

Lyles Station: A Snapshot of a Rural Historically Black Farming Community in Indiana.

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In southwest Indiana, there is a small, historically all-Black farming community now called Lyles Station. Lyles Station is located in a low-lying area (flood zone), near the convergence of the Patoka, Wabash and White rivers (Madison 1:00 – 1:10). The founders of Lyles Station migrated from various states, including Virginia and Tennessee. As Stanley Madison states in his presentation to the Indiana Rotary Club, one of the earliest pioneering Lyles Station homesteaders was an African American named Charles Greir who arrived in the



Figure 1 Norman Greer, a direct descendant of Charles Greir—a founder of Lyles Station. Photo Credit: Farm

area around the year 1813 or 1814.

By the end of 1825, Mr. Greir had purchased nearly 270 acres of land (Madison 1:34-1:55). The area that we now call Lyles Station was originally called Switch Station.

Some accounts about the founders of the area around Switch Station claim

that Joshua Lyles, one of the key founders and the community's namesake, was formerly enslaved; other accounts claim that Joshua Lyles was always a free man.¹ What is indisputable is that a group of pioneering Black men and women founded a self-reliant farming community in Indiana—that still exists.

In its heyday, Lyles Station had between 500 and 800 residents, two churches, “55 households an elementary school, two general stores, a lumber mill, and a post office” (Polk).

Lyles Station grew and flourished until 1913, when a devastating flood affected not only Lyles



Figure 2 Lyles Station School, teachers and students.
Photo Credit: WHAS11

Station but much of Indiana and led to a decline in the population of Lyles Station (Madison 8:11). Stanley Madison, and other descendants of the early pioneers, is preserving Lyles Station by restoring old structures. Wayman Chapel

African Methodist Episcopal Church is still standing, and the Lyles Station school now serves as a museum illustrating the rich history of the small farming community. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has an exhibit about the history of Lyles Station (NMAAHC). In his presentation to the Evansville, Indiana Rotary Club, Stanley Madison mentions some notable Lyles Station achievers, among them were: Mr. W.H. Roundtree, the first Black postmaster in Indiana. Roundtree successfully petitioned the Indiana governor to provide free primary education to Lyles Station residents. Prior to this government decision, families had to pay for their children's education. As Mr. Madison notes, the collective work of the residents built the schools. (Madison 3:35 – 4:00). Another notable is Aaron Fisher, a World War I veteran who was one of the most highly decorated WWI soldiers in Indiana. Mr. Madison also notes that Lyles station was very much part of the underground railroad, and he lists several families involved as conductors on the railroad to freedom (2:26 – 3:04).

Sadly, Lyles Station is also known for a United States government radiation experiment conducted on Black children. Vertus Hardiman was one of the Lyles Station children who was

experimented on; he was five years old at the time he was experimented on, in 1928. A documentary about this tragedy has been produced (W. Smith). Please note that this documentary contains images that may not be suitable for young children to view.

Because of the efforts of Mr. Madison, the residents of Lyles Station and other descendants of the early founders, the story of the founding of Lyles Station as an all-Black enclave is becoming more widely known. The legacy of the men and women of Lyles Station provides another example of the determination of a people seeking to live on their own terms and control their own destiny.² Lyles Station is on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Notes

¹ See the article by Polk, the first section of her article on James Lyles contains a reference to Joshua Lyles being born free. Also, Mr. Madison describes him as a freeborn man (Madison 6:15).

² I highly recommend Mr. Madison's presentation given to the Evansville Rotary Club. Although some minor misstatements were made with dates—for example, Mr. Madison implied that Aaron Fisher was deployed in Europe during WWI in 1911, although his presentation slide on the screen showed what is probably the correct year of his government award (1918); the U.S. did not enter the war until 1917—the information that Mr. Madison presents leads the researcher to investigate more deeply Lyles Station and other Black-founded settlements and towns. It is clear the Mr. Madison has a wealth of knowledge.

Works Cited

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