

NELSON DAVIES

By Paul Gettys

Nelson Davies was an African American resident of York who lived a remarkable life. Rising from slavery, he became well-educated, developed his talents as a house painter and artist, served in various political offices, and was a civic and religious leader of his community. He was born in Virginia about 1833 and died in York in 1901.

We have no way of knowing the parents of Nelson Davies. We are told he was born in Virginia about 1833. About 1845, when he was around twelve, he was part of a group of slaves being transported to the west for sale. The slave trader passed through Yorkville, and a bar owner named Thomas Davies spotted the young man in the group. Needing a tapster for the bar, he purchased Nelson. At some point, the boy adopted his new master's last name. While working at the bar, Nelson learned to read and write, and he also began drawing pictures.¹ Thomas Davies evidently took a great interest in his young slave, as he assigned Nelson to John Curry to learn the painter's trade. John C. Curry, a native of Ireland, was a well-known house painter in York and Chester counties.² Prior to emancipation, Nelson became a proficient painter. As a slave, he could have been hired out by his master, who would have profited from his work.³

Nelson evidently had begun a family before the Civil War while he was still a slave. His wife, Mary Ann, could have also been a slave of John Davies or of another York family. In the 1870 Census, the family appears with three children, the oldest of whom, Nelson, Jr., was born in 1855. Another son, Lawrence, was born about 1859 and a daughter Mary C. was born about 1861. Thus, all three children were born into slavery. Interestingly, the 1870 Census identifies Nelson as "Mulatto," or mixed race, but describes his wife and children as "Black."

After the close of the Civil War, Nelson Davies, now a free man, took part in a scheme to transport freedmen to the West to resettle. This is described by Mr. Lewis Grist, editor of the *Yorkville Enquirer*: "Along in the sixties, Davies gave his co-operation in a movement to take a

¹ The Slave Code of South Carolina made it illegal to teach a slave to read and write, but this law was often ignored. Dr. Walter Edgar, in his *South Carolina: A History* (page 299) estimates that at the time of the Civil War, about five percent of the state's population of Blacks was literate.

² Curry is listed as an accomplished house painter in York and Chester counties in the *South Carolina Artisan Database* maintained by Wade Fairey of Roots and Recall.

³ The details of Nelson's early life are included in his obituary in the *Yorkville Enquirer* of February 27, 1901. The editor, Mr. Lewis Grist, was evidently well-acquainted with Nelson Davies, who had been an advertiser in his paper for many years.

large crowd of Negroes to the west. He went along himself, and afterward returned here [Yorkville]. It was generally believed that he got so much per capita for each Negro persuaded to join the movement.”⁴ Grist believed that the scheme was originated by outsiders who were seeking to take advantage of the upheaval brought about by the war.

As early as October 1865, Nelson Davies began advertising in the *Yorkville Enquirer* as a skilled house painter. His early ads state:

“Nelson Davis [sic] respectfully informs the citizens of York and surrounding Districts, that he is ready and willing to attend to the business of Plain and Ornamental house painting, glazing, and paper hanging. He prides himself especially in being able to imitate successfully, the various kinds of wood, viz: Mahogany, Maple, Oak, Satin-wood, Walnut, Rosewood, etc. Also Egyptian, Italian, Pennsylvania, Jasper and Sinah Marbles. By strict attention to business, he hopes to secure a share of public patronage, and feels assured, that he will be able to give entire satisfaction to those who may employ him. All communications addressed to him at Yorkville, S. C. will meet with prompt attention. Nelson Davies.”⁵

Davies’ ad began appearing in the same issues of the paper with ads from the major business houses in York which were stating that they were attempting to reopen following the war and were receiving new merchandise. It is interesting that a newly-freed slave was competing in the marketplace for white business as a highly-skilled artisan. His statements that he was adept at imitating types of wood and marble refers to work we describe today as “Faux-painting.” This work required a high level of skill and was mastered by only a few. It allowed house owners to use cheaper types of wood and to paint them over with graining to resemble more expensive woods. The marble graining was used especially for fireplace surrounds and mantels. Authentic faux-graining is highly prized today in older houses as evidence of the home owners’ desire to upgrade their properties.

The ad in October, 1867 states “Nelson Davies has returned to Yorkville and is ready to execute every description of house and ornamental painting.”⁶ This may indicate that he had been absent in his resettlement scheme earlier in 1867.

Davies would run his ad almost weekly through the late 1860s and into the 1870s. In 1878, he added a statement to his ad:

⁴ *Yorkville Enquirer*, February 27, 1901.

