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Conditions of Subject and Object

ABSTRACT

This collection of articles concerning archaeological and historical investigations of New Philadelphia concludes with a commentary that discusses the heritage of Frank and Lucy McWorter and the town, and the challenges of such research endeavors from the perspective of a descendant and a scholar of Black agency and African American history. Like many other McWorter descendants, Abdul Alkalimat sees such an archaeological project as a way to promote, preserve, and further explore the story of that founding family and the town. The role of such research projects in expanding the base of support and knowledge is highly valuable. The legacy of freedom, a powerful story rooted in the history of Frank and Lucy McWorter, provides a profound and important message within American history.

Comment

Writing this comment has required that I gather my thoughts from two vantage points, both as a subject and an object in the production of historical interpretation. I write as the great-great-grandson of Frank and Lucy McWorter, as a spokesperson for the McWorter family, and as such I am an activist in establishing and maintaining the collective memory and imagination of our family. At the same time, as a social scientist in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois, I have the responsibility to make sure my interpretation takes into consideration the scientific evidence. Yet, I am also part of the evidence in the eyes of others. I am both subject and object, a universal human condition.

New Philadelphia has a special meaning in that the main stewardship of the McWorter land passed through the male lineage of Frank to Solomon to Arthur. Arthur's children, and some cousins, were the last (fourth) generation of McWorters to grow up in New Philadelphia. This included my father, Festus. There were seven of us in the fifth generation, grandchildren of Arthur, who grew up together in Chicago. We lived within a culture of memory and return.

They made the story of Frank McWorter a living part of family identity, and a ritual recollection at church and community events. We were also taken to the Barry Apple Festival, convened just a few miles from the site of New Philadelphia, and to visit relatives in Jacksonville, Springfield, and other locations in the area. We stood on this identity. In fact, I became defined by the dialectics of carrying this tradition forward.

At our most recent family reunion, six surviving members of the fifth generation issued a statement to represent the views of the family. This is the statement:

The McWorter family, descendants of Frank (1777–1854) and Lucy (1771–1870) are holding a 2005 family reunion in Springfield, Illinois and Barry, Illinois (Pike County). We are gathering from many states—Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas, as well as England. Our family now includes descendants from the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th generations. Our oldest family member is 103, Zelia Alberta McWorter Ewing. She will not be in attendance but has sent a video greeting and message to the family reunion from her home in Chicago. She grew up in New Philadelphia.

Over the years our family has had many reunions that have kept alive our collective memory of our early family history, especially the commitment of Frank McWorter, known as “Free Frank,” to free his family from slavery and contribute to the overall freedom of Black people. He was successful in working and saving money so he bought 16 family members out of bondage and established a successful rural town and family farm. In addition, his farm was a station on the Underground Railroad so he risked everything he had built for his family in order to help other slaves get to freedom. He was the model of a man who believed and committed his life to the freedom of his people.

Frank McWorter and his son Solomon have been written about since the late 19th century. A historical tract by the Pike County Historical Society was published in the 1960s. The main genealogical work in the 20th century was started by Thelma McWorter Kirkpatrick Wheaton (4th generation, 1907–2001). Her work was continued by her daughter who wrote her PhD dissertation and published a book on “Free Frank” McWorter. Helen McWorter Simpson (4th generation, 1895–1990) who also wrote a book, “The Makers of History” (1981) based on her research in the 1950s.

We have gathered at this time for several reasons:

1. We are connecting members of the family who have independently been doing genealogical research and who have not known each other in the past. New research is redefining the lineage of the McWorter family.

2. We have been honored to have Governor Blagojevich dedicate a stretch of Interstate 72 in Illinois to Frank McWorter, so we are pleased to gather to affirm our ancestral family founder.

3. We are very interested in the National Science Foundation sponsored archeological project to study the material remains of the town of New Philadelphia founded by Frank McWorter in 1836.

4. Finally, we are interested in cooperating with the New Philadelphia Association in building a lasting monument to keep the memory of Frank McWorter alive as part of the local history of Pike County, Illinois.

We are a diverse and geographically dispersed family. Our family has its origins in the offspring of a slave owner and a woman from West Africa whom he owned. From this time our family includes the widest possible social and ethnic diversity, literally a spectrum from Black to white including Native Americans and Latinos. Our story is the American story, from slavery to freedom, Black and white, from the farm to the city, from the South to all regions and areas of the world.

We have many family initiatives regarding family history and historical restoration projects. We are in the stage of generating proposals and plans for the future. Our goal is to encourage all family members, and interested parties in Illinois and throughout the country to contribute their ideas so that in the near future we can gather as a family and come to final plans.

Our family is united around the goal of preserving the memory and legacy of freedoms started by Frank and Lucy McWorter. We welcome everyone willing to join and contribute to this effort.

Signed by fifth generation organizers of the 2005 McWorter Family Reunion (24 June 2005) Shirley McWorter Moss, Allen Kirkpatrick, Sandra McWorter, Gerald McWorter, Patricia McWorter, and Lonie Wilson (for her mother).

