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From: Rheatown U. M. Women

Rheatown Tennessee. "Black People". pp. 49-53. Sue R. Thomas. T. Elmer Cox Museum.

RHEATOWN
TENNESSEE

first settled in 1771



The Overmountain Press

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SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Tennessee Annals; Zella Armstrong, historian; Capt. J.J. Marshall's Scrapbook, (furnished by his daughters, Dorothy Marshall and Thelma Marshall Campbell); William Flavorian Piper, newspaperman and teacher; Harry Roberts; **Goodspeed, History of Tennessee, 1887**; Clay Middleton, **Recollections of Rheatown**; Carl N. Hayes, "Neighbor Against Neighbor"; *History of Greene County*, 1950, Martha Thomas Chambers; D.D. Alexander's last article to **Greeneville Sun** (Submitted by Kathleen Cannon Mysinger); Judge S.C. Williams, historian; First Register of Rheatown Methodist Church South, 1871-1909, submitted by Robert R. Broyles; Methodist Church 1844, submitted by Ray Maupin; Richard Doughy, **Greeneville - One Hundred Year Portrait - 1775-1875**; Josephine Divine, Randall Moody, Irene Keebler Rowe, Keene White and Joseph Maupin.

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HELEN THOMAS McCURRY December 9, 1909 - May 25, 1981

The third edition of the book **Rheatown** is dedicated to Helen Thomas McCurry, who was the prime promoter in its first publication in 1977.

Born Helen Madaline Thomas on December 9, 1909, in the little village of Rheatown, she was the third child of William Earle and Lulu White Thomas. The family moved to Jonesborough and later to Chattanooga in her early childhood, but returned to Rheatown while she was still in elementary school. She graduated from Chuckey High School in 1927 and attended East Tennessee State Normal School before starting a teaching career in Greene County. An excellent bookkeeper and cashier, she was employed at H.T. Hackney Co. in Greeneville and at Security Feed and Seed Co. in Johnson City. She managed the Chuckey High School cafeteria and later worked at Barlow's Market and Jaynes Market in Limestone.

On June 15, 1930, she married O.L. (Jack) McCurry, who also lived near Rheatown. They built their home, *Idlewood*, on the McCurry property which they farmed until 1950 when they formed the McCurry Insurance Agency.

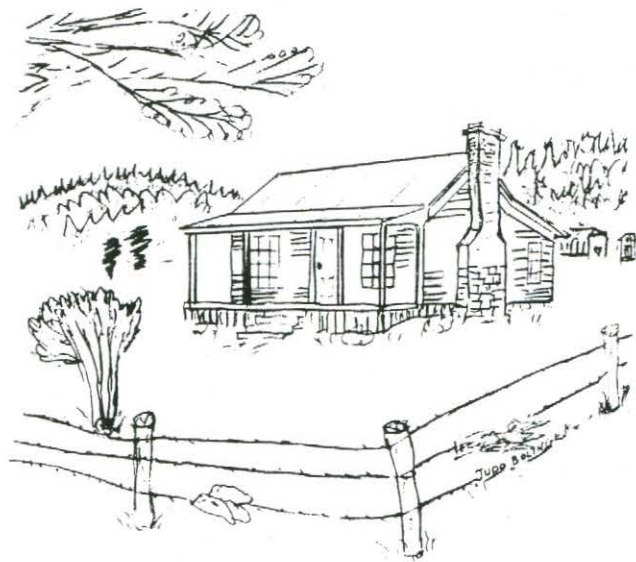
Helen joined the Rheatown Methodist Church in 1940. She served on the official board, was a Sunday School teacher for the teens, and was church pianist. She served as church treasurer for several years. As a member of the United Methodist Women, she had served in every office at some point in time and always attended District meetings and Conference meetings.

She was instrumental in getting the Rheatown Cemetery Association formed and was maintenance treasurer. She was a charter member of the Chuckey Home Demonstration and had served as its president. She was also a member of the Greene County Retired Teachers Association and the Greater Limestone Parish Mature Years, serving as its secretary.

Helen had a simple faith and a deep love and concern which touched the lives of everyone who knew her. The ideals of Christian faith were her philosophy for life. She believed in the dignity of work and helping others, doing every job well and always giving more than was expected of her. She was happiest when entertaining her family and friends in her lovely country home, which was surrounded by the many flowers she enjoyed growing.