⁵ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 26, 1865.

⁶ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 24, 1867.

“As to my skill as a workman, I respectfully refer to the following gentlemen: L. M. Grist, W. A. Moore, Hon. I. D. Witherspoon, A. W. Ingold, J. F. Wallace, Lawson Jenkins, Col. W. H. McCorkle, Dr. H. G. Jackson, Dr. J. F. Lindsay, James L. Clark, James E. Smith, Hon. A. S. Wallace, all of Yorkville and J. S. R. Thompson, Spartanburg, R. M. Wilson, Gaston [County, N. C.], J. R. Brice, Fairfield, and J. Harvey Smith, Chester.”⁷

This was a “who’s who” list of the white elite of York, and also showed that Davies had worked in other towns. We can assume that Davies did painting work for each of these men.

I have found individual references of several projects undertaken by Davies in the news section of the *Yorkville Enquirer*. In 1878, it was reported that “Mr. James E. Smith has added a good deal of ornamentation to his house and is having it painted under the skillful manipulation of Nelson Davies.”⁸ Smith is included in Davies’ ad which listed references. In 1879, a unique project was undertaken. The locomotive for the Chester and Lenoir Railway was sent to the shop for repairs. This was the original locomotive put into service in 1874 when the narrow-gauge railway was implemented. The painting of the locomotive was done by Nelson Davies.⁹ In 1883, Hunter & Oates, a major mercantile company in York, built a large new store building on West Liberty Street behind the courthouse. The paper reported that Nelson Davies was the painter for the interior. “Where white is not used the work is in imitation of rosewood, maple and mahogany, and so well are the imitations made and the tints representing these woods are so well arranged as to preserve perfect harmony and the most pleasing effect.”¹⁰ Also in 1883, “Mr. G. H. O’Leary’s furniture store, under the skillful hands of Nelson Davis [sic] now presents quite a handsome front.”¹¹ Later in 1883, a letter in the *Enquirer* from Black’s Station (later known as Blacksburg) described construction going on there: “To give the finishing touch to the wood work, we now have here Nelson Davies, the accomplished painter of Yorkville, who is plying his brushes with his wonted skill.”¹² A very large and visible project which took place in 1884 was the York County Court House. “The contract for painting the court house was awarded by the County Commission to Nelson Davies for a bid of \$365. It was the lowest of three proposals. The house will be repainted, inside and out. The exterior of the walls will be in imitation of English brown stone, the surrounding painted in colors to harmonize with it. All the interior wood work will be repainted and the walls and ceilings are to be Calsomined¹³ with the

⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, July 11, 1878.

⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 23, 1878.

⁹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 27, 1879.

¹⁰ *Yorkville Enquirer*, March 15, 1883.

¹¹ *Rock Hill Herald*, June 14, 1883.

¹² *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 18, 1883.

¹³ Calsomine or kalsomine was a lime paint made from calcium carbonate which we would today call whitewash. It was opaque, easy to use, and fast-drying. Heating with wood stoves often led to rapid staining of walls, and whitewashing was a cheap and easy way to freshen up the walls and ceilings.

best quality of material. The contractor has the skill to do a creditable piece of work.”¹⁴ Davies also undertook repairs to the county Probate office later that year.¹⁵ In 1889, it was reported that “Mrs. M. E. Deal of Blacksburg is having her handsome residence repainted by the veteran painter of Yorkville, Nelson Davies.”¹⁶ Later in his career, he was working on a project for York businessman W. B. Moore. The newspaper reported that Ben Foster, a “colored painter who works for Nelson Davies,” fell from the top of the house and was knocked unconscious. He regained his senses soon and was evidently not seriously wounded.¹⁷

In addition to his own ads, Nelson Davies was featured in the ads for the Kuykendal store. In this period, drug stores often also served as retailers for paints. John C. Kuykendal owned one of the largest drug stores in Yorkville. In 1885, he placed an ad for the Longman & Martinez paints, a line of paints he carried, stating, “As to the quality of these paints, I have permission to refer to Nelson Davies, an old practical painter who has as much paint sense as any man in South Carolina.”¹⁸ In a later ad in 1888, Kuykendal used an endorsement from Davies: “I have had the pleasure of using the Longman & Martinez Pure Prepared Paint for ten to twelve years...it has given satisfaction in every job on which I applied it. I can truly say to the world that it is the cheapest pure paint made, and will, when properly put on, last longer than pure white lead and oil. I also testify that its use is less injurious to the painter than lead. Nelson Davies, House and Decorative Painter.”¹⁹ It seems remarkable that a prominent white merchant was using an African American craftsman to endorse his product during the late Nineteenth Century. One would assume that Davies was paid for these endorsements.

