

# The Story of Hastings' Early African American Citizens

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## Hastings Census Data

1860 Federal Census	1,642/11 colored
1865 Territorial Census	2,495/14 colored
1870 Census	3,458/40 colored
1880 Census	3,809/ 24 colored
1900 Census	3,705/34 colored
1920 Census	4,571/ 4 colored
1930 Census	5,086/ 2? (White is the only race listed, however a name lookup confirms at least 2 black residents)

## A Snapshot of African American Society in Hastings

3-27-1875 H.G. "Literary. - But few of our readers are aware that we have in this city in full blast a literary club, under the name of United States Debating Society. It is composed of American citizens of African descent, and is the incipient expression of a vaulting ambition which aims at not in less than that intellectual power, which the colored man thinks he has but to reach forth and possess. At the last meeting the credit system was discussed and among the barbers the cash down idea was most popular. The best informed among them also have knowledge that the freedman's bank of Washington, left a considerable number of their colored brethren minus the deposits which they had eked out from their hard earnings."

5-27-1875 H.G. "Everything is lovely in Hastings. The colored people at that place held a meeting in Germania Hall a few nights ago, to rejoice and jubilate over the passage of de civil rights bill\*. Addresses were made by the Rev. Mr. Jones (colored) of Minneapolis, and Mr. Taylor, (colored) of Hastings, and responded to on the part of the white trash, by Col. T. O'Leary and D. Chamberlain, esq. the affair closing with a dance, both colors freely intermingling. Just think of it, the O'Learys affiliating with the demed nagur. It must be now de kingdom's comin', and de year of Jubilee. Stillwater Gazette reprinted in the H.G.

\*The **Civil Rights Act of 1875** (18 [Stat. 335–337](#)),<sup>[2]</sup> sometimes called **Enforcement Act** or **Force Act**, was a [United States federal law](#) enacted during the [Reconstruction Era](#) in response to civil rights violations to [African Americans](#), "to protect all citizens in their civil and legal rights", giving them equal treatment in [public accommodations](#), public transportation, and to prohibit exclusion from [jury service](#). The bill was passed by the [43rd United States Congress](#) and signed into law by President [Ulysses S. Grant](#) on March 1, 1875. The law was generally opposed by public opinion, but blacks did favor it. [Wikipedia](#))

H.G. 1-24-1916 The KuKluxClan were delightfully entertained by Dr. and Mrs. L.D.Peck, at their home on West 7th Street last Saturday evening. Dancing and supper were leading features.

In the mid-20s KKK strong in Hastings August, 1925 there was a parade of more than 200 white-robed Klansmen through town with a meeting following. Mayor Sieben would

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not allow them to burn a cross. They went outside city limits south of town and burned it.

## **History of the John Wallace and James Curry Families**

John Wallace was born in South Carolina and brought to Minnesota from Kentucky by Company F, Third Minnesota Regiment in 1862, he had formerly been a slave. Blanche Lovejoy, their neighbor on 4th Street in Hastings wrote their story saying, "Mr. Wallace paid a white man to bring his wife, Nancy and their two young sons from Virginia to Minnesota. They got as far as St. Louis without mishap, but there, one of the children was taken away from her. The mother and one child arrived here safely." This was during the Civil War, a mystery - how was the white man connected to their family, how were slaves allowed to leave their master? And, why was Nancy in Virginia, her home state, instead of Tennessee where her son James was born in 1861?

In 1865, John, Nancy and their son James were living in Lakeville, Minnesota. By 1870 they were living in Hastings on 4th Street and had a daughter named Louanna. He worked as a laborer.

James Curry was born August 2, 1859 in Harrisonburg, Albermarle County, Virginia. His father, Mack Curry was working as a farm laborer at the time of the 1870 census. He and his wife Miranda had seven children. No one in the family could read or write. His real estate holdings were valued at \$150.00 and personal estate \$50.00. I am not sure if they were slaves or not, but maybe the fact that there are no records for them in 1860 may indicate that they were.

In 1885, James and Ella Curry with their daughters Georgianna and Mary Ellen moved to Hastings from Harrisonburg, Virginia to be near Ella's aunt, Nancy Wallace. They moved into the Wallace home on West 4th Street with John, Nancy, their son James and his wife Ella and 6 month old daughter Nellie May.

The Currys stayed at the Wallace home long enough to get established. Jim Curry's first job was working for Charles Mather, the postmaster; helping around his home at W. 8th Street. For a time his pay was 50 cents/day and later it increased to about 1.25/day. He took any work he could, from working on farms to carpenter jobs. For short periods in 1886 and 1894 he 'slung hash in the Ryan Hotel' in St. Paul. His first investment in Hastings was to buy a lot, where he helped to build a house which he later sold. In 1889 he purchased two lots and built a fine 9 room home at 801 W. 4th Street. He later purchased 8 adjoining lots and became a 'real farmer, purchasing a cow from Otto Poore. He built a barn, bought some chickens, was given a horse and had a large garden.' In the summer of 1894 he was offered a job at a summer resort at Prior Lake, owned and managed by Hastings people. He was the handyman there for 19 seasons.

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He loved swimming since he was a young lad so one of his tasks at the resort was teaching young and old to swim.

James and Ella Wallace moved next door to his parents (John and Nancy) on 4th Street and eventually had 7 children.

