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*Roberts Settlement Church, Burial
and
Homecoming Association*



*The Background and Development
of
Roberts Settlement
In Historical Context*

ARCHEY BROOKS GILLIAM HURLEY JEFFRIES KNIGHT LOCKLEAR MCCOWAN

*Presented
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DEDICATIONS

It was the desire of Milton and Pauline Roberts Wallace Baltimore to preserve the heritage of Roberts Settlement. They loved the church, and they hoped that "future generations would maintain, preserve, and cultivate a sense of pride and memory of our unique history". Therefore, in September 2002 the children of Milton and Pauline requested a timeline be developed for their parents honor and memory.

The attached Roberts Settlement, Burial, and Homecoming Association timeline has been captured for future generations. A great deal of gratitude is due Stephen Vincent, author, Southern Seed, Northern Soil, and Associate Professor of History, University of Wisconsin--Whitewater, who provided most of the historical data, moral support, patience and without whom this project would not have been completed.

Accolades and courtesies go to Conner Prairie for production of the timeline panels in the vestibule of the chapel. Special thanks goes to Mr. Tim Crumrin, Associate Director for Research; to Mr. Ron Kellen, Exhibits Preparator; and to the editorial staff. Their expertise was truly professional.

Past President Vincent Newson appointed a committee to assemble and develop the timeline. Current President Stacey White provided encouragement. Tonja W. Goodloe chaired the committee along with committee members Maizie and Wayne Glover, and Stephanie Lloyd. Their devotion to duty, detail, and many hours of sifting through information culminated in the following Roberts Settlement timeline and the timeline panels hanging in the vestibule. Dedicated to and for---the children!!!

THE '**ROBERTS**' NAME ACCORDING TO ORAL HISTORY

According to oral history told throughout many generations, the name **Roberts** was adopted by an African valet (name unknown) who worked for a Lord Roberts from England (a North Carolina plantation owner). Lord Roberts was a large landowner and appointed his valet, a free black man, overseer of the slave workers on his plantation. Lord Roberts returned to England on business and died leaving no heirs. The valet took charge of the plantation and adopted the **Roberts** name. He married a Cherokee Indian (name unknown) who bore him a son, James Roberts. The family continued to increase with the births of several children. As the years passed, there were many inter-racial marriages in the history of the Roberts family. The descendents of the valet grew and prospered in North Carolina's Halifax and Northampton Counties and Virginia's Greensville County during the 1700's. Because of increasing intolerance toward free blacks, descendents moved to the mid-western frontier.

This story, although never documented, remains important and symbolic for the people who have followed the first pioneers named **Roberts**.

The Background and Development of Roberts Settlement in Historical Context

- 1492 *Columbus' arrival begins permanent European Settlement of the New World.

- *Catastrophic depopulation of Native Americans begins due to limited immunities to European diseases. Many Roberts residents are descended from Indian groups decimated by such disease.

- 1607 *First permanent British settlement begins in Virginia.

- 1619 *First African slaves are imported to Virginia, thus beginning slavery in the British colonies that will become the United States.

- 1619–
1660 *Many early African slaves in Virginia and Maryland gain their freedom before the British colonies' slave code is fully defined. Roberts residents may partly be descended from these early "free people of color."

- 1650–
1800 *Three Indian tribes—the Meherrin, Nottoway, and Tuscarora—live in the Virginia-North Carolina coastal plain as the first English arrive in the mid-17th century. All three continue to live near the Virginia-North Carolina line in dwindling numbers in the early-to-mid-18th century. Members of these groups probably intermarry with Roberts residents' ancestors.

- 1700–
1775 *Forced African slave migration to the British American colonies reaches its peak. By 1775 nearly 1 in 5 colonists shares African descent. Fearing free black-slave conspiracies to destroy slavery, laws are passed to restrict free black rights and discourage the group's growth.

- 1765 *James Roberts purchases land in Northampton County, North Carolina. The resulting deed provides the first reference to a Roberts in public records; James is described as a resident "planter" (farmer) in a county land deed.

- 1775–
1781 *The American patriots defeat the British in the Revolutionary War, clinching American freedom. Most of the final, decisive fighting occurs in the South, 1779–1781.

- 1776 *The British colonies on the mainland of North declare their independence, becoming the United States of America.

- 1779–
1780 *More than a half dozen free men of color from Northampton County, North Carolina serve in the United States' Continental Army. Many are ancestors of Roberts' residents.

- 1776–
ca. 1820 *Slavery is questioned as Americans establish freedom from Britain. In the original northern states steps are taken to begin to abolish slavery. In most, slavery is gradually eliminated between roughly 1780 and 1820.

*In the South the free black caste is granted greater tolerance and laws restricting manumission are removed. The number of free people of color grows rapidly.