In addition to his work as a painter, Nelson Davies became a leader in the African American community on Yorkville. The community celebrated the Fourth of July in 1868. The *Yorkville Enquirer* reported “The colored people assembled for July 4 celebrations. A large procession marched through the city to the suburbs where A. J. H. White (Black) and Nelson Davies (Colored) delivered speeches.”²⁰ Later, in 1877, Thanksgiving Day was observed by the African American community. The *Enquirer* reported that “The colored people were generally disposed to observe the day. Rep. Nelson Davies, who has a store near the depot, closed his store.”²¹ It is not clear if the store referred to is his paint shop or a retail store. Davies was also active in the religious life of the African American community. In 1888, Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church

¹⁴ *Yorkville Enquirer*, April 24, 1884. This was evidently the 1826 Court House. In November 1892, the Court House burned and a new Victorian-style building with a tall clock tower replaced it.

¹⁵ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 24, 1884.

¹⁶ *Yorkville Enquirer*, July 3, 1889.

¹⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 27, 1896. Ben Foster was likely the brother of Reese Foster, who became a successful African American contractor, building large houses on Kings Mountain Street in York. Ironically, Reese also fell as a young man from a house being built on Cleveland Avenue in 1890 (*Yorkville Enquirer*, October 20, 1890).

¹⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 29, 1885.

¹⁹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, March 21, 1888.

²⁰ *Yorkville Enquirer*, July 9, 1868. The paper’s use of the term “Black” for the other speaker and the term “Colored” for Davies may indicate his status as a Mulatto.

²¹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 31, 1877.

celebrated its twentieth anniversary, which services held over several days. On August 1, there were addresses by the Pastor, Rev. E. M. Pinckney, and by Nelson Davies and Ella Goode.²² In 1891, he served as County Treasurer for an organization called the Inter-State Colored Exposition, which was developed to exhibit progress being made by the African American community in the South, with a view of providing exhibitions at the upcoming World's Fair in Chicago in 1893.²³ Emancipation Day was celebrated in Yorkville on January 1, 1896. The Town Council authorized a parade through the city, and there were speeches and a banquet. Nelson Davies read President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation at the event.²⁴

In the 1890s, Davies was a leader in Clinton Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The church had a difficult period in 1897 when the pastor, Rev. J. A. Turner, was deposed by the Bishop. Even though another minister was appointed to preach, Turner appeared and attempted to enter the pulpit. "Four church officers blocked the pulpit, and Turner went at Nelson Davies, one of the prominent officers and largest in size and came near butting him out of a window." After the scuffle, Davies called for the congregation to leave the church and took the Bible off the pulpit. Turner reported that he went ahead with his service to a handful of people, "and while I was preaching Nelson Davies stood out there and mocked me."²⁵ Clinton Chapel AME Zion church still exists and is located at 302 California Street in York.

Davies embarked on an important political career which saw him hold a number of offices and take an active role in the South Carolina Republican Party. When African Americans became enfranchised after the Civil War, they began to dominate the Republican Party and won many positions of influence. The period of Reconstruction saw African Americans hold many seats in the state legislature and in the US House of Representatives. In the hotly contested election of 1876, the white power structure regained control of the political system. Newly elected Governor Wade Hampton sought to find a middle way which established white control but also allowed for strong representation by African Americans. More racist attitudes eventually won out, and the Constitution of 1895 basically disenfranchised the African American community.

Davies sought to be a participant in the political life of York County and South Carolina during this turbulent era. He served for over two years as York County Auditor. He was appointed to this position in late 1868 by Governor Scott.²⁶ As part of his duties as Auditor, he oversaw the assessment of property values. A legal ad in 1869 stated: "Notice from County Auditor Nelson Davis [sic] to Township Assessors, The several Township Assessors in York County are hereby required to meet me, at my office in Yorkville, on Wednesday the 8th day of September to receive

²² *Yorkville Enquirer*, August 1, 1888.

²³ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 9, 1891.

²⁴ , December 27, 1895.

²⁵ *Yorkville Enquirer*, June 23, 1897.