Helen saw one of her greatest dreams come true when the spire was erected on the Rheatown United Methodist Church, from proceeds earned by selling the book. **Rheatown.**





THE WILL RUPE HOUSE *The Will Rupe house is located on the west edge of Rheatown. The Rupe family lived here many years. A small branch runs in front and to the side of the house, making this a neat and cozy cottage. After the death of Mr. Rupe, the house was occupied by Charles and Effie Hankal and their son, Charles. Charles has lived there alone since the death of his parents.*



THE THOMAS BARN *This is one of the few old barns standing in Rheatown. It is built of rough sawed lumber and is well put together. This barn has been the scene of many a horse and mule-trading session, as well as cattle and hog trades by Buford and Reamer Thomas.*

BLACK PEOPLE by Sue R. Thomas

The history of Rheatown would not be complete without including the contribution of the black population to the community. They were all good citizens. Only a few were ex-slaves, and some were descendants of slaves. They were regarded as good workers. All of them owned their own homes. Some were more prosperous than others, and most of them provided for their families from the small land acreage on which they lived. Others worked for the white residents to supplement their income.

One reason for the small Negro population was that few of the early pioneers were financially able to purchase them. Another reason was that several of the pioneers were Quakers, or Friends as they were sometimes called, and were abolitionists, being opposed to slavery.

Two of the largest pioneer slave owners were Joseph and Nicholas Earnest. The former owned a number of slaves. Until a few years ago, some of the slave quarters still stood at the rear of the large brick home he erected in the eastern end of town. The front portion of the brick home is still in use and is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Lamons. For a number of years the slave quarters were used for storage purposes. Frank Willis, a former slave, lived with the Earnest family a long time after the close of the Civil War. He had a son-in-law named Samp Ninney. "Aunt Hester", another slave of Henry Earnest and his wife, was known as a very fine cook.

For some reason, the older Negro residents were called uncle and aunt by the white residents.

Probably two of the best known and highly respected black residents were "Uncle King" and "Aunt Amelia Alexander". "Aunt Amelia" was better known as "Aunt Mealey". She belonged to Nicholas Earnest, and was only a small girl when the



Alexander House

Civil War ended. Not only was she a good cook, she served the community as a midwife for years. She was a small girl when the first train ran from Bristol to Knoxville. Her master brought all the slaves he owned to Chuckey to see the train pass through. She said it nearly scared the life out of her. The Earnest family taught all their slaves to read and write. Since the Negroes had no church at that time, Mr. Earnest took his slaves with his family to the Presbyterian Church in Rheatown. The Alexanders had one daughter who, when she was old enough, went to Greeneville as a maid for the Brown family. They also had a grandson, Alford, whom they reared. "Aunt Mealey" had to take him with her when she worked in the homes of the white people. After the Negroes had a school and church erected between Rheatown and Chuckey, she served as Sunday School Superintendent until her death. She was well versed in the Bible.

Another good Negro couple was Hardin Gillespie and his wife, "Aunt Bet". Hardin served in the Federal Army and died several years before "Aunt Bet". She lived alone in her small home surrounded by flowers, which she loved. She worked some for the white people and drew Hardin's pension when he died. "Aunt Bet" prided herself on her excellent health, with exception of a knee injury which she received when she stepped off a train before it stopped. She was returning from a trip to Knoxville. She had perfect teeth. When asked one time who made her teeth, she replied, "God Almighty". She attributed her good teeth to the fact that she kept them clean with sprigs from an althea bush. She once resided in a house not far from the Masonic Academy. She sold it to Elmer Barnes and purchased a little house and lot not far from the present United Methodist Church.



Gillespie House

Another black man, Wash Broyles, lived near the Masonic Academy. He had a large family of boys, Jim, Bob, John, and Dan. Wash worked for the late Nick P. Earnest for years.

Washington Greenlee and wife Rachel migrated from Virginia to Rheatown. As a former slave, he often told that his master took him to Yorktown when he was a little boy to see Lord Cornwallis surrender the British Army to General George Washington. He lived to be 107 years of age.

