

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

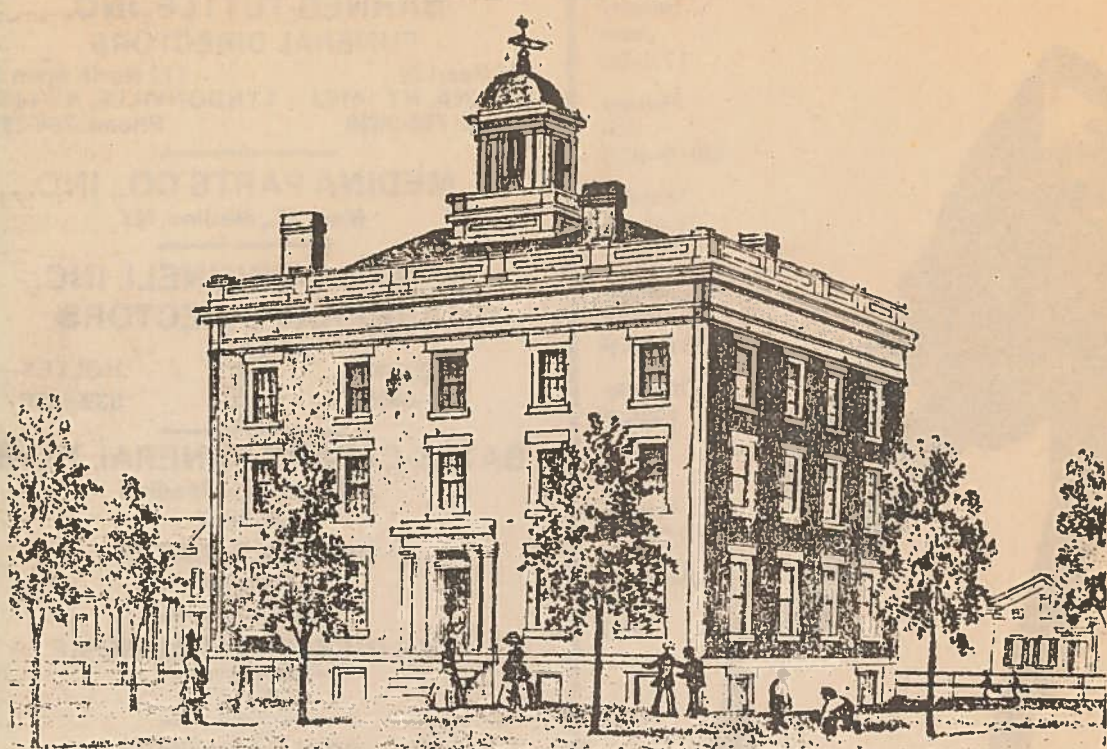
C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XIII

1-25-91

No. 4

## JAMES LITTLE



*The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges at will come to us must be the result of severe and instant struggle rather than of artificial forcing."*

— Booker T. Washington

In observance of Martin Luther King's birthday and February as Black History month, here is a small piece of local black heritage. This comes in the form of an interview with Katherine H. Billings which was taped in March 1980 by the Orleans County History Association through the Oral History Project.

Katherine Billings speaking: "Some 25 or more years ago, looking over old family papers, I came upon a will dated 1839. It was signed by one James Little, a name unknown to me. The contents of the will fascinated me. In part it read: 'I do hereby devise and bequeath unto the American Bible Society, the American Anti-slavery Society, and the society for the Education of Pious Young Men of Color, share and share alike the proceeds from the sale of a certain tract of land in Eaton County, Michigan.' 80 acres to be exact. Named as executors were Lansing Bailey and Thomas A. Fanning, prominent Albion citizens of that era."

"I turned to my mother, Kittie Hart Billings, asking: 'Who was James Little?' In substance this is the story she told. When her grandfather, Deacon Joseph Hart, pioneered in Barre in 1812, along with his four sons, ranging in age from 11 to 5, he brought a black boy, James Little. The boy, a slave, was given to Deacon Hart as part of his life's dowry. My great-grandfather, not believing in slavery, accepted the boy, granting him his freedom. He was brought up as a member of the Hart family. When the Hart boys went to school, he went too, learning to read and write and perhaps a little bit more. Coming of age, he moved to Michigan where the three Hart daughters had settled. And, of course, Michigan was Free Territory."

"A few years later, Mother and I visited her cousin, Charles Hart, son of my grandfather's younger brother, Samuel Hart, in Adrian, Michigan. In all our conversation about the family, I mentioned Jim Little and his will. Charles' response was: 'There was nothing to will. He died broke and Father paid his Funeral expenses.' I didn't think of Jim Little for years. About four years ago a friend, knowing my interest in local history, showed me a pamphlet dated 1891 and listing all the principals, teachers

and graduates of the Old Albion academy (pictured). The last couple of pages were devoted to reminiscences."

At this point, as county historian, let me interject here the exact passage from that publication which I think Miss Billings wanted to quote.

"During the half of a century which has passed away since it was my good fortune to be a student in the Academy, the greatest inventions have been utilized, and are familiar to even the youngest among you. Within that interval of time, a great economic question has culminated in war, with all its horrible accompaniments of death and destruction. We of the alumni saw the first drops of this great tempest when the 'underground railroad' brought Jimmy Little from slavery to unlawful freedom in this community; and we felt the first throb of the 'problem' when good Deacon Fanning thought it his duty to have 'Jimmy' the ex-slave, educated at the Academy as a fellow student with us. The only other African in Town at that time was Prince Jackson, the servant of Dr. Nicholson.....But poor 'Jimmy's' path toward knowledge was not strewn with roses."

Yours truly,  
Rufus B. Bullock

Miss Billings speaking again: "Recently I went through a scrapbook compiled by my Grandmother Hart. There, a clipping caught my eye, undated, but bearing this caption "A Reminiscence of Slavery." Let me read it: 'An old black colored man, named James Little, arrived at the home of S.E. Hart, from Lansing, yesterday afternoon. The old gentleman is in the neighborhood of 100 years old and in his childhood was a slave of Mr. Hart's grandfather in the state of New York. Later, upon his master's death, he was transferred to Mr. Hart's father who gave him the same privileges and education which Mr. Hart and his brothers received and when he arrived at the age of 21, his liberty was given to him, together with a piece of land in Michigan in the vicinity of Lansing. Mr. Hart had not seen the old gentleman in 50 years."

"If Jim Little came with the Harts in 1812 and attended the early schools, I should say that Albion schools have always been integrated; a statement which few, if any other Western New York villages could agree.

The stories may not exactly jibe but in essential facts they tally.