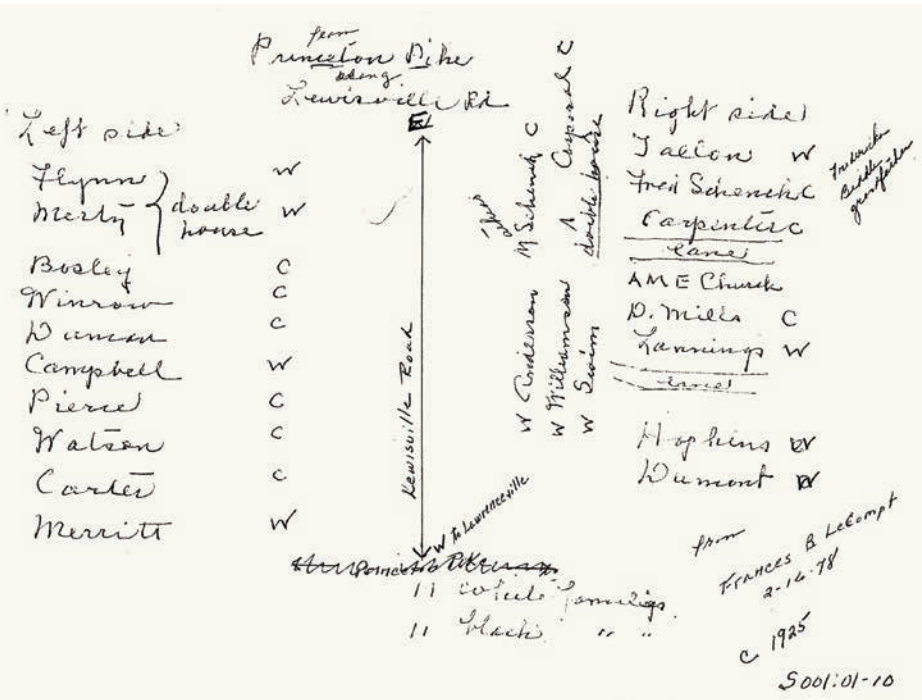




Lewisville Road and African American History



Lewisville Road, originally the western section of Great Meadow Road leading from the colonial village of Maidenhead to the Great Meadows, is one of the oldest roads in the township. But what happened there in the 19th century makes it even more significant. In the decades before the Civil War, Lewisville became the home of the earliest African American community in Lawrence Township. Though blacks and whites resided together, the group of houses at its midpoint and the black families who lived there formed a center of African American life in Lawrence for over a century. This essay traces the development of Lewisville Road's African American community to the 1920s.

The Origins of the Name

The area became known as Lewisville during the mid-19th century, yet the name did not appear on a map until 1875. An 1883 history of Mercer County included Lewisville among Lawrence Township's six rural communities, describing it as "a cluster of houses in the central part of the township, on a narrow road leading from the road running northwest from Baker's Basin to the Princeton turnpike, and was so called in honor of the former proprietor of considerable land there."¹ Lewisville was named after Lewis W.R. Phillips; a descendant of one of the township's founding families, who lived on a

Frances Bosley LeCompt drew this map of residents on Lewisville Road c. 1925 when she was interviewed by Winona Nash in 1978. The right is the north side and the left is the south side of the road. She showed Lewisville Road's racial diversity by marking white families as "w" and African American families as "c".

Image courtesy of Lawrence Township Archives

large farm on the eastern side of today's Route 206 just north of Cold Soil Road. He graduated from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), held local office, and served as a trustee and elder of the Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church. Phillips died in 1855 at the age of sixty-five and was buried in the churchyard. As a member of a slaveholding family and a slaveholder himself, Lewis W.R. Phillips, may seem like an odd choice for tribute by a free black community.

