

ALFRED ISLAY WALDEN

1843 - 1884

Unlike his father, grandfather, and great grandfather before him, Islay Walden was born a slave. His great grandfather, John Chavis Walden, was a free Negro of Chatham County, North Carolina. His grandfather, William Walden, died the year before his birth; his father, William D. Walden, had married a free Negro, Nancy Glover, about the same time he was co-habiting with his mother, a slave, Ruth. Ruth was owned by a slavemaster, James Gardner, of Randolph County, North Carolina.

Islay's mother's status determined his status. By the mere fact that Ruth was a slave, Islay and his sister, Sarah, were slaves. By the fact that they were owned by Gardner when born their names were Gardner. They chose to adopt their father's surname however, Walden. Ruth was the granddaughter of a full-blood Cherokee Indian. Her mother was the child of a White slavemaster. Record of Ruth's birthdate has not been found, however, one can conclude that she was born about 1820.

Islay's father was the son of William and Elizabeth (Lytle) Walden, both free Negroes. Elizabeth's father was Francis Lytle of Randolph County, North Carolina. William D.'s father was born Ca. 1790, and died in 1842. Elizabeth preceded her husband in death and William had remarried (to Levina) when his Will was published August 2, 1842. William and Elizabeth had four sons; William D., b. 1815, Stanford B., b. 1817, Anderson, b. 1820, and John C., b. 1822. (All yearly dates are approximate..determined from old records).

William Walden and Ruth Gardner's first child was Sarah, b. 1843. Alfred Islay was born in 1843. The year Islay was born, their owner, James Gardner, died. His brother, Dolphin Gardner, purchased the slaves from the estate. They were sold shortly thereafter. Because of financial reverses on the part of owners, Islay was sold several times as a child. He told of "being sold twice in his mother's arms".... Sarah told of being torn from her mother's side, sold, never to see her mother again.

Sarah related an incident when Islay, a pre-teen boy, was going to be sold against the master's wife's wishes. Master's wife encouraged him "not to act so bright, stumble when you bring in the wood"..etc.

By 1850 Islay was owned by Noah Smitherman of Randolph County. Ruth died about 1851. Islay was 8 years old.

Some of the Smithermans welcomed a baby daughter, Nancy Jane, while Islay was their chattel. In a letter written May 8, 1872, while a student at Howard University, Islay wrote to, and dedicated a poem to, Nancy Jane Smitherman who he had known since birth. The poem appears in his 2nd Edition book of poems, "Walden's Miscellaneous Poems", published in 1873 in Washington, D.C..

One of Islay's owners enjoyed taking him to market and wagering bets that he could figure difficult calculations in 3 minutes time. He was about 8 - 10 years of age when he was "showed off" in this manner. Islay developed skill in carpentry, and as a teenager, John Merton, an employer at a gold mine (in North Carolina) where Islay worked, encouraged him as a poet.

As a young man Islay witnessed the hanging of a young Negro man with the same first name as he. After that Islay refused to use his name Alfred. Islay suffered with weak, watery eyes, at times he was almost blind. For this reason, and because of his age, Islay would be discouraged by well meaning relatives and friends about getting an education when freedom was a new cloak.

When the first shot was fired starting the Civil War, Islay was at work in a gold mine; he was in his 18th year of life. He drove oxen for John Merton, a man who was kind to him. He witnessed scenes of war and described his feelings in a poem, "An Address to Dixie", and the "Widow".

On that April date in 1865, when Lee Surrendered to Grant, Islay was still at work at the gold mine. He soon began to explore his new freedom and found work at various mines in the locale. In the winter of 1867, he left the state of North Carolina and set out, on foot, for Washington, D.C. in search of medical help for his eyes and an education. He describes walking through snow, in need of boots and an overcoat in the poem "Wish For An Overcoat".

In Washington, D.C., he worked for a while on a construction site where Howard University was being built. Howard was established by the Freedman's Bureau and opened in 1867. A student could enter the Preparatory Department for the equivalent of a high school education, continue on through college and then take a graduate degree in law, medicine, or theology. The first classes were held in 1867, and by 1870 a cluster of new buildings occupied a 150 acre site on the outskirts of Washington, D.C..

In 1870 Islay left Washington and wandered about New Jersey and Pennsylvania earning his living by writing and selling political ballads on the streets. In 1872, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, he received aid when the Second Reform Church, pledged through Professor Atherton, \$150.00 per year, for the duration of his schooling. When he applied for entry to Howard, the daughter of Dr. Nichols, an instructor, taught him to read, write and work "examples in Division". He entered Class D, the lowest class, and joined a class a year ahead of the one first entered. In 1876 he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (from Howard's Normal School Department).

In spite of what has been written, family tradition tells us Islay was taught to read and write "by the light of the fireplace, in the dust from ashes... by Master's wife". This is verified by Sarah (Ingram) Barton, a 90 year old cousin, the daughter of Catherine (Kate) Ingram. Kate was Sarah's child, Islay's niece.

After graduation, he established a Mission in New Jersey for poor children, the result being, several of the children's parents were converted. He was ordained as a Minister of the Gospel in May, 1879. During the summer of 1879 he applied his profession at the Presbyterian Church South. Then he was sent to Lassister's Mills, North Carolina by the American Missionary Association. In 1880, along with 20 members, he organized Streiby, North Carolina's Congregationalist Church. They met in a forest clearing, perhaps on some of the 150 acres of land he purchased the same year. Through a faith in God, through Jesus Christ, in a years time and many man hours dedicated by the members, the Promised Land Church was occupied and dedicated.

A school was established and taught by Islay. The 1880 Federal Census shows Islay living with my grandparents, Emsley and Sarah Hill, as a boarder. His occupation: Minister of the Gospel. His sister's children, my aunt and father, attended his school and church.

By 1883 he had married Elinora Wilmina Farmer. They had no children.

In 1884, in his 41st year of life, Islay died.

His widow, Elinora, married a cousin, Henry Ruffin Walden, in December, 1888. They had no children. Elinora Wilmina Walden died Ca. 1891.

He was a genteel man, strengthened by his faith in God, filled with the Holy Spirit. The fruits of his faith was apparent throught his life. He harbored no vengeful spirit against his former owners, nor the race in general that had enslaved and repressed he and his people. He loved people, he loved God.

His sister Sarah had moved, along with her complete family, to Milford, ~~Clermont Co.~~ Ohio in the Spring of 1893. Emsley and Sarah (Walden) Hill had 10 children. One of those children was my beloved father, William Julius Hill. Sarah died April 12, 1920 in Alderson, West Virginia. She left Cincinnati, Ohio in 1917, about four years after the death of her husband, Emsley Hill, to live with her daughter, Lucretia, and son-in-law, Robert Lee Wilson.

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