Mr. John Wallace died at his home on west fourth St on March 6, 1900. He was seventy years old. His obituary notes "He was a good citizen, and by his genial manner made many friends. His familiar figure upon our streets will be greatly missed. He was a prominent member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church." Nancy lived in their home until her death, June 25, 1919 outliving her son, James, who died October 15, 1915. All are buried at Lakeside Cemetery.

Perhaps the most popular black family in Hastings was the Curry family. Nine of the ten Curry children graduated from HHS. In the class of 29 graduates in 1905, Howard was one of only four males.

At least three Curry family marriages took place in their home on 4th Street. Georgiana, the eldest daughter married John W. Collins from Minneapolis in October of 1909. She graduated from 1906 Hastings high school and Brown's Business college in Northfield. Attendants were Mary, sister to bride and Jacob, brother of groom. As often happens the attendants ended up marrying each other at the Curry family home in June, 1911.

A younger Curry daughter, Murlin married in 1922 in the Methodist parsonage followed by a six o'clock dinner at the Curry home. Murlin, Georgiana and Mary all moved to Minneapolis following their marriages. Florence married Sidney Simmons and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina following her marriage. She was valedictorian of her graduating class in 1906, attended Hampton Normal Institute in Hampton, Va. and took a post graduate course in library work at Tuskegee Institute at Tuskegee, Alabama. She then returned to Virginia where she was Assistant Librarian at the Hampton Institute for ten years, until her marriage.

By all accounts James Curry was a genial, outgoing man who loved life. When he was 16 and without a job he did what many have wanted to do - he joined a circus with his brother. He was with the circus for one season and said when he left, he could perform a somersault or handspring in any direction and six months before his death a feature article about him said, "he thinks he can still execute a somersault easily and without disastrous results to himself or anyone else, but his wife says she doubts it." James worked for 15 years as a janitor at the Hastings public school.

On November 24, 1933 all the Hastings newspapers had long articles about his life and death. The church was packed for his funeral and the downtown businesses closed for the funeral as well. Larry Ho, wrote a wonderful tribute in the St. Paul Dispatch. He wrote, "One of the best friends of my childhood days - James Curry of Hastings is dead. This splendid colored man who was raised in the atmosphere of slavery, sang his gallant way through life. .. I am proud that so splendid a man loved me truly. In

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reverence, I salute his memory and in reverence I tell this one incident of his glad and smiling life. One night he sang a song at the Hastings opera house at a church benefit. In the midst of his song the electric lights went out. Jim laughed and called out, 'cheer up folks, we are all the same color now'. No, Jim old pal. unfortunately we are not all the same color, though we should be. You were radiant gold all through, while most of us are a drab yellow. I'd like to throw a rose to you Jim, but across the distance all I can throw is my heart - no less loving in this hour of our parting than on that first day 50 years ago, when you first held me on your lap."

Following her husband's death Ellen Branson Curry moved to Minneapolis to be nearer her children and grandchildren. She died on October 1, 1943 at the age of 80. Her remains were brought to Lakeside and interred next to her husband, James.

### **History of A.M.E. Church/Brown's Chapel**

The Wallace and Curry families were active in procuring a house of worship for colored families:

The Methodist Episcopal Church on Vermillion Street was where most of the colored families worshipped. October 11, 1890 the Hastings Gazette printed, "A New Church — At a meeting of the colored people of the city, held at John Wallace's on Fourth Street, Friday evening it was decided to start a church of their own shortly, and the following officers were elected: Class Leader - James Wallace, Secretary - James Curry and Treasurer - John Wallace."

Then again 11-28-91 from the Hastings Gazette, "The African M.E. Church is negotiating for the building, corner of 5th & Sibley Streets, formerly occupied by the German Baptists, and are soliciting subscriptions among our citizens to assist in the purchase. The cause is a worthy one, and meeting with good success."

July 16, 1892 article in H. G. announces "preparations taking place for the opening of Brown's Chapel on the corner of 5th and Sibley. There are 3 services scheduled at 10:30 a.m., 3 p.m. and 7:45 p.m. The choir of the Methodist Church will sing in the afternoon, and voices from the twin cities are engaged for morning and evening. Rev. J. P. James from Minneapolis, a native Haitian, will preach during the day. The people of Hastings. of whatever religious opinion, are requested and cordially invited to attend."

Card of Thanks in Hastings Democrat 11-22-1896. "The A.M.E. Church of this city, wish to extend to the generous people of Minnesota and Wisconsin thanks for the assistance they have rendered in contributing to the fund raised by Samuel Golden, solicitor, of Prescott, Wis., for payment on the debt on our church, which we are unable to raise ourselves. The sum raised this year is \$49.81 net." Signed by trustees: James Curry James Wallace, John Wallace and Cornelius Peterson, Pastor.

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April 10, 1897 H.G. "John Wallace will give a history of his life, with a few plantation songs, at Match's Hall next Wednesday evening, at seven o'clock, the net proceeds going to Brown's Chapel. Admission twenty-five cents"

Hastings Democrat, 10-31-1907 reported, "The ringing of the fire bell on Friday evening called out the fire department, when it was ascertained that the African Methodist Church was on fire, and through their efforts the fire was promptly extinguished. Upon investigation it was found that an entrance had been effected by someone through a back window by cutting the screen, and raising the sash. There were indications where kerosene had been poured over the floor, pews and elsewhere in the building so that there is no doubt that it was the work of an incendiary."

Heidi Langenfeld, researched the information in this report.

Rich Manke formatted the information for the purposes of this meeting.