Lewis W.R. Phillips joined the antislavery movement in the 1820s as a supporter of the New Jersey Colonization Society, a chapter of the American Colonization Society (ACS). Colonization advocated the relocation of freed slaves back to Africa. Established in 1817, the ACS founded a colony on Africa's west coast in 1822, and over the next several decades resettled about 13,000 blacks in what became Liberia. Started in 1824, the New Jersey Society reflected the state's conservative approach to abolition. Records from the first annual meeting list Phillips among the organization's top donors. Phillips freed two slaves after joining the society; 25-year-old Lucy in 1826 and another woman aged 35 in 1829. According to the 1830 census, one of these women probably remained a part of his household. In fact, free blacks continued to live with Phillips for the rest of his life. Perhaps he changed his mind about colonization because African Americans rejected it.²

Rather than uprooting free blacks, Lewis W.R. Phillips helped the community cultivate deeper roots in Lawrence Township. Phillips sold numerous properties to blacks and whites during the 1840s and 1850s along what became Lewisville Road. In an oral history interview conducted by the Lawrence Historical Society in 1989, Fred LeCompt recalled that Samuel Duncan was the earliest black settler on the road. A deed recorded Duncan's purchase of one-third of an acre from Phillips in 1843 for \$30. Earlier that year Phillips sold a house and lot to Hezekiah Vanhorn for \$500. George Centurian purchased the eastern half of a duplex and lot from Phillips for \$960 in 1852. At the time of Phillips' death Centurian owed him \$235 plus \$11.75 in interest, while Vanhorn had a small debt. Phillips' relationship with at least the Vanhorn family was personal; Hezekiah, Nancy and their son Mahlon lived with him in 1850.



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These three properties with the addition of two more purchased by Ezekiel Schenck (western half of the duplex) and Theodore Schenck (lot behind the duplex) in the late 1850s, formed the heart of Lewisville's African American community throughout its history.³

Community-Building

Many of Lewisville's early settlers were former slaves from Lawrence and the surrounding area or their descendants. The community developed during the 1840s when slavery in the township was slowly ending as most slaves born before gradual abolition had been freed and the children born after the 1804 act completed their years of mandatory service to their mothers' master (age of 21 for females and 25 for males). Census records chart the transition from slavery to freedom. The 1840s marked an important turning point as one-half of the township's black residents lived in white households in 1840 but only one-third did by 1850. By 1880 almost 90% of blacks lived in black households. Yet, a high population turnover rate and dispersed settlement patterns restricted community-building. Lewisville was the exception. Its core families, like the Duncans and Schencks, established permanent roots and by the Civil War the neighborhood supported nine households or one-fifth of Lawrence's small black population.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) strengthened the Lewisville community. In fact, the formation of an A.M.E. congregation in the mid-19th century might have triggered naming the area in the first place. The A.M.E. Church was founded by a former slave named Richard Allen in Philadelphia during the 1790s following a split with the Methodist Church over racial discrimination. Allen's new church kept the less formal services and emotional appeal that made Methodism so popular and blacks seeking religious autonomy formed congregations first in the mid-Atlantic region and then across the country. The earliest A.M.E. churches in this area were established at Trenton and Pennington in 1816 followed by Princeton in 1832.

Before the founding of an A.M.E. Church in Lawrence some blacks worshipped at white churches including the Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church at Princessville. The Presbyterian Church membership records for 1808-1849 listed twenty blacks among the 350 or so names. The earliest black members were slaves worshipping alongside their masters. For example, one of Lewis W.R. Phillips' slaves, Harry, joined in 1816. Slaves owned by Waters Smith, Charles Reeder, Ralph Phillips, and Charles Green also entered the church fellowship. The first free blacks were admitted in the mid-1820s, but most joined in the 1830s and 1840s as the township's free black population grew, like Oscar Suydam, who transferred from the Presbyterian Church in Pennington in 1834, and Randall and Rachel Schenck, certified together in 1843. By the 1840s the founding of a Methodist Church at Princessville, located just across from Lewisville Road on Princeton Pike by Mershon's tavern, provided another option for religious worship. In the early 1870s, prominent members literally moved the Methodist Church to Baker's Basin to be closer to their homes.⁴

