

Brickmason's skill still stands

Sevier builder's handiwork includes Courthouse, Masonic Lodge, Church

By Jeannine F. Hunter (Feb. 27, 2003)

Sevier County has always had a relatively small black population yet the tight-knit community has produced several brick masons, and all-black construction companies, carpenters and furniture makers. Black brick masons and builders constructed "nearly every important private and public building in the county," according to an article, "Leaders of Afro-American Nashville," which was a project of the 1998 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History.

Isaac Dockery, born in 1832, was a well-respected brick mason and builder who lived in Sevier County and established a business in Newport, I.D. & Sons Contractors in Brick.

Dockery, who was not a slave nor were his parents, taught his skill to sons, sons-in-law and grandsons. Examples of his handiwork include the Sevier County Courthouse (1896), Sevierville's New Salem Baptist Church (1886) and the Sevierville Masonic Lodge (1893). "He built the first kiln in Sevier County," wrote Martha Burden Bowden, Dockery's great-granddaughter in her 1988 book "Mountain of Dreams." ("Mountain of Dreams" can be found in the Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection of the Knox County Public Library System).

Several members of Dockery's family also started as brick masons including Paris Witt McMahan, a former slave who later established the Sevierville-based Riverside Steam Brick Co. that operated until the 1930s; George and Stewart Burden, who went on to establish a collection company in the early 1900s; and Fred McMahan, who attended Knoxville College and earned his master's degree in architectural engineering at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Around 1920, McMahan returned to Sevierville and opened J.F. & N McMahan Construction Co. with his brothers James and Newt.

The McMahan company built the Dwight and Kate Wade House in Sevierville, a home modeled after an "avant-garde exhibition dwelling at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair's 'Town of Tomorrow' exhibit," wrote Robbie D. Jones in "Leaders of Afro-American Nashville."