²⁶ *The Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, SC), November 5, 1868.

blanks and instructions.”²⁷ Also during his term as Auditor, he remained active in Republican politics. He was the principal speaker at a Republican barbeque at which he spoke on the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation and opposed new taxes for African Americans who were working the land.²⁸ At another public meeting in April 1871, Davis spoke opposing a resolution calling on all existing office holders to resign.²⁹ The *Enquirer* reported in 1871 that “John G. Enloe, Esq. has been appointed County Auditor for York County by Governor Scott following the resignation of Nelson Davies.”³⁰ It is not clear why Davies resigned from this position. While serving as Auditor, he applied to be a canvasser for the Fort Mill and Rock Hill area of York County in 1870.³¹ In January 1872, the South Carolina Senate confirmed the appointment of Nelson Davies as a Jury Commissioner for York County.³² In Davies’ obituary in 1901, the editor of the *Enquirer* commented on his activities during this period. “He made himself very obnoxious to the whites and was much sought after by the Ku-Klux from 1869 to about 1871, but managed to keep out of the way.”³³ In 1872, he was active at the Republican County Convention, held in August. Davies was at first mentioned as a candidate for the state Senate but was instead nominated for the House of Representatives.³⁴ The records of the South Carolina House confirm that Nelson Davies was a representative from York County in the Fiftieth General Assembly and the Fifty-First General Assembly, serving from November 1872 to 1876.³⁵ By 1874, Davies was serving on the Ways and Means Committee, the Bank and Insurance Committee and the Claims Committee.³⁶ In his reelection effort in 1874, Davies received 2,559 votes, the second highest total among several candidates for multiple seats.³⁷

In 1876, Davies was nominated once again for the House of Representatives,³⁸ but was not reelected. During the 1876 campaign, he appeared at numerous events, including a rally in Rock Hill attended by 500 at which he was the first speaker.³⁹ This was the controversial election in which the white power structure regained control, and there was significant violence to deter black voters. Davies continued to be active in the Republican Party. In 1881, Davies ran on the ticket of the Prohibition Party in the municipal election in Yorkville and was elected as a Warden (Town Council member).⁴⁰ In 1882, he participated in a political meeting at Wilson’s Chapel,

²⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 2, 1869.

²⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 30, 1869.

²⁹ *The Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, S. C.), April 7, 1871.

³⁰ *Yorkville Enquirer*, March 30, 1871.

³¹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 12, 1870.

³² *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 11, 1872.

³³ *Yorkville Enquirer*, February 27, 1901.

³⁴ *Yorkville Enquirer*, August 1 and August 19, 1872.

³⁵ *The Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives, Vol. I*, Columbia, S. C.: USC Press, 1974, Walter Edgar, Editor.

³⁶ *The Daily Phoenix*, Columbia, SC, December 1, 1874.

³⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 5, 1874.

³⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 7, 1876 reported on the county Republican convention.

³⁹ *Anderson Intelligencer*, November 9, 1876.

⁴⁰ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 5 and May 12, 1881.

along with Congressman Wallace and Hannibal White “in support of the waning flag of black republicanism.”⁴¹

After his service in the legislature, Davies served on a number of juries, including York County Petit Juries, U. S. Circuit Court, and other levels. This appeared to be an area in which he enjoyed serving. In April 1882, he served on an important jury for the U. S. Circuit Court in Charleston. The case, U. S. vs. Bates, involved alleged election law violations in Richland County in the 1880 election. The jury included 13 whites and 7 African Americans.⁴² As late as 1897, we have evidence that Davies was an active voter, even after the 1895 Constitution severely limited African American participation. The municipal registration book for Yorkville was closed on May 5, with 141 registered voters. Of the total, only nine were African American, including Nelson Davies.⁴³

Following the ouster of many black Republicans in the 1876 election, various investigations were held concerning budget deficits, corruption, and election irregularities. Nelson Davies was swept up in the investigation of the 1872 selection of John James Patterson as United States Senator. Prior to the adoption of Amendment XVII to the United States Constitution in 1913, U. S. senators were elected by the state legislatures. In 1872, three men were candidates, Patterson, R. B. Elliott, and R. K. Scott, a former Governor. It was alleged that all three men offered bribes for votes. Patterson won handily.⁴⁴ He was accused of being a “Carpetbagger,” having moved to South Carolina in 1869 from Pennsylvania to take advantage of the confused situation after the Civil War. He became wealthy investing in railroads and banking. By the 1872 election, he could outspend the other candidates in buying votes. Many gave him the derisive name “Honest John” Patterson, because it was said that if he promised a bribe he always paid it. Patterson was arrested for bribery, but never tried.⁴⁵ He served his term as Senator from 1873 until 1879, after which he did not return to South Carolina.

