

WILEY JOHN RUSSELL
PIONEER AFRICAN AMERICAN - WILSON COUNTY RESIDENT

Wiley John Russell was born in March 1856 to John Russell and Harriet Glasco Russell. His brother and two sisters were: Glasco born 1855, Charlotte born 1854, and Leah born 1858. Nothing more is known about Glasco.

After John Russell's death, Harriet married Charles Stevenson, a farmer from Alabama. They lived in "Stevenson Colony" in the La Vernia Area. The Colony consisted of a church, school, lodge hall, small grocery store and a cemetery.

Charles Stevenson and Harriet Russell had 2 daughters, Harriet Stevenson and Anna Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson's 2 children and Harriet's three children completed the household in 1870. Fourteen year old Wiley was the only son in the family.

The Wash and Rodgers families of La Vernia are related to the Russells. Some related families in Floresville are Walker, Kuykendall, and Harris. Anna Stevenson married Orange Wash and Harriet Stevenson married Walter Rodgers. Wiley's sister Leah Russell married Thomas Hegwood in 1879 and his sister, Charlotte Russell married 3 times – William Wash, Joseph Brown, and Mr. Whipple.

Wiley's stepfather Mr. Stevenson had been in Wilson County since 1851, and was one of the first freedmen in the county to purchase land. He became one of the largest African American landowners in the vicinity. After Charles Stevenson's death in 1879, Harriet was made administrator of this estate. Judging from one annual inventory, she submitted to the court, they had become prosperous. In 1880 the estate had an income of nearly \$1200.00.

Wiley could read and write which was unusual for African Americans at that time. However, it is not known where he acquired his education.

In 1880, Wiley, aged 24, was not yet married and was living with his widowed mother, Harriet and younger sisters, Anna and Harriet. At Christmas time 1885, 29 year-old Wiley married "the prettiest girl" he'd ever seen, Adeline "Addie" Williams. She was 20 years old. Reverend John T. Gibbons, Minister of the Gospel, performed the wedding.

The newlyweds probably moved to Floresville around this time. Wiley was a farmer and grew cotton and other crops. He was adamant about never working for anyone---to always be self employed. This was a pledge he kept.

From 1887 to 1910, 15 children were born to the couple.

- Callie (1887)
- August "Gus" (1888)
- Jesse and Bessie (1890)

- Isabelle (1892)
- Richard (1894)
- Annie (1896)
- Daisy (1898)
- James and John (1900)
- Bertha (1902)
- Norine (1904)
- Lewis (1906)
- Alonzo (1908)
- Lucille (1910)

At one time, the household also included Wiley's niece and nephew, Hattie and William Hegwood, and Adeline's mother, Jennie Williams.

Around 1910, the family moved to the Muskogee/Taft area of Oklahoma seeking better schools and better farmland. However, the soil was poor and the weather was bad. So the Russells returned to Floresville.

At marriage, each Russell child was offered land on which to build a home in Floresville. "Gus", Jesse, Isabelle and Lucille built homes.

Religion and education were family priorities. This was a God-loving, church-going Christian family. Wiley's mother, Harriet Stevenson, and her neighbor, James Reese, donated the land on which the St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church stood. Wiley served as Superintendent of Sunday School at the church for 50 years. His home was where the ministers ate Sunday dinner. Russell's were at every church service.

One son, August "Gus" became a Methodist minister and later district superintendent of the Victoria District. All the children served prominently in Methodist churches all over the State of Texas. Jesse, James and John were Trustees, Stewards, and other officers at St. Paul Methodist Church in San Antonio for many years. The Russell grandchildren have continued this tradition.

The importance of education was evidenced by moving the family to another state for improved educational opportunities. All the Russell offspring attended the Floresville "colored" school. Many of them finished high school in San Antonio and went on to college. One son, Alonzo "Lonnie" taught in the Floresville "colored" school, and later taught many years at an Austin, Texas high school.

Wiley Russell was a well-respected man in his community. He lived by the Golden Rule and taught his children to do the same. As a husband, he was a loving man and a good provider. As a father, he was a strict disciplinarian and was a true patriarch.

Wiley died in November 1940 at age 84. At his funeral were hundreds of people who came to pay tribute to this African American pioneer of Wilson County, Texas. Adeline Russell spent her time supporting her husband's work and nurturing their 15 sons and daughters. She was proud of her children's accomplishments. She was loved and revered by her family and her community. Adeline died in April of 1945 at age 79. Wiley and Adeline Russell are buried in Floresville Cemetery # 2 on Plum Street.

By Jamie L. Walker Harris for the Wilson County Historical Society,