who would work with San Francisco Bay Area artists working in several different media to portray these family histories. Several members did volunteer to work with

the artists; one member was an artist in her own right. Some members discovered through the process that they had Bay Area relatives of which they were previously unaware. The exhibit opened last November and ran until February 2, 2012. It was an excellent presentation, and well worth a visit.

### Society Presence on Facebook

Outreach and Education Committee Chair Nicka Smith has established an AAGSNC page on Facebook. She writes a blog for the page as well as the society web site. This shows a great potential for attracting non-members as well as members to the society's activities. Visit the site; it is enlightening, and no sign-in is required.

### Funeral Program and Obituary Database

For the benefit of our membership, Obit Committee Chair Bill Melson has launched the ambitious project of scanning well over 1,000 documents and 4,000 images. These were donated by San Francisco Bay Area residents and document the deaths of area residents or their relatives who are now deceased. Bill and his committee members have been listing and scanning these documents even through the holiday season. He assures us that this vital resource will be posted to the Members Only section of the website early in 2012 for all members to use.

### Membership Increase Over Last Year

Due in part to our programs, at last count we have increased our paid membership 13% over the previous year. The above is by no means an exhaustive list of achievements, but as you can see, we have had a wonderful program year, thanks to the untiring efforts of our volunteer members. We invite you to become a member if you have not already. Much of what we members learn, we learn from each other, so the more members we have, the more we have to share. Join today!

ARE YOU A MEMBER?

Adult regular membership is just \$30 per year

JOIN AAGSNC TODAY AT

[www.aagsnc.org](http://www.aagsnc.org)



# A Brief History of Watch Night

By Charlene Brown



Did you start the New Year by going to a Watch Night service at your church? Whether it's the first stop before going out to celebrate, or the only stop for New Year's, many of us do attend Watch Night. But often we don't know the history of this tradition.

Watch Night is found among many Christian denominations, but the tradition is particularly strong in African-American churches. It is the last service of the old year, and begins the new with prayer and thanksgiving. The faithful gather on New Year's Eve night, usually between 7 and 10 p.m., for a service that includes prayer, singing, scripture reading and preaching, and which ends at midnight. It's a time to reflect on the year that's ending, and prepare spiritually for the new.

Though barely known to most white Americans, search the web for "watch night" and you'll learn that it's a Christian tradition that goes back as far as the Moravians many centuries ago. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Moravian missionaries spread

their practices around the world. Blacks came together in churches and private homes on December 31, 1862, known as "Freedom's Eve," eagerly awaiting word that President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had become law. At the stroke of midnight, January 1, 1863, the law went into effect and all slaves were declared free. The news was greeted with prayers, shouts and songs of joy as the newly emancipated thanked God.

In an article for [huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com), the Reverend P. Kimberleigh Jordan says that for many, the tradition was a way to deal with the uncertainties of life as a slave. "The belief was that enslaved people gathered with loved ones during the week between Christmas and New Year's. Watchnight was the final gathering, during which they prayed for God to protect and 'watch between them' when they departed," she says. They knew that this might be the last time some of them would be together, as slave owners often settled their debts by the start of the New Year, sometimes by selling off some of their human chattel.

A more common connection is with Emancipation. All across the South,

Blacks came together in churches and private homes on December 31, 1862, known as "Freedom's Eve," eagerly awaiting word that President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had become law. At the stroke of midnight, January 1, 1863, the law went into effect and all slaves were declared free. The news was greeted with prayers, shouts and songs of joy as the newly emancipated thanked God.

Watch Night took on added emotional and spiritual significance for African-Americans as they awaited the January 1, 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama, our country's first African-American president. To many, that historic event was the answer to centuries of prayers.

For African-Americans who keep this tradition, Watch Night is a bridge between our past and our future, a time for thanking God for bringing us safely through the past year, and asking His blessings for the next.

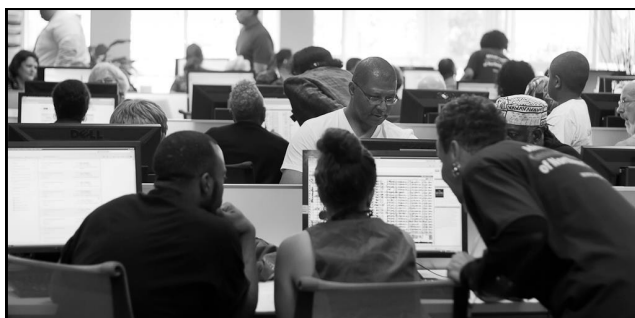


## Society News

2011 was a busy and productive time for AAGSNC. Our membership grew, in part because members presented or participated in large public events like the ones pictured on these pages.

### BLACK FAMILY HISTORY DAY

October 8, 2011



AAGSNC's Outreach and Education Committee held our second successful Black Family History Day at the Oakland Family History Center. 35 volunteers helped more than 68 people trace their families. The day included two workshops, one-on-one assistance, and codes to participate in 23andMe.com's "Roots in the Future" project. Volunteers from the California Genealogical Society (CGS) and the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group assisted.



**Vernester Sheeler helps an attendee identify her ancestors.**



**Program Committee Chair Jackie Stewart assists a pair of cousins tracing their lineage.**



**Felicia Addison taught Introduction to Genealogy and Introduction to Online Research classes.**



**Treasurer Melvyn Gillette (right) in a one-on-one consultation.**





### CGS ANCESTRY DAY

November 7, 2011

AAGSNC members (l. to r.) Vernester Sheeler, Nicka Smith, Felicia Addison and (not pictured) Lisa Lee served as consultants for the California Genealogical Society's "Ancestry Day" in San Francisco. The event was a joint effort with Ancestry.com.