In October 1877, it was reported that Nelson Davies had been served with a subpoena to appear and testify before a joint investigative committee of the legislature investigating the 1872 Senate election of “Honest John” Patterson.⁴⁶ Davies was accused of taking a bribe of \$500 to vote for Patterson.⁴⁷ Davies testified that he had been promised a bribe of \$500 for his vote, and that after the election, he was paid \$300 at Patterson’s house and \$100 later at the Republican

⁴¹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 5, 1882. Wilson’s Chapel AME Zion Church is located southwest of York near Sharon.

⁴² *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 26, 1882 and April 20, 1882.

⁴³ *Yorkville Enquirer*, May 5, 1897.

⁴⁴ *The Sun*, New York City, December 16, 1872 in an article “Carolina Vultures: How Honest John Patterson was Elected Senator.”

⁴⁵ Biographical information from an article by Hyman S. Rubin, III in the *South Carolina Encyclopedia*.

⁴⁶ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 18, 1877.

⁴⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 15, 1877. The paper included a long list of legislators with the amounts they were allegedly given by Patterson.

convention.⁴⁸ The investigating committee, dominated by white Democrats who had taken office in 1876, found that Patterson had offered numerous bribes. It appears that no one was ever prosecuted, as the Democrats themselves were vulnerable to election fraud claims in the turbulent 1876 election. I have found no evidence that Nelson Davies suffered any legal consequences.

Late in his life, Nelson began to practice his artistic abilities in a very public way. In July 1895, the *Enquirer* reported, “Nelson Davies, the well-known colored house painter, has made his debut as an artist. At the Zion Church last Friday night, he exhibited a series of paintings of his own execution which he calls ‘The Forty Coming Wonders.’” The paintings, which were described as “very well executed,” were four feet by six feet and were intended to illustrate the visions of St. John on the Island of Patmos.⁴⁹ A few months later, Davies exhibited his paintings in the York County Court House “for the benefit of the white people.”⁵⁰ This exhibition drew an audience of between 50 and 60 whites, who “thought the work quite credible.”⁵¹ It is not known if this body of art work has survived, and I have not seen any references to other works of art done by Davies.

Several records exist of property transactions involving Davies. In 1873, Davies purchased a lot in Yorkville from T. A. Moore for \$500.⁵² In 1883, a legal notice concerning the failed business firm of J. J. Smith & Co. listed Davies as owing \$3.35 to the firm.⁵³ A tragedy occurred in 1897 when the family home burned. It was described as a two-story house belonging to and occupied by Nelson Davies and family and situated on the eastern outskirts of Yorkville. The *Enquirer* reported that the flames had made such headway before being discovered that they could not be controlled. A portion of the family’s furniture was saved.⁵⁴ At a tax sale for the land of W. C. Veal, a lot in Yorkville is listed as an asset and is described as “bounded by the lands of Nelson Davies and T. B. McClain.”⁵⁵ After Davies’ death in 1901, Probate Judge W. H. McCorkle printed a notice stating that his son Nelson C. Davies had applied for a letter of administration for the estate.⁵⁶ A year later, Davies’ land was mentioned in a public notice for the county clerk’s sale of a lot owned by W. R. Carroll. The Carroll lot is described as being bounded on the north by lands of Nelson Davies, on the east by W. L. Goforth, on the south by Sloan Johnson, and on the west by Booker Pharr.⁵⁷ In 1903, W. Brown Wylie, the county clerk, advertised a land sale described as a parcel on the corner of New and Funk Street containing two acres and

⁴⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, December 6, 1877.

⁴⁹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, July 17, 1895.

⁵⁰ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 18, 1895.

⁵¹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 15, 1895.

⁵² *Yorkville Enquirer*, February 13, 1873.

⁵³ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 1, 1883.

⁵⁴ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 27, 1897.

⁵⁵ *Yorkville Enquirer*, July 13, 1901.

⁵⁶ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 9, 1901.

⁵⁷ *Yorkville Enquirer*, November 29, 1902.

“adjoining the lots of Polodore Witherspoon and Nelson Davies’ home place.”⁵⁸ As late as 1911, ten years after his death, the sale of a parcel in Yorkville was advertised “known as the Nelson Davis [sic] home place, with a house, one story, and 29 acres under cultivation.”⁵⁹ These items would indicate that Nelson Davies was a property owner who had a solid place in the community.

Roots and Recall seeks additional information on this remarkable man. If you have information on the family and descendants of Nelson Davies, please share with us.

⁵⁸ *Yorkville Enquirer*, October 30, 1903.

⁵⁹ *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 19 and September 26, 1911.