Yet even before the Methodist Church relocated, Lewisville residents had formed an African Methodist Episcopal congregation, the first independent black church in the township. A newspaper account from 1863 included Lewisville in the Trenton Circuit, but the congregation probably dates back even further. *Morgan's History of the New Jersey Conference of the A.M.E. Church* (1887) sadly declared Lawrenceville's "History lost" except for "the date of a few of the pastors who have served." The earliest record was 1841. For years the black families at Lewisville, like those in nearby Pennington, gathered in each other's homes for Sunday services delivered by an itinerant preacher.

Finally in the 1890s the community built Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church on Lewisville Road. Church trustees Rev. James H. Smith (of Allentown),

Theodore Schenck, John Skillman, and Aaron Kennedy bought .251 of an acre from white neighbors Joseph and Bessie Mershon for \$37. The deed included an easement for Mershon to access his land using the lane "leading from the Lewisville Road in front of John Skillman and Theodore Schenck's property." John Skillman bought Ezekiel Schenck's part of the duplex in 1884. A flier for the cornerstone laying ceremony of the "A.M.E. Church Mission, Louisville" set the date as July 26, but unfortunately left off the year. It was probably built in 1891 or 1892 since the deed was dated December 30, 1890 and recorded on October 3, 1892. The church was a small, frame structure painted light brown with green trim and capable of holding about sixty people. The congregation continued to share a minister with other small area A.M.E. churches. Georgianna Schenck (daughter of James and Leah) and Sheldon Jordan (son of Charles and Catherine) are remembered as the first children christened in the new church. Georgianna was the granddaughter of founding trustee Theodore Schenck, while Sheldon was related to founding trustee John Skillman through his mother. The Jordans bought the Centurian side of the duplex next to John Skillman.

The Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church may have been small, but it brought crowds of people from all over to Lewisville Road around the turn of the century. A harvest home was a popular fundraiser at the time and Mount Pisgah went all out. The *Trenton Evening Times* described each occasion as a revival, political meeting and carnival all in one. The A.M.E. Church used Oliphant's Grove, an outdoor space located off Lewisville Road. The newspaper reported that church ladies would prepare dinner for three thousand people. Frances LeCompt remembered the Duncans, Schencks and DeKnights traveling in their horses and buggies to collect donations of poultry and vegetables from farmers for harvest homes. According to the *Times*, organizers in 1905 hoped "to get every colored man in Mercer County out to hear the speaking and participate in the festivities." The political discussion in 1907 centered on the Brownsville Affair in Texas where local whites framed black soldiers for a shooting that ended in the dishonorable discharge of 167 black infantrymen by President Theodore Roosevelt. Harvest home speakers debated the impact of Roosevelt's unjust action on the Republican vote. Amusements lightened the mood including sack races, fireworks and live music by Stryker's Excelsior Band from Princeton. The main event in 1906 was "a baseball game between negro leagues for the state baseball championship," followed the next year by a women's baseball game called "novel" by the press. These events and more were planned by prominent church members: James Schenck, Fred and May Schenck, Mary Duncan, James and Carrie Duncan, Eliza Kennedy, and Joseph and Mary Pierce.

