

Turner Family History Part 1 – The Teacher

This month's family history features the Turner family. I chose this family because of the impact of one woman, an Amherstburg educator named Julia Turner. I read about Julia Turner in the past, but it wasn't until recently when I decided to create a social media post about her, that I learned more about Julia, her parents, siblings and their children who will all be discussed in the Turner family history. Julia's parents were Henry Turner and Rosena (also referred to as Judith) Cox. According to Afua Cooper's article "Putting Flesh on the Bones: Writing the History of Julia Turner" Henry and Rosena escaped enslavement in West Virginia and Kentucky and arrived in Ontario in 1828. Cooper adds that a descendant of Georgina/Jordina Turner named Sylvia Jackson shared that when Henry and Rosena came to Ontario, they opened a grocery store and a rooming house in Amherstburg, in addition to making and selling carpets. Sylvia Jackson was unsure how long they operated these businesses. Cooper's article also states that Henry Turner appears on the list for Captain Caldwell's Company of Coloured Volunteers at Amherstburg and that he served as a Sergeant in active duty during the Upper Canada Rebellion from December 27, 1837 to January 25, 1838.

According to Julia's obituary, her father Henry died on the Steamer Pearl while leaving Detroit for Amherstburg on July 26, 1863, while Rosena passed on April 27, 1880. Her obituary appeared in the *Amherstburg Echo* on April 30, 1880 and said "In Amherstburg, on Tuesday, April 17th, Mrs. Judith Turner, relic of the late Henry Turner, aged 78 years. The funeral took place on Wednesday afternoon, and was very largely attended. Deceased was the mother of Wm. H. Turner, of Amherstburg, and James E. Turner, of Colchester North."

Henry and Rosena's children include Julia, Mary Jane, William H., Rosina, James E., Elizabeth Georgina (also spelt Jordina), Louisa, and Rebecca. Other than Mary Jane's married

name, Crawford, I could not find any information for her. I also could not find anything for Rebecca other than being listed on the 1871 Census with Rosena Turner. She is not mentioned on the previous 1861 Census as living with Henry and Rosena Turner, so it is possible that she was not the birthchild of Rosena, but instead was the wife of Rosena's son William and was just living in the same household. If this is not the case, then Rebecca could be the child of Rosena and Henry, but I could not find evidence to support either theory.

I was able to find information for Julia, William H., Rosina, James E., Elizabeth Georgina, and Louisa. I will start with Julia who was born on July 4, 1829. According to Afua Cooper, by the time she was fourteen, Julia was teaching at a segregated school in Essex County. She received an education at Oberlin College, earning her teaching certificate. She taught at schools throughout Essex County including at Mount Pleasant, Colchester, the King Street School in Amherstburg, Sandwich and the Marble Village School in Anderdon. Cooper's article includes a letter Julia wrote on January 25, 1853 to George Whipple, who was the field secretary of the American Missionary Association, requesting financial assistance for a school in Amherstburg. The letter says "Dear Sir, I have forwarded this letter to you by recommendation to solicit aid in behalf of a school in Amherstburg. their [sic] is a school in this place kept in Mr Rice's mission house by a young man by the name of James Underwood. As to the teacher they are satisfied with his teaching but are dissatisfied with the course he has taken by going to the mission house. As he was paid twenty dollars per month by the trustees of the incorporation, they feel dissatisfied under those circumstances and having known their disapproval of that course to the trustees, they [the trustees] refuse to hear them, being rather in favour of his course and partial to Mr Rice."

“They [the parents] have requested me to apply for assistance in carrying on their school in the coloured Wesleyan Church which I shall teach and the number of scholars are from thirty-five to forty, which I shall take up if I can be supported. They will pay what they can, but having to their taxes to pay to the other school whither they send or not, but by not sending will be exempted from paying the rate bill which they will pay to their own teacher if they can get assistance from you.”

“They say you would assist them if they would come under the AMA society. As for myself, I have been teaching in Canada for eight years and for some of them I have received twenty four dollars per year for two years and I had the promise [of] more but the people were too poor, I could not bear to distress them. I have taught five years ... in one settlement by the name of Mount Pleasant to which if I do not get support in town will teach.”

“It is a large settlement of coloured people and a large quantity has moved there within the two years time, to give you sir, an idea of the number that have [sic] gone in that settlement since the fugitive bill has passed. I have received from them last year, for the first time \$72 for the year so I can say thank God, times are getting better ... As to my assertions and character as a schoolteacher, you can inquire of Mr Peden, minister of the Presbyterian church, Mr A. Binga, pastor of the Baptist church ... I am your humble servant, Julia Turner. P.S. I will teach either place that you will support me in, Amherstburg or Mount Pleasant.”

