

## STORIES OF THE PAST

## Follow Free Frank

October 6, 1990 was a warm sunny day when Betty Lacy and I stepped onto the gravel road at the New Philadelphia town site. We represented the Historical Society who were invited to join Dr. Juliet Walker on the last stretch of her 440-mile trek retracing her great-great grandfather's (Free Frank McWorter) starting point in Kentucky following his trail to Hadley Township, Pike County. In 1830, he traveled in a covered wagon with his wife and four children. Dr. Walker hiked the entire journey.

We were soon joined that morning by friends and relatives arriving in a large bus. Exhilarating chatter filled the air as we all followed Walker in a stream of hikers, some carrying signs "Free Frank, Pioneer Freedom Walk" on the Barry-Baylis road into town, ending at the Barry Baptist Church. There a ceremony was planned to celebrate not only Dr. Walker's feat, but to commemorate the "The Free Frank Gravesite National Register of Historic Places Marker".

Newspaperman Tom Coulson refers to this service in his *Pike Press* column praising McWorter in the Wednesday publication preceding the 1990 Apple Festival. His "Pike County Notebook" is below:

"A dark figure emerges from the mist"

It's possible that the most capable man who ever lived in Pike County—this county that produced John Hay, John Nicolay and a dozen other giants of business, politics

and education—was not a white man but a black man.

No one can say with certainty that Free Frank McWorter was that unusual, because that would be comparing apples and oranges. Who can say what our other notables would have achieved against the handicaps endured by any black person? And who can say what Fee Frank would have achieved without those handicaps?

But no one can deny he was remarkable.

Free Frank was an uneducated man who knew how to work within the political, business, and social systems. He bought his own freedom by manufacturing gunpowder, and bought 15 members of his family, first by that method and later with profits from his farming operation.

Free Frank acquired land in Kentucky, traded it for land in western Illinois, built that to 500 acres, and established a town where blacks and whites lived together in harmony. In a very real sense, he operated his farm to support his town.

He maintained a school in New Philadelphia and had hopes of establishing a Baptist seminary at its center.

Moreover, he established a family that has produced outstanding individuals in several professions. You can meet some of them Saturday in Barry. A half-dozen will be among the speakers.

Free Frank, who was granted the legal surname McWorter by the Illinois legislature in 1837, died in 1854 at the age of 77. His town thrived until after the Civil War when it



CAROL MCCARTNEY

declined. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that its decline coincided roughly with the time frame in which the freed slaves in the South were being suppressed through terrorism and politics into a new type of slavery.

At least more than terrain may have been involved in the railroad's decision to miss New Philadelphia by more than half a mile in 1869. That was a big spike in the coffin.

In 1885 the town was officially dissolved, but it continued to exist for quite a while. The last remnants disappeared only in recent decades. Many citizens still living can remember parts of New Philadelphia, and Mayor Ed Venicombe of Barry grew up there. The Venicombes were one of the original white families in that mixed community.

There is no point in comparing Free Frank with Pike's other famous citizens, but there is a huge point in recognizing what he was. He was a man with skills and attitudes that could have built a healthy mixed society—characteristics that could have avoided a Civil War if prevalent enough.

I hope Free Franks exist all over this land today."

In 1996, Tom Coulson joined other interested Pike Countians to form the New Philadelphia Association whose mission is "to preserve the historic New Philadelphia town site and to educate the public about the national importance of the contributions of Free Frank McWorter and the town residents to the culture and history of Pike County and the nation."

Even today, Tom would advise everyone to follow Free Frank's example of virtues, attitudes, and skills—31 years after the 1990 "Notebook" column and Dr. Walker's journey in her ancestor's courageous footsteps.

