

John Carruther Stanly- An Inspiration You've Never Heard Of

By: Samuel Hoy

I live close to the second oldest city in North Carolina known as New Bern. This city was originally settled in 1710 by Swiss and German immigrants, has a deep history and is famous for Tryon Palace, a beautiful brick mansion that was the official residence and administrative headquarters of North Carolina British governors from 1770 to 1775. (1) Today, Tryon Palace and several of the buildings in its period have been restored and is a popular tourist attraction for history buffs. Several years ago I went on a New Bern historic trolley tour and listened to a well-informed guide talk about many of the buildings, but one in particular grabbed my attention. It was the John Wright Stanly house that served as home to several generations of his family, many of whom were well known important figures during the American Revolution and the Civil War. However, this guide also talked about John Carruthers Stanly who didn't live in this house because he was the product of a scandalous affair between a black slave and white merchant John Wright Stanly. Because of the status of his African American mother, Stanly was born a slave. He, among many other mulattos offspring during the time, faced social hardships as he didn't enjoy the same rights and privileges as the white man because of his black side, but was not accepted by the slave community due to his white side. Despite the social inequalities, his owners taught him to read, write, and barbering skills. These owners petitioned Craven County court to free Stanly, and he was given his freedom on March 12, 1795 (2). With his newly gained freedom, Stanly rose above and beyond the social criticism of his descent and built a name for himself through business ventures. Stanly began building wealth with his barbershop and through loans to people who did not want bank secured loans. He then turned to investing in property and sold it for profit, which was a white dominated market. Stanly was a pioneer of

successful black entrepreneurs, and was referred to by a New Bern journalist as a man of dignified presence of whom "no citizen of Newbern would hesitate to walk the streets with him."

(3). Stanly went on to pay it forward and helped others slaves to secure their freedom. This included his wife, whom he bought and legally emancipated, and was one of the original members of the First Presbyterian New Bern Church organized in 1817 that is still standing today. In spite of all the good he did for slaves in New Bern, over time Stanly lived a paradox and "became not only the largest slave owner in Craven County, and one of the largest in North Carolina, but he owned more than twice as many slaves as the second largest free Negro slave owner in the South". (3). Even with the criticism from historians that tarnish his legacy, Stanly had become one of the most prominent and trusted free negros in the state. As such, his ability to influence decisions that impacted people of color is best illustrated when a proposal to deny free blacks the right to vote was introduced at the NC Constitutional Convention of 1835. At this conference, a reporter pointed out that this would be highly unfair to the most successful and respectable members of its class, including African American men like John C. Stanly of New Bern. (3) (4) John Stanly's reputation was instrumental to a continuance of freed blacks being able to vote in North Carolina, as many of the white folk saw how much support Stanly possessed. John Carruthers Stanly's life story is not very popular, even though his story was quite inspiring. He started his life as "ordinary folk", and through hard work and determination, he became a key player in championing racial justice and equality. Stanly's legacy remains to this day, as his descendants are continuing to fight racial inequalities. Stanly's granddaughter was "one of the first African-American women to attend Oberlin College in Ohio," (1) and his great nephew John Patterson Green became the first African American senator in Ohio and established Labor Day as an Ohio state holiday. (5)

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