The philosophy of our family was summed up decades ago by Thelma McWorter Kirkpatrick Wheaton in the following words:

Through the years we have some extended families not by blood or marriage but by circumstances that arise from crises or by circumstances from empowerment, through work, academics, cultural, psychological, religious, and even politics. Family reunions help to achieve and further long held dreams—renew old relationships—meet the new born—celebrate getting together—having fun—joy—great happiness. The desire for getting to know relatives is one of the basic fundamental factors that make a family reunion a success. In fact it is human nature to want to be accepted and approved by relatives and family.

Within our fifth generation there are two competing narratives, two different interpretations of the meaning of Frank McWorter:

1. Frank McWorter as frontier entrepreneur.
2. Frank McWorter as freedom fighter.

Of course, one can make the obvious point to say that he was both, but that would miss the main point of emphasis. The key is to grasp his main priority and then see how he went about making it happen. In fact, to put together his business practices with his political practices, he was really a “by any means necessary” kind of guy.

My first cousin, Juliet Walker (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1976, History) made the following point at a press conference in June 2005:

My concern in this rebuilding, restructuring of New Philadelphia is to exemplify and to emphasize what is truly the significance of Free Frank’s life. And that is that he was an entrepreneur; a business person who uses his business skills first as a slave, and then as Free Frank, a free Black, to buy his family from slavery. Free Frank’s whole life was about freedom. And he was able to do this because he was involved in business activities. The founding of the town was a business activity.

My approach (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1974, Sociology) would rather state that because he was motivated by the freedom impulse he was able to go into business. My main evidence is that our family has not engaged in business traditions. We have been industrial workers and service professionals. Our family members have been teachers, community and labor activists, social workers, postal workers, and bus drivers. No one went into business. The freedom impulse was transformed into a “serve the people” ethic.

This is both a family drama and a scientific drama, as the story of Frank McWorter becomes part of the iconic structure of the African American narrative. This is a challenge to every African American family to rediscover the freedom impulse in their family history, to trace its movement across the generations, and to nurture it now and for the future.

Dr. Walker has made many seminal contributions to the McWorter family and New Philadelphia history, notably her book (Walker 1983) and her relentless continuation of her mother’s passion to keep the Free Frank story alive. One of her recent contributions, however, has been to keep all current and new researchers sensitive to the concerns of family and her work as the standing scholar of record. She went way overboard in some of her actions, but in the end she made sure there would be no utopian scenarios in which racism was whitewashed. Sometimes black people have to take extreme actions to make a

point. The fight over historical interpretation is in fact part of the freedom struggle, so Juliet is acting in the family tradition.

On the other hand, Paul Shackel, Chris Fennell, Terry Martin, and their colleagues have proven themselves to be decent people and careful scholars, so it has been a pleasure on my part and for our family as a whole to work with them in this project. It has been especially important for them to use the Internet to make available their findings and the actual data being collected. This transparency suggests the dawn of a new age of research in which the campus-based scholar and the community-based citizen-scientist can collaborate with many diverse voices all crunching the same data.

Finally, in my view, the big question that frames this research is searching for black agency as part of the core identity of this country. Standing at New Philadelphia in the time of Frank McWorter (1829–1854), one would have white agency, but the belittling of black agency. Twenty miles to the west in Hannibal, Missouri across the Mississippi, we have the story of Sam Clemens (1835–1910), who as Mark Twain was a cultural voice that rose up and dealt with the morality of slavery. Twenty miles to the east we have Pittsfield, Illinois, where practicing attorney Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) went on to do the same thing in the realm of politics. To the north in Quincy, Illinois we have the abolitionist Dr. Richard Eels and his court case of 1843. At the same time, especially in the area of Canada where Frank Jr. lived as a runaway freedman, Alexis de Tocqueville visited and made the morality of slavery part of his writings in *Democracy in America* in 1835 (de Tocqueville 1836).

Where is the voice of the African American in all of this? Terrell Dempsey reminds us of the distortions and omissions in our understanding of Sam Clemens in his book *Searching for Jim* (Dempsey 2003). Lerone Bennett (2000) helps clarify our understanding of the fundamental flaws in Lincoln's beliefs and actions. The story of the abolitionist Dr. Eels in Quincy often leaves out the escaped and then recaptured slave named

Charley. And while many quote de Tocqueville, few know about or refer to the novel of his companion, Gustave de Beaumont (1999), *Marie, or, Slavery in the United States*, written in 1835. All of this represents efforts to rewrite the history of this country without the romantic illusions that serve as a fetter on historical consciousness, and our maturation and acceptance of each other as part of a process, a process that we can shape and determine by our collective will.

This is the test before us. We have a developing body of empirical data and some initial interpretations, or at least possible ways of connecting these dots of data. The goal is to amass as much of this data as possible, and use the big ideas to help us configure them for the greatest consensus among descendants and scholars, local people and specialists, historians and residents. This collection of articles is a wonderful addition to this process.

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