1787

*The United States government prohibits slavery in the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan). Slavery lingers, nonetheless, largely disappearing in Ohio after 1803, in Indiana after 1820, and in Illinois only in the 1840s.

*The United States Constitution is written in Philadelphia; its subsequent ratification establishes our modern United States government.

1792–
1831

*Slave insurrections and fears of related slave conspiracies lead whites to reconsider the status of free people of color. Many of the rights of free blacks are restricted or stripped away, especially after 1820.

1812–
1815

*The War of 1812 reasserts American independence from Great Britain.

1816

*Indiana is admitted as the nineteenth state in the Union.

1820–
1840

*Free blacks emigrate from North Carolina, Virginia, and other Southern states as their status is severely curtailed and race relations deteriorate. Among those leaving in the mid-1820s is Elijah Roberts, a future founder of Roberts Settlement; he initially settles in Ohio.

1823

*Hamilton County, Indiana formed; Quaker population grows.

1828

*“Long Jim” and Willis Roberts migrate from Northampton County to the site of Beech Settlement in eastern Indiana, apparently drawn to the area by the dominant presence of non-hostile Quakers. Willis’ adult children and Long Jim will help found Roberts Settlement seven years later.

*Andrew Jackson is elected president, the first man of humble origins to gain the office.

1831–
1861

*The most active and controversial phase of the abolition movement flourishes. Controversial, confrontational tactics alienate most white Americans, both in the North and the South. Many fear the future of the United States is jeopardized by the resulting North-South conflicts. African-Americans, such as Frederick Douglass and Henry Bibb, are at the forefront of the movement.

*The Underground Railroad develops as an informal network of individuals willing to aid runaway slaves. Many if not most providing aid are fellow African Americans.

1831

*The Nat Turner Rebellion, the largest successful slave insurrection in American history, occurs near the Virginia-North Carolina, close to the homes of future Roberts

residents. Many free people of color are forced to flee in the indiscriminate anti-black backlash that follows.

- 1831–
1834** *Most of the founding Roberts Settlement families migrate to the frontier, residing temporarily at Beech Settlement. Included is Hansel Roberts, soon to be the largest Roberts landholder.
- 1835–
1837** *Roberts Settlement's first settlers arrive in May 1835. A total of ten African-descended men and women will purchase 920 acres between July 1835 and December 1837 from the United States government. Deeds attesting to the settlers' purchase are signed by president Martin Van Buren.
- 1837–
1843** *A severe depression brings western settlement to a near standstill, thus slowing further free black emigration from the South. Roberts Settlement's further development slows.
- 1843** *A group of abolitionists withdraw from the Methodist Episcopal Church because of the main body's refusal to condemn slavery. Known as Wesleyan Methodists, they quickly form several congregations in north central Hamilton County. Many of their members are former Quakers.
- *Frederick Douglass, the most prominent African-American leader of the nineteenth century, is brutally beaten while giving an abolitionist speech in Pendleton, Indiana, 25 miles southeast of Roberts Settlement. Fearing further violence, Douglass postpones his next scheduled speech in Noblesville, 10 miles southeast of the Roberts community.
- 1844** *A Quaker-dominated crowd of abolitionists prevents the recapture of a runaway slave family headed by John and Luann Roads ten miles south of Roberts Settlement. The Roads family resettle on the edge of the Roberts community. They remain there through the late 1860s.
- 1847** *Roberts residents erect a log-cabin meetinghouse on the site of the present Roberts Chapel. The building serves as both a church and a schoolhouse.
- 1848** *The Methodist residents of Roberts Settlement join the Wesleyan Methodist sect. The Roberts congregation will remain actively involved with the Wesleyans into the 1920s.
- 1846–
1861** *A national crisis develops over whether to allow slave labor in the newly acquired Far West. The resulting deadlock places the nation on edge for fifteen years, only to be resolved by the Civil War.
- 1850** *The United State Congress passes a revised, stronger Fugitive Slave Law, repealing the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act. The new law is written in a way that it leaves Northern free blacks far more vulnerable to enslavement. Thousands flee to Canada. Indiana's free black population actually declines in the 1850s.

