

An Unusual Man For His Time  
The Life of Peter Postell

The Athenaeum Society

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December 1, 2016

## An Unusual Man For His Time

On a hot rain swept night five months ago word came that an old building on Sixth Street was on fire. A phone call revealed it to be the Peter Postell landmark at the corner of Sixth and Virginia.

Who was this man, Peter Postell? Research several years ago in the files of the Hopkinsville Kentuckian newspaper revealed an extensive obituary under the heading, "Richest Colored Man in Kentucky, Passes Away." That heading whetted the curiosity of this historian to dig more deeply into the various resources available to learn more about the life of this man.

Then came a phone call from Baltimore in late July, 1997. The caller was Paula Reed, a great-great granddaughter of Peter Postell. She with her mother, Pauline Martin Boyd, expressed an interest in coming to Hopkinsville to research the family here. On Aug. 4 & 5, these ladies were welcomed and shown sites relative to their family and they related several stories of great interest.

Peter Postell was a renaissance business man of the African-American race long before his time. Coming to prominence in the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Postell launched his business career in a grocery store and went on to acquire real estate holdings, to become prominent in his church, to serve on the school board and to become active in several social organizations.

Born a mulatto slave in the York district of South Carolina (some accounts indicate North Carolina) in 1841, he was a son of Capt. Elijah Coachman Postell, born Nov. 18, 1824, in Lancaster Co., South Carolina, and a slave Selina Kirkpatrick, also born in Lancaster County, Sept. 17, 1817. Elijah served in Co. "B" of Palmetto Regs. S. Car. Volunteers, in the Mexican War and he attained the rank of Captain in Co. "E," 2<sup>nd</sup> Miss. Infantry in the Confederate Army. Selina and her husband, Edward "Ned" Kirkpatrick, who was born at Yorkville, S. C. about 1793, came to Hopkinsville after the Civil War to live with the Postells and to operate a saloon and to serve as a cook in the Postell building. Selina died Jan. 21, 1882, and Ned died nearly seven years later. They are buried on the Postell lot in Cave Spring Cemetery.

In 1857, Peter was sold to slave traders who took him to Richmond, Virginia where in the spring of 1858 he was sold to a Christian County farmer who lived near Church Hill, Posey J. Glass (1828 –1893). The new owner brought him to Hopkinsville where he was registered on April 15 of that year. Late in the Civil War, in 1864, Peter, with other runaway slaves, went to Clarksville where he joined Co. "H," 16<sup>th</sup> U. S. Colored Vol. Infantry. He enlisted under the name of Peter Glass.

A story relates that while walking home at war's end, his company was traveling through Hart Co., Ky., by the farm of CSA Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner. Observing a young girl at a well, Peter stopped and asked her for a drink of water. She obliged and thus a lifetime relationship developed. Peter traveled on home where he worked in a barber shop to raise the money to buy Pauline Buckner. Kentucky slaves were not freed by the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, so he was forced to make the purchase in the time before passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment which freed slaves held in Union states.

Sometime between the trip home and late 1868, he went back to Hart County and bought Pauline's freedom. Together, they would start a family and a very successful business.

In 1868 with the accumulation of \$200 he formed a partnership with Bill Cohn, a white man, in the grocery business. The next year Cohn retired and Postell assumed full ownership. The business was located in a small frame building located on the northwest corner of Virginia and Court (6<sup>th</sup>) Street. Sometime later in the 1870's, the store building owner, A. P. Campbell, built four brick storehouses on the lot, one rented to Postell. Campbell sold the buildings to Postell on Jan. 21, 1880 for \$5,500. There the business prospered until the night of Oct. 25, 1882. Fire broke out in Tobe Smith's livery stable on the northeast corner of Virginia and Spring (now 8<sup>th</sup>) Street. When daylight came, destruction revealed the fire had spread from Virginia St. north to 5<sup>th</sup> and from Liberty to Main Street, including Postell's building. His total loss was \$7,000 with insurance of \$2,000.

In 1883 Postell replaced the block of four two story storerooms for \$15,000. His grocery occupied the corner room for the remainder of Postell's life. By 1910 B. B. Rice ran a grocery there, through 1916. Rogers & Poe Grocery followed, then by H. G. Hill Grocery in 1928 until the early 1930's. Buck's Cash Market occupied the corner storeroom in the mid 1930's to be followed by Drury Bros. Grocery during World War II. The Sanitary Market followed by Cunningham's Market was at the corner, until the early 1950's. Osteen's Furniture Store rented the entire first floor building until 1971. Rogers Used Furniture and A-One Furniture were the last occupants of the building. J. T. Hoard's restaurant, Wolf Geller's Dry goods, Kirkpatrick's Saloon, Sam Bohns Dry goods, Frank De George's Fish Market, and Hooser's Pool Room were occupants of the other three first floor storerooms.

In addition to professional offices on the second floor, a large assembly room, called Postell Hall, provided space for social gatherings. Monthly meetings of the United Benevolent Society, the Century Club and other groups were conducted there.

An interesting foot note to Peter's life is revealed in a newspaper item in Nov. 1889, "Zack Townes, colored, of Washington Co., Penn., was visiting his full blooded brother, Peter Postell, grocer here, for the first time in 32 years since they were separated by slavery. They assumed different names upon being freed."