### "I AM AMERICA" EXHIBIT

November 20, 2011



AAGSNC members attended a reception to celebrate the exhibit "I Am America: Black Genealogy Through the Eyes of An Artist" at San Francisco's Main Public Library. The exhibit commemorated African-Americans who contributed to the making of America before, during and immediately after the Civil War, and explored the role of slave revolts. Three works were about the families of AAGSNC members, left photo.

Left: AAGSNC members Judith Collins and Melvyn Gillette, artist Tomye, AAGSNC member Nicka Smith, and artist Makeda Rashidi at the "I Am America" reception.



Clockwise from above: Quilt by Alice Beasley and dolls by Karen Oyekanmi; artist Tomye's mixed-media piece about the family of AAGSNC's Melvyn Gillette; mosaic featuring Nicka Smith's great-grandfather, Louis Balfour Atlas, Sr., next to a painting by Makeda Rashidi of Judith Collins' great-grandmother.





**African American Genealogical Society  
of Northern California (AAGSNC)**

*2012 Meeting Programs and Events*

<b>Jan 21</b> Genealogy Software and Record Keeping	<b>Feb 11</b> Black Family History Day <i>Oakland FHC</i>	<b>Feb 18</b> Beyond the Census: Other State & Federal Resources, Newspapers
<b>Mar 17</b> Writing Your Story: Presenting Your Family's History	<b>Apr 21</b> Reviewing the 1940 Census	<b>May 19</b> The Great Migration and Migration Patterns
<b>Jun 16</b> Genealogy Research Techniques and Ancestral Project Presentation	<b>Sep 15</b> Braggin' & Lyin' (What I Did This Summer) Social Media	<b>Oct 13</b> Black Family History Day <i>Oakland FHC</i>
<b>Oct 20</b> Breaking Through Brick Walls and DNA Presentation	<b>Nov 17</b> Slave Research and Immigration	<b>Dec 15</b> Christmas Party and Black Elephant Sale

All meetings and programs are open to the public and unless specified, are held at  
Oakland Public Library, Dimond Branch, 3565 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, CA 94602

\*Meeting Program Topics Are Subject to Change\*

# CALENDAR

## AAGSNC

AAGSNC meets every third Saturday of the month from 1:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the Oakland Public Library, Dimond Branch, 3565 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, California. No meetings in July and August.

## Other Events

Fourth Wednesday of each month, through May 23 - African American Research Workshop, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.; individual help 4:45 p.m. to 5:45 p.m., Regional Family History Center, 4766 Lincoln Ave., Oakland, CA, 510-531-3905  
Facilitator: Judith Collins of AAGSNC

California Genealogical Society and Library offers Genealogy for Beginners, first Saturday of every month FREE at 2201 Broadway, Suite L12, Oakland, California 94612 [www.calgensoc.org](http://www.calgensoc.org).

The Baobab Tree is published four times a year and is provided free to all members. Additional copies and past issues may be purchased for \$5.00 per copy. All articles and manuscripts submitted for publication are evaluated and may be edited. Authors retain copyright. AAGSNC does not assume responsibility for errors of fact or interpretation. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in The Baobab Tree are: February 15 for the Spring issue, May 15 for the Summer issue, July 15 for the Fall issue, and October 15 for the Winter issue. Correspondence on editorial matters, story submissions and requests for permission to reprint articles may be sent to [journal@aagsnc.org](mailto:journal@aagsnc.org). For Writer's Guidelines, send request to [journal@aagsnc.org](mailto:journal@aagsnc.org) or on the web at [www.aagsnc.org](http://www.aagsnc.org).

## Articles and manuscripts acceptable for publication include:

### Manuscripts/Articles:

- African and African-American genealogy, cultural traditions, and philosophy
- Church histories
- Documentation of African oral traditions and African writings
- Stories & documentation of African-American families
- Ancestry charts, family group records, personal family papers
- Miscellaneous topics of interest in researching African ancestors
- Resources and methods of research in Africa

### Abstracts:

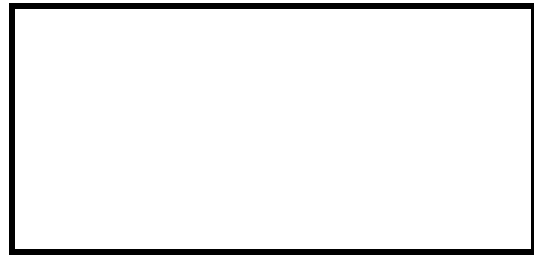
- Census transcriptions (federal, state, county & city)
- Church records (baptisms, burials, marriages, etc.)
- Court records
- Manumission and freedom certificates
- Missionary and benevolent society records
- Military and pension records
- Newspaper transcriptions
- Plantation family papers relating to slaves
- Tax lists naming free blacks or slaves
- Voter registration lists

Visit the [AAGSNC Website...](http://www.aagsnc.org)

Read the blog, post ancestor charts, read back issues of The Baobab  
Check our Resources Section, Calendar of Events, Society Information

[aagsnc.org](http://aagsnc.org)

**African American Genealogical  
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P.O. Box 27485  
Oakland, CA 94602-0985  
(877) 884-2843**



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	Lenora Gobert	Term Expires Jan. 2014
	Rhonda Edwards	Term Expires Jan. 2012

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 Organization \$55  
 Life Membership - Individual \$300  
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 Ranie G. Smith  
 Electra Kimble Price**

**OBJECTIVES**

- To promote interest in genealogy, biography and related history in African ancestry research
- To supplement and enrich the education of African-Americans through the collection, preservation and maintenance of African-American genealogical materials
- To promote the accumulation and preservation of African-American genealogical and related historical materials and make such materials available to all
- To promote and maintain ethical standards in genealogical research and publications

**It's *Your* History...Isn't It Time You Told Your Story?**