- 1851** *A revised Indiana State Constitution prohibits further black immigration.
- 1858** *The present frame church is built and is used as a school and church building. A three-story belfry is added in 1916.
- 1860–1861** *Abraham Lincoln, the presidential candidate of the exclusively northern Republicans, sweeps the North and is elected president with a minority of the popular vote. Eleven slave states secede from the United States in response, triggering the events that begin the Civil War.
- 1861–1865** *The North wins the Civil War, but at the cost of more than one million combined Union and Confederate casualties.
- *Slavery is ended through the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Thirteenth Amendment (1865).
- *At least 11 men from Roberts Settlement join the United States Colored Troops' 28th Regiment, participating in the siege of Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia near Petersburg, Virginia during 1864–1865.
- *Midwestern farming reaches its most prosperous point; farm owners acquire new horse-powered machinery and benefit from exceptionally favorable conditions. Roberts Settlement enters its community's "golden age."
- 1865–1877** *The North tries to reshape the South through the active phase of Reconstruction. Ex-slaves briefly receive political rights, but southern whites retain the upper hand economically and socially. Sharecropping begins.
- *Northern African Americans gain political rights. Roberts men become active participants in local politics as ardent Republicans. By 1900 two residents, William and Elijah Gilliam, are elected as township constables.
- 1873–1879** *The "Great Depression" causes widespread economic suffering in both cities and countryside alike. Declining crop and livestock prices increasingly trouble American farmers, including those in the Midwest.
- Ca.1870–1900** *Roberts Settlements' remaining early landowners pass away. Dividing their holdings evenly among their heirs, larger Roberts farms are often broken up. The resulting smaller farms remain viable, but the future becomes less promising.
- *Educational opportunities increase. The Roberts community school receives tax-funding and high schools are opened in nearby Arcadia and Westfield. At least 6 residents earn post-secondary degrees. By 1900 the community claims graduates from Butler, Valparaiso, Indiana Normal (now Indiana State), National Medical and Wilberforce colleges.
- *Roberts parents increasingly urge their children to pursue careers beyond the settlement.

One prominent ex-patriot, Cyrus Roberts, opens a school for ex-slaves in Tennessee. Another, Dolphin Roberts, becomes the Recorder of the General Land Office, the highest appointed federal position held by an African American at the time.

*Many residents move to more lucrative farm areas in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

- Ca. 1880–1914** *African Americans experience the “nadir [low point] of black history.” In the South whites’ efforts to achieve black subordination lead to extraordinarily deplorable conditions. Jim Crow (legal) segregation is given national sanction through the Supreme Court’s Plessy vs. Ferguson decision (1896); many sharecroppers are forced into debt peonage; blacks in most areas are stripped of political rights; and frequent lynchings reinforce the principle of absolute white supremacy.
- 1880** *Frederick Douglass returns to Noblesville to address a crowd estimated at 10,000 attending a Republican Party rally organized by Milton Roberts.
- 1893–1897** *Another severe economic depression settles over the United States. Farmers in the Plains states and the South are especially hard hit and form the Populist Party. Midwestern farmers fare somewhat better but the restricted future of farming becomes more apparent.
- Ca. 1900–1930** *Roberts Settlement’s population declines sharply. Less than ten farm families remain by the advent of the Great Depression.
- 1909** *A bi-racial coalition of black and white civil rights activists form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). W.E.B. DuBois, a forceful advocate for blacks’ full inclusion in American life, provides much of the group’s initial direction.
- 1914–1918** *World War I engulfs the entire world in warfare unprecedented in its economic and human cost; the United States joins the fighting relatively late (1917), but places a decisive role in the Allies’ victory.
- *Several Roberts men serve in the American Expeditionary Forces sent to France in 1917, serving in segregated units.
- *Farmers at Roberts Settlement, like farmers throughout the North, experience a brief revival in fortunes as war-related shortages drive up farm product prices.
- 1915** *Roberts Settlement’s school, Jackson Township School #5, closes due to limited enrollment and the rural school consolidation movement.
- 1916–1929** *Northern factory owners begin to hire African-American workers en masse because of exceptional WWI opportunities and a sharp decline in their immigrant work pools. This fosters the Great Black Migration to Northern cities; of the African-American

population in 1910, only one-tenth live outside the South. By 1970, 50% of all African-Americans live outside the South.

*Former Roberts residents increasingly become leaders within rapidly growing Northern black communities. Among the most distinguished is Chicago surgeon, Carl G. Roberts, who becomes president of the National Medical Association. Others gain recognition as ministers, principals, teachers, and business leaders.