Postell invested heavily in real estate holdings between 1871 and 1898. To own a home was his first objective. In 1871 he bought a house and lot at the corner of Market (5<sup>th</sup>) and Clay for \$900. The family lived at this location until 1886, when Postell contracted with Forbes & Bro. in April, to build a two story brick Italianate home on that corner. Cost was \$6,000 and it was built across the street from Clay Street School. The family occupied this home until 1904 when the widow Postell moved to the home of her oldest daughter, Bettie Patterson in Greenfield, Ohio.

In 1912, eight Hopkinsville physicians: J. E. Stone, F. Preston Thomas, R. F. McDaniel, F. M.

Brown, J. Paul Keith, J. B. Jackson, Austin Bell, and J. Gant Gaither, opened the Hopkinsville Hospital in the house. Mrs. Wanda M. Williams was named superintendent and it was in operation until Jennie Stuart Memorial Hospital opened on July 1, 1914. Again, the house served as a private residence until it was torn down in 1959.

Other homes and lots Postell owned included: one on Jackson (2<sup>nd</sup>) Street, three cottages, one on corner of Broad (4<sup>th</sup>) and Burgess (2<sup>nd</sup>) Street, a lot on Maple (16<sup>th</sup>) Street, one on Liberty, another on Broad (4<sup>th</sup>), and Jesup Avenue. In 1896 Postell bought a 150 acre farm at Binn's Mill. Downtown real estate was also of some interest. In 1891 Postell bought the H. B. Garner building on the west side of Main for \$7,900. It is now the office of White, White, & Crenshaw, Attorneys.

For several years in the 1880's, Postell served on the Colored School Board as deeds reflect the purchase and sale of land for school building lots. He was also a longtime member of Freeman Chapel C.M.E. Church. In the fall of 1881, Postell was a African-American delegate from the United States to the Methodist Council of the World then in session in London, England.

Postell's family remained upper most in his life. Two children were born to Peter and Pauline prior to the new state law which required Kentucky African-Americans to legally marry: John Washington, born Dec. 11, 1868, and Peter Jr., born June 5, 1871.

Peter and Pauline were married at the Christian County Court house on Feb. 24, 1872, by County Judge James O. Ellis. Eight more children were born by 1890. John W. was a gauger in the Revenue Service before his appointment by the governor as Steward at Western Kentucky Asylum in 1896. The state legislature blocked the appointment and he moved to Henderson where he operated a saloon until his death, April 4, 1918.

Peter, Jr. remained in Hopkinsville where he worked with his father in the grocery. In 1895 he married Fannie Bronston (1863 – 1953), a graduate of Berea College in 1890. Fannie was a teacher and

later principal at both Booker T. Washington School and Attucks High School. Peter Jr. died in Hopkinsville Apr. 7, 1944.

Bettie Estelline, the oldest of six girls, several of whom attended Fisk University in Nashville, was born July 20, 1873. She married Frederick D. Patterson and they lived in Greenfield, Ohio. It was to her home that Pauline and the younger girls moved when she left Hopkinsville in 1904. Bettie was still living in the late 1930's.

The next child was given an unusual but appropriate name, born in 1876, named Centennial. This child died on Dec. 8, 1877.

The fifth child was Zachariah "Zack," born May 1, 1878. He married, had one child, and died Feb. 13, 1901.

Five girls followed:

Annie Lee, called "Auntie" was born Nov. 26, 1880. She married Ben Ammons and they lived in Philadelphia. She worked as a YMCA social worker and died there Mar. 3, 1940.

Pauline was born Sept. 15, 1882. She married Earnest L. Atwell, a cigar salesman. They also lived in Philadelphia where she died Feb. 26, 1925. As a young lady, Pauline taught music at Tuskegee Institute.

The next child, Lucy Evelyn, was born July 13, 1885 and died at almost eight, June 3, 1893.

The last two girls, May Bell, born Oct. 12, 1888, and Lillian Buckner, born Nov. 27, 1890, both remained unmarried with their mother. They moved before 1919 to Philadelphia, where they both died young, May Bell on July 31, 1919, and Lillian on Mar. 17, 1921.

Peter Postell died of dropsy at his home on May 22, 1901. He was buried in East Hill Cemetery, also known as the Union Benevolent Cemetery. Pauline died at her home in Philadelphia, Mar. 10,

1922. She was buried in Cave Spring Cemetery along with the other family members whose bodies were exhumed from East Hill Cemetery. Peter's obituary stated that his estate was valued at between \$100,000 and \$125,000. At Pauline's death in 1922, her estate amounted to \$52,656.02. Peter's will bequeathed his entire estate to his widow Pauline with the provision that should she remarry. "I cannot conceive that she would. My estate shall be equally divided among my children. I close this will by expressing the hope that all my children will unite in helping their mother to earn a support, as I know she will help them; that no contention or strife or ill feeling shall exist by reason of money or property, and my earnest prayer is that they may be useful and honorable in the community in which they live."

Peter Postell did not live the expected 70 years, but in his allotted 60 years, he lived life full of contributions to his family, community and to his race.