

**Mariah Gates Patterson**

**Reason included: founder of the Crawfordsville AME Church and conductor, was part of the Thomas Fry I and family caravan to Indiana from Kentucky**



Mariah Gates Patterson

Photo courtesy of Vicke Hudson Swisher

Mariah was born in Kentucky to slave parents Frankie Jackson Gates and Isaac Gates about 1826. While her parents had often thought of fleeing, they chose not to leave, but instead supported freedom for their children, Thomas and Mariah. The Gates' family either belonged to or were acquainted with wealthy Kentucky land owner Thomas Fry I, so young Thomas and Mariah Gates became part of his caravan bound for Indiana in the early 1830s. Frankie and Isaac stayed behind, one legend suggested they were sold to help finance their children's trip to Indiana.

In 1833/1834, Thomas Fry I, his family, and many slaves left Mercer/Boyle County in Kentucky to come to Crawfordsville. Their mission was three-fold; to avoid the ugly racial incidents occurring daily in the Mercer/Boyle County, Kentucky area, to find a good education at Wabash College for Thomas I's sons, and to free their slaves. Mariah and her brother Thomas Gates, joined the caravan along with members of the Isaac Jones, James Askin(s) and the Nelson Patterson I families. Little information remained about the months-long travel experience except that people rode in wagons, on horseback, or walked. When the group arrived in Crawfordsville, Thomas Fry I built a home on property off State Road 32 near the Ben Hur Cemetery south of Crawfordsville. His son, Thomas Fry II, inherited

that property, developed his physician practice, and became editor of a local newspaper. Another son, Francis Fry, built a home on Grant Street.

All Thomas Fry I's former slaves faced increasingly hostile laws requiring all persons of color to be indentured, to have a White person employ them, or to be servants until they were adults. Mariah Gates lived with the Isaac Jones family whose home stood on East Pike Street. There, she learned to help with the children and take on many jobs in the kitchen.

Beginning in 1842, Mariah settled into life in Crawfordsville. She was baptized by Reverend Benjamin Hill in Sugar Creek "just a few yards east of Mr. Sperry's Bridge on the county pike to Tippecanoe County". In 1851, Mariah married a man who was also in the Thomas Fry I caravan, Nelson Patterson II, and gave birth to four children born between 1851 and 1861 (sons George Francis, John Nelson, William and daughter Lucy). After choosing to settle in the Northend, they built their home across the street from John Speed and near the Bethel AME Church, which became the primary focus for the family. By 1851, Isaac Elston's wife, Maria (Aiken) Elston, hired Mariah to work in the kitchen at the Elston mansion located on East Pike Street. Maria Elston, raised as a devout Quaker in New York State, had strong religious beliefs, and Maria and Mariah became close friends until Maria's death in 1874. Local residents and the Isaac Elston family referred to Mariah as Grandma Patterson and Aunty Mariah. Over time, Mariah also served prominent Crawfordsville families such as Senator Henry S. Lane (his wife Joanna was Maria and Isaac's daughter), the Smiths, Bradens, Thompsons, Duckworths, Davidsons, Keeneys, and General Lew Wallace.

The Patterson family soon found themselves involved in John Speed's work on the Underground Railroad. Speed not only hid fugitives in the loft of his log kitchen annex as stationmaster but also transported them to the next station. The Pattersons accepted runaway slaves from the Speed Cabin, avoided suspicious strangers stalking the neighborhood, and hid and cared for runaways in the cellar of the Bethel AME Church.

Along with her church work as a Sunday school teacher and assisting the runaway slaves, Mariah was first matron of the court and a charter member of the Eastern Star. Mariah died at her home at 701 South Elm Street 30 August 1929 at the age of 103, the oldest in the county at the time. Three ministers officiated her funeral; Reverend W. H. Saunders of Chicago, Reverend H. D. Saunders of Crawfordsville's Bethel AME Church and Reverend Richards of Crawfordsville's Second Baptist Church, the other Black congregation in town.

Her place in the history of the Bethel AME Church earned her prominence about town. She spoke to her children, grandchildren and anyone who chose to listen about how the church was established in Crawfordsville. She shared stories about how John Speed called upon the Bethel AME Church members to hide fugitives when Speed's loft was too full or suspicious people lurked about the neighborhood. Stories of those slaves running back and forth between Speed Cabin and Bethel AME remained legendary in the church history.

During her research, Martha Cantrell found this perfect quote written about Mariah Gates Patterson and John Allen Speed.

*"Different races but similar character traits: each looked at each other as a human being. Neither Black nor White was a factor in their association. Both were Christians with humanitarian accomplishments which created the legendary history of their time."*

### **Nelson Patterson II**

#### **Reasons included: Bethel AME Church member and conductor, was part of the Thomas Fry I and family caravan to Indiana from Kentucky**

Nelson Patterson II was born a Kentucky slave around 1828. He and his parents, Nelson I and Martha, came to Montgomery County with the Thomas Fry I caravan of 1833/1834. He became the yardman and cook for the Isaac Elston family. He married Mariah Gates, also a member of the Fry caravan, and had four children born between 1851 and 1861 (sons George Francis, John Nelson, William and daughter Lucy). After choosing to settle in the Northend, they built their home across the street from John Speed and near the Bethel AME Church, which became the focus for the family.

In the 1850 census, Nelson was listed as living with his parents and identified himself as Black. In the 1860 census, he identified himself as Mulatto, able to read and write, and employed as a bartender. By the 1870 census, after his return from his service in the Civil War, he identified as Black and worked as a cook.

Nelson enlisted as a private in Company G of the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment United States Colored Troops on 7 February 1865 mustering out on 8 November 1865. His enlistment records stated he stood 5' 8 ½" tall.

Bethel AME Church legends identified him as an instrumental guide, watchman, and creator of plots to help escaping slaves. He worked in tandem with John Speed and other local Abolitionists/Activists.

His military records indicated Nelson died on 3 April 1873. His daughter Lucy applied for a headstone on 10 September 1932. A memorial to Nelson and the other local members of the United States Colored Troops stands in the Old Town Cemetery on Covington Hill where he was thought to be buried.

#### **List of References for Mariah and Nelson Patterson II**

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