- 1920s** *The Harlem Renaissance flourishes as talented African-American artists ranging from Duke Ellington to Langston Hughes to Nora Zeale Hurston flock to New York City. The Renaissance epitomizes the sense of possibility and greater freedom shared by Southern emigrants.
- 1922–1940** *Northern farming continues to be reshaped by forces that work to the disadvantage of small-scale farmers, including most at Roberts Settlement. Farm product prices decline while the increasing use of tractors and trucks provide economies of scale favoring large landowners. Small farmers face deteriorating prospects well before the start of the Great Depression; conditions nonetheless worsen further after 1929.
- 1924** *The first annual Roberts Homecoming Reunion is held at Roberts Settlement. Dr. Carl G. Roberts serves as principal coordinator of the reunions through most of the period preceding his death in 1953.
- 1920–1926** *The Ku Klux Klan is reborn. In Indiana, the Klan gains control of the state government. Self-styled defenders of “traditional” values, they are anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic as well as anti-black. Roberts Settlement residents later remember this as the first time they truly felt uneasy in surrounding communities.
- 1925** *Klan leader D. C. Stephenson is convicted of murder at his trial in Noblesville. The Stephenson scandal and internal dissension lead to downfall of Klan.
- 1929–1940** *The Great Depression spreads around the globe. In America, roughly one-fourth of workers are unemployed by 1933; another one-fourth face underemployment (lower wages, and/or shorter hours). Conditions for African-Americans are markedly worse. The exodus of black Americans from the South declines dramatically.
- 1941–1945** *The United States’ involvement in World War II transforms the nation into the world’s dominant military and diplomatic superpower. America’s economy recovers fully from the Great Depression, reaches it greatest point of world domination, and ushers in robust economic growth that continues through the 1960s.
- 1941** *A. Philip Randolph successfully leads drive forcing U.S. government to end to discrimination in defense industries and government position. Military

segregation, nonetheless, remains in effect.

- 1944** *Dr. Carl Roberts donates Roberts family documents to the Library of Congress. Included in the resulting Roberts Family Collection are financial ledgers from the late 1700s onward, letters between family members during the migration to the Indiana frontier, Civil War letters by Junius Roberts, and extensive genealogical charts.
- 1948** *President Harry Truman mandates all military branches to be integrated.
- 1949** *Indiana passes its school desegregation bill.
- 1945–
1970** *Farmers again face extraordinarily hard times. Between 1945 and 1960 the average farm family income drops more than one-fourth while the average American wage earner's income increases more than one-third. The nation's rural population drops by more than one-half from 1950 to 1970.
- 1950–
1953** *The United States intervenes to prevent communist North Korea from succeeding in its invasion of South Korea. The resulting Korean War is fought to an indecisive result, notwithstanding 23,000 American deaths.
- 1951** **Ebony* magazine features Roberts Settlement and Roberts Settlement reunions in its November issue. The article lauds the community's distinctive past as well as those who continue to honor its history.
- 1954** *The Supreme Court declares that segregation in public schools is illegal, reversing the longstanding principle of "separate but equal" established by the *Plessy* decision. Implicitly the Court brings into question the South's entire Jim Crow system of segregation.
- 1955–
1965** *The direct-action phase of the Civil Rights struggle begins with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and achieves its greatest impact through the massive protest demonstrations of the early-to-mid 1960s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 effectively outlaw public forms of discrimination and restore southern blacks' voting rights.
- 1964–
1975** *American involvement in the Vietnam War dramatically escalates but ultimately fails to prevent a communist North Vietnamese victory. More than 50,000 American soldiers die in the nation's most controversial military conflict.
- Ca. 1970–
present** *After a period of relative decline, Roberts Settlement reunions gain renewed luster. Successive generations of new leaders create new ways to sustain and increase interest as the settlement's most prosperous days grow more distant. Efforts include establishing an ongoing newsletter, improving the physical upkeep of

Roberts Chapel and surrounding grounds, and promoting greater awareness of the settlement's heritage among younger descendants.

- Ca. 1970
ca. 1992** *Economic challenges ranging from oil crises to government budgetary problems to declining rates of global economic growth force Americans to reconsider the buoyant economic optimism that reigned during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.
- 1970** *The Roberts annual homecoming is expanded to a three-day event with fun filled events including a tractor-led hayride, wiener roast, fire works, social activities, picnic, and a church service. Establishment of these significant traditions is led by Pauline Baltimore, Jeanetta Duvall, as well as, Herbert Rice, who is the driving force to keep Roberts' heritage and history alive.
- 1976** *Alex Haley publishes *Roots*; a subsequent televised adaptation plays to record-breaking audiences. Collectively, the book and mini-series spark a dramatic increase among African-Americans in their ancestry. Roberts Settlement reunions benefit indirectly because of the heightened interest in, and awareness of African-American history.
- 1994** *Tonja White Goodloe and Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, along with other Roberts' descendents, begin efforts to get Roberts Chapel added to the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1996** *The United States government places Roberts Chapel on the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1999** *The July 4th celebration includes honoring attendees that also attended the first homecoming in 1924.
- 2002** *A donation from the Merrell Family, in memory of Revel Roberts, makes possible significant chapel enhancements and repairs, such as a new furnace, ceiling fans, interior paint, and chimney and foundation tuck pointing. Jerry Granger and the Buildings and Grounds Committee coordinate this effort.
- *Jeanetta Gilliam Duvall and Herbert Rice receive the Elijah Roberts Award for fostering the values, spirit, and heritage of Roberts Settlement.
- 2004** *Homecomings continue to have large attendance with descendents of the original settlers traveling from across the United States to attend this annual celebration.