

Black man was a Rock Hill leader before integration

Longtime barber helped found a newspaper and advocated education

For half a century, from 1870 to 1920, a black man lived in Rock Hill who was a remarkable leader, admired by both blacks and whites. J. Henry Toole was born about 1852. The U.S. Census gives his birthplace as North Carolina and another source says he was born in Raleigh.

As soon as Toole arrived in town, he opened Rock Hill's first barber shop, which was for white men only. Each customer had his own shaving mug with gold lettering. No doubt this allowed Toole to gather much useful information from the town's business community.

In 1872, Toole was arrested with 194 others by Union officers and charged with being a member of the Ku Klux Klan. For 41 days, Toole shared a Yorkville jail cell with Capt. Iredell Jones of Mount Gallant plantation and Samuel Fewell of Ebenezer. He was not charged but the three other black men arrested at the same time were sent to Columbia for prosecution.

In 1876, the S.C. Democratic Party endorsed the Confederate hero Gen. Wade Hampton for S.C. governor with rallies and parades by white men sporting red shirts. Hampton was present in Rock Hill to launch the parade. The Rock Hill Red Shirts, a group organized to remove Federal troops from the state during Reconstruction, included a cavalry unit of black men led by Toole.

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



Toole was the only black Episcopalian in Rock Hill until the Rev. Edmond Joyner established St. Paul's Mission for Blacks on West Black Street in 1884. Toole became the leader of the Mission, which operated a Sunday school, and a trade and day school. The mission closed in 1921, shortly after Toole's death.

In 1894, Toole sought a position as Register of Deeds for the District of Columbia, but he did not get the job. Toole probably was attracted to Washington because he had a brother, Gray Toole, who was President Cleveland's personal barber. Gray Toole even had a room in the White House. Charlotte directories show that Gray Toole had two barber shops in Charlotte in 1890.

During the 1880s and 1890s, J. Henry Toole purchased a number of Rock Hill lots, losing at least two buildings to fires that swept off one side or the other of Main Street. Maybe this is what tempted him to open a barber shop in Yorkville in 1901, "under the Parish Hotel."

But he must have returned to Rock Hill by 1904 when Gov. D.C. Heyward appointed him notary public.

Toole was one of the founders of Rock Hill's first black newspaper, the Rock Hill Messenger.

When Toole endorsed the Rev. P.J. Drayton to be president of Claflin College in Orangeburg, C.P.T. White, editor of the Mes-

senger, thundered against him. White wrote that he was voicing the "sentiments of every self-respecting colored citizen in South Carolina" who would rise up against the recommendation by a "Negro Democrat, a Ku Klux..." Toole, calling the editorial "malicious slander" sued White for \$5,000 and was represented by the Rock Hill law firm Spencer and Dunlap. White was defended by Wilson and Wilson of Rock Hill. The case was settled out of court.

In 1911, Toole sold his barber shop to Albert Collins of Indian Land in Lancaster County. The 1913, the Rock Hill Directory stated that Toole owned a grocery store at 101 Main St. In 1913-15, Toole petitioned for a black school and offered three rooms in a building he owned.

Toole died Oct. 15, 1920. The funeral was at the Church of Our Savior with assistance by the pastors of First Presbyterian and St. John's Methodist. The honorary pall bearers were Gilbert Greene, John Roddey, Ben Fewell, Henry Massey, Capt. J.W. Marshall, John Black, Julius Friedheim, W.W. Gill, David Hutchison, William Hutchison and Col. W. J. Rawlinson, all of whom were white business leaders, an indication of the high status that Toole attained with that group.

Toole was buried in Charlotte at St. Peters Episcopal Cemetery. Toole's first wife, Lucy, died in January 1893. He was survived by his second wife, the former Ella Mikell of Charleston, three sons and a daughter.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

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