"Aunt Minervah" lived in the last of the shacks built for students to attend Masonic Academy. Her mind was bad, and she lived to be very old. She had no family and no means of support, except what Rheatown residents gave her. She usually visited the Donnelly, Keebler, and Piper homes weekly, returning home with sufficient food to do her until her next visit to their homes. When she became unable to make the visits, persons from the above homes took baskets of food to her, and she was always remembered at Christmas time.

Andy Marvel, a good black man, lived on a hill between the main part of Rheatown and the Doyle farms. He stayed close to his little house, tended his garden, and raised chickens. He also raised his own meat. He sold chickens and eggs to buy his staple groceries. He was referred to as the weather prophet. Whenever it came a dry spell, people would contact him to find out when it might rain. His answer was always, "Not until it thunders."

"Aunt Hester Allison" lived to be quite old. She owned her home, which has



Allison Cabin

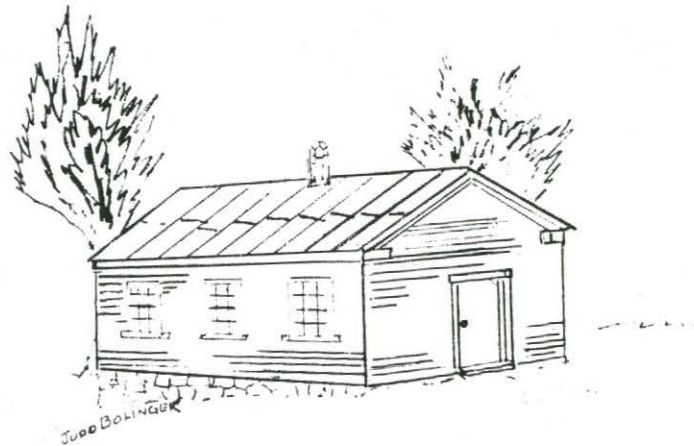
since been demolished. It stood back from the main street and was located about the third house on the east side of the road leading to the cemetery.

Russ Good was one black man who lived wherever he threw his hat. He worked for the Piper family for several years, doing odd turns when needed. In 1905, when William F. Piper established **The Rural Searchlight**, a weekly paper printed on a hand-turned press, Russ usually turned the press.

Jim Laughlin lived for many years in his little home across the road from the old Moody place. The road led from the center of Rheatown to the Quaker Knob and Pleasant Vale areas. When the highway was built through Rheatown, Bill Price was a member of the road crew. He met and married Etta. Etta and Bill's wedding occurred on a Sunday afternoon in front of Magistrate James R. White's home. It was well attended by the white people. They raised their family in the Laughlin house, which is now occupied by Ed Doyle. Bill worked for several of the white people, especially the Thomas and Range families. After Etta's death, the children moved away and Bill went to Greeneville and worked for the V.F.W. for several years before his death.

Noah Bradson was probably a slave of one of the Bradson families. He built a little house on one of the knolls in the Quaker Knob area. It was called, "Noah's Ark".

In 1875 Jacob Campbell came to Rheatown. His wife's name was Matilda. It is believed that she was a Bradson. They had several boys; among them were Bob, Lee, and Hugh. They built a little house in the valley between two large hills.



The small Negro school between Rheatown and Chuckey was the only place of learning for the blacks in that area. The white students would come from Chuckey school at about the same time the Negro students would be going to Chuckey, and many times it would be an occasion for minor fights — for what reason, I never knew. Many a Negro child learned to read and write in this building.



Bill Price House

On one of these hills was found an Indian cemetery. The Campbells were hard working people. They had a good orchard of apples and peaches, and also raised strawberries.

Jim Russell, a fine looking Mulatto Negro, came to Rheatown as a young man and purchased a tanyard from Ham Shoun. The tanyard was located in the center of town and was in continuous operation for more than one hundred years. Jim was very successful in the business and was considered to be one of the wealthiest men in the village. He married Ann Steward, a beautiful Mulatto. They had no children but they raised a black boy, Stuart Miller. Stewart married a pretty Mulatto girl from Johnson City. At the time of Jim's death, he and Stewart and his family lived in the old Hiram Fraker home, now owned by Eula and Daryl Collete. The family moved to Jonesborough and later to Johnson City. Stewart died in Johnson City and his widow now lives in Boston, Massachusetts. They had several children. A small child of theirs is buried in Rheatown Cemetery, where most of the old black population is buried.

There are no black people residing in Rheatown at the present time.