In addition to religious services, the new church building created space for various African American clubs to meet at Lewisville including social and civic lodges like the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias as well as youth organizations like the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. The A.M.E. Church served as Lewisville's spiritual, social and civic center, uniting the dozen neighborhood families together with the small black community in Lawrence and connecting them to African Americans in New Jersey and across the nation.⁵

A New Century

The Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church was not the only visible change on Lewisville Road by the early 1900s. Lewisville's earliest black landowners passed away as the 19th century came to a close. Hezekiah Vanhorn died in 1873 at age seventy-three followed by George Centurian in 1885. Samuel Duncan died in 1892 at age seventy-six possibly living long enough to see Mount Pisgah rise across the street from his house. According to the census, the Schenck family was the only one left on Lewisville Road with deep roots by 1920. The new generation maintained their historic presence on the north

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side of the road next to the church. Georgianna Schenck Anderson inherited her grandfather Theodore's property in 1919 where she raised five sons. Her older brother Fred acquired the duplex, buying the Centurian side in 1903 and repurchasing the Schenck half in a tax lien sale in 1927.⁶

Perhaps none of the new families made as big of an impact on Lewisville Road as the Bosleys. Amos and Charlotte Bosley moved their family from Pennsylvania to Lawrence around 1900 to live with Charlotte's cousin Anne DeKnight on a farm on Meadow Road behind the Princessville Inn (formerly Mershon's tavern). Lavinia Bosley was born there in 1905. As a young girl she remembered fetching pails of beer at the inn for her father and watching funerals from their house overlooking Princessville Cemetery. They relocated to Lewisville Road in the 1910s after DeKnight sold the farm and moved to the village. The 1920 marriage of Charlotte Bosley to Sheldon Jordan is remembered as the biggest wedding ever held at the Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church, uniting two Lewisville families and bringing black and white neighbors together in celebration. As the Bosley children married, the family branched out along the road's south side, occupying many of the original properties. Frances and her husband Fred LeCompt purchased Samuel Duncan's house in 1928 from Duncan's heirs who had all moved out of state with the exception of son Mathias still living in Baker's Basin. Older brother

Clarence bought the old Vanhorn place in 1931 next door to his parents.⁷

Lewisville Road's changing population was part of the typical movement of people looking for opportunity or to be near family, but also a much larger historical event known as the Great Migration, when approximately 1.5 million black southerners moved into northern states between 1910 and 1930. According to census data, in the mid-1800s less than 10% of the African Americans from Lawrence were born out of state (mostly PA and NY). By 1880 the first migrant arrived from South Carolina, and Virginia surpassed Pennsylvania as the largest source of newcomers. Despite the increase in migration from the south, 77% of the blacks were still Jersey-born. By 1920 almost half of Lawrence's black population was born in the south. While Virginians continued to move to the area in large numbers, the Great Migration also brought people from the Deep South. For instance, Sandy Carter, his wife and seven children left Florida and settled at the western end of Lewisville Road near the intersection with Brown's Mill Road in 1917. Sandy Carter worked at a rubber mill. Trenton's industries drew blacks to the area during WWI as immigration slowed and demand for labor increased. Before this time very few African American men from Lawrence held industrial jobs; the vast majority worked as agricultural laborers.⁸

The Lawrenceville School also recruited southern migrants in large



Princessville Cemetery: Tradition holds that the Methodists granted African Americans from Lewisville permission to use their cemetery. One of the few African American gravestones at Princessville belongs to Katherine, wife of A.M.E. church trustee John Skillman. The others include James Parker and Joseph Canada, who served with the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, and Canada's wife Eliza. These graves are set apart from the main group and each other alongside Meadow Road. The placement of Katherine's grave in the back agrees with oral history records and most likely indicates the location of many unmarked African American graves. Frances LeCompt recalled that Samuel Duncan, Charles and Catherine Jordan, and Anne DeKnight's two sons were all laid to rest at Princessville. Obituaries confirm at least a dozen African American burials between 1906 and 1926, including the following Lewisville residents and prominent A.M.E. church members. An article published in the *Trenton Evening Times* on September 27, 1925 described the Princessville Cemetery as neglected and overgrown. Interments probably ended in the late 1920s.