There is no indication that Turner received AMA funding, but a year later she began teaching at a segregated school in Amherstburg. According to an article found in the *Amherstburg Echo* titled “First School in Amherstburg Held in Rental Rooms” printed on November 23, 1934, “Common school was held in the Sons’ Hall (the old Echo office), the rent of which was \$5 a month. In 1854, Miss Julia Turner became teacher of the colored school at

£50.” With this position, she was required to provide the classroom space and fuel to heat it. The condition of Turner’s school are recorded in Benjamin Drew’s book *A North-Side View of Slavery* which says “A separate school has been established here, at their own request: their request was given them, but leanness went with it. I visited the school. There was an attendance of twenty-four,--number on the list, thirty. The school-house is a small, low building, and contains neither blackboard nor chair. Long benches extend on the sides of the room, close to the walls, with desks of corresponding length in front of them. The whole interior is comfortless and repulsive. The teacher, a colored lady, is much troubled by the frequent absences of the pupils, and the miserably tattered and worn-out condition of the books. Two inkstands were in use, which, on being nearly inverted, yielded a very little bad ink. The teacher appeared to be one of the working sort, disposed to bear up as well as she could under her many discouragements: but the whole school adds one more dreary chapter to "the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties." But there is a better time coming. Malden (Amherstburg) is one of the stations at which the Colonial Church and School Society propose to establish schools, ‘expressly for the benefit of the colored race, but open to all.’”

Julia Turner remained at the Amherstburg school until December 1856 but was forced out due to sexism. Black community members circulated a petition which called for the employment of a male teacher, likely because there was a (false) belief that a male teacher would better manage the students. As a result, Turner was replaced by John B. Williams. Julia Turner continued teaching as is shown on the 1871 and 1881 Census which list her as a schoolteacher.

In addition to being a teacher, Julia Turner also invested in real estate. She began acquiring property in 1870 and by 1899 she owned at least five lots which varied in size and value. Afua Cooper argues that Turner was among those who paid the highest taxes in Essex

County, with properties in Sandwich, Malden, Anderdon, and Colchester North. Cooper adds that family lore states that along with “Hiram Walker, Turner was one of the county’s leading taxpayers.” At the time of her death, Turner’s estate was valued at \$4,200 with her personal estate valued at roughly \$1,800. One report from the *Windsor Evening Record* stated that her estate was valued at roughly \$7,000.

The *Windsor Evening Record* reported on November 10, 1900 “Miss Julia Turner of Sandwich is visiting her nephew, James Naul. She took very ill Wednesday morning and was with difficulty resuscitated.” Sadly, Julia Turner passed away that day, on November 10, 1900 in Amherstburg. She never married and her death record lists her as 72 years old and a ‘Retired Lady.’ The *Amherstburg Echo* printed a very detailed obituary for Julia on November 16, 1900 which says “Death of Miss Turner – Last week’s Echo made mention of the fact of the serious illness of Miss Julia Turner at James Naul’s, where she was visiting. Miss Turner recovered sufficiently to make arrangements to go to her home in Sandwich, when at 2:30 Saturday morning she was seized with a worse attack and expired in a few minutes. The remains were interred Tuesday afternoon, in Rose Hill Cemetery. The remains were first taken to the First Baptist church where services were conducted by Rev. Dr. Henderson, of Detroit, assisted by Rev. Mr. Penicks, of Kansas City, and Rev. Mr. Thompson, of Sandwich. Following were pallbearers: J.M. Brantford, Henry Banks, J.D. Brown, Philip Alexander, Ezekiel Stephens and George Thomas. Miss Turner was very well known throughout Essex County. She was a daughter of the late Henry and Rosina Turner, of Amherstburg. One of thirteen children, she was born here July 4th, 1829, and so was past 71 years of age at her death. Of the thirteen children only four now survive. They are William H., of Cleveland; Mrs. William Monroe, of Amherstburg; James E., of New Canaan, and Mrs. Georgina E. Mathews, of Sandwich. Her

father Henry Turner died on the steamer Pearl while leaving Detroit for Amherstburg July 26th, 1863, while her mother died here April 27th, 1880. Miss Turner received her rudimentary education in the school here, and completed it at Oberlin College, Ohio, taking out a teacher's certificate. She taught school at Mt. Pleasant, Malden township, Anderdon, Colchester North, Harrow, Amherstburg, and at Sandwich for 13 years. For the past 24 years she lived with her nephew, Wm. Monroe in Sandwich and conducted a fruit and vegetable farm there. At the age of 16 she allied herself with the Baptist church at Mt. Pleasant and was a valued and esteemed member of that body until her death. She was a frugal woman and possessed great thrift, accumulating considerable property during her lifetime. She had farms in Malden, Anderdon, Colchester North, and town property in Sandwich and Amherstburg.

The money she earned as a teacher helped support her family and Julia is among the many examples of Black women who acted as breadwinners. Additionally, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a flood of Freedom Seekers came to this region, meaning there was an increased need to educate newcomers. Julia Turner contributed to the education of numerous Freedom Seekers (and others).

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.