- Caroline Duncan (wife of James, son of Samuel), January 3, 1913
- Mary Duncan (Samuel's wife), March 23, 1915
- Eliza Kennedy (wife of Joseph, from Eggerts Crossing), June 23, 1915
- Leah Schenck (wife of James M., son of Theodore), December 21, 1921
- Florence May Schenck (wife of Fred, son of James M.), October 18, 1924

Bosley family at Anne DeKnight's farm on Meadow Road c. 1912. Oral histories conducted by the Lawrence Historical Society with sisters Frances Bosley LeCompt and Lavinia Bosley Melton and Frances' children Mary LeCompt Ferguson and Fred LeCompt have preserved much of Lewisville's past.



Image courtesy of Lawrence Township Archives

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numbers to work as cooks, waiters and servants in the dormitories in the early 1900s. While some of the school's black workers lived on campus, others settled on Gordon Ave., James Ave. and George Ave. in the village as well as on Lewisville Road. Several Lewisville residents worked for the school including John Skillman, Amos Bosley, Sheldon Jordan, and Albert Carter. Lavinia Melton remembered her sister Frances LeCompt pressing dresses for girls attending Lawrenceville dances. "The Lawrenceville School ruled Lawrenceville, Lewisville and all, in those days," recalled Lavinia.

The African American population in Lawrence Township doubled during the 1920s. Historically, the population grew from 166 in 1830 to 243 by 1860, but then dropped under 200 from 1870-1910, until it rose back to 243 in 1920. Just over 500 African Americans called Lawrence home in 1930, but the number of black households on Lewisville Road stayed the same—around ten and about half the total—with the five founding properties at the heart. Fred LeCompt lived in Samuel Duncan's old place from 1928 to 1989, followed by siblings Stephen and Mary Ferguson until 2000. Today it is replaced by modern construction. Mount Pisgah A.M.E. has been gone for over sixty years; the church once stood on the small wooded lot beside the

entrance to the Lawrenceville School's athletic fields. On the other side of those little woods are the Centurian/Schenck duplex and Theodore Schenck properties. Georgianna Anderson lived on her grandfather's land through the 1970s. The duplex passed from one generation to the next, sheltering Schenck families and Lewisville friends into the present century. Across the street sits the old Vanhorn place, where Clarence and Frances Bosley resided for almost fifty years. Small in size, but rich in history; Lewisville Road is a significant African American historic site in the township that must not be forgotten.

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- Phillips also sold property next to Vanhorn to another African American named James Wright in 1844; see Deed Book G, p.123. Wright died in 1857, see Register of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, 1848-1878, NJSA. The 1860 census listed his wife and son in Hugh Hamill's household (Lawrenceville School). The son James sold the property to William Dumont in 1870; see Deed Book 79, p.304. The property returned to black ownership in 1913 when Dumont sold to Amos Bosley. At the time of Amos' death in 1941, five of his seven adult children lived in the house: Frances LeCompt, Amos P., Florence Turner, Lavinia Melton and Allan, see Deed Book 1386, p.413. The house was sold in the mid-1980s. (MCCO)
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- 5 *The Christian Recorder*, January 10, 1863. Joseph H. Morgan, *Morgan's History of the New Jersey Conference of the A.M.E. Church, from 1872 to 1887, and of the several churches, as far as possible, from date of organization with biographical sketches of members of the conference* (Camden, 1887), 77. Rev. James H. Smith, Deed Book 184, p.324; John Skillman, Deed Book 139, p.429, MCCO. Skillman bought Ezekiel's property after foreclosure in 1880. Box: Churches, Folder: Mount Pisgah, LTA; Frances Bosley LeCompt interview, January 24, 1978, LTA. *Trenton Evening Times*, August 10, 1905 p.6; September 1, 1906 p.1; July 27, 1907 p.11. The Mount Pisgah A.M.E. was damaged in a storm around 1950. The church sold the lot in 1982; see Deed Book, 2191, p.901. Charles Jordan, Deed Book 154, p.31, MCCO.
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- 8 Sandy Carter, Deed Book 402, p.75, MCCO.

