

## *Howard Willard Clark, Sr.*

### **From**

### *Essence of a People: African Americans Who Made a Difference in Loudoun County, Virginia*

Born in Hamilton, on May 4, 1876, to Richard and Louisa Clark, Howard Willard Clark, Sr., encountered a world still reeling from the climactic aftershocks of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The liberated had become liberators in the fight for freedom, justice, and equality. Deeply influenced by the world he saw around him, Howard Clark worked from an early age to change the course of history.

### *The Vision*

Even as a young man, Clark's entrepreneurial spirit was impressive—he farmed, worked day jobs, and ran his own ice cream parlor in the evenings and on the weekends. He started the ice cream business not just to earn additional income, but to give African Americans a recreational gathering place. When he was not working, he was educating himself and listening to the counsel of his elders. Clark watched other young men leave Loudoun County in search of better opportunities, but he chose to “stay and fight.”

When he was fourteen, Clark made a commitment to improving the quality of life for African Americans. With community leaders, he helped to establish the Loudoun County Emancipation Association, whose aims were “to celebrate the Day of Freedom, to cultivate good fellowship, and to work for the betterment of the Negro race.” They chose to commemorate the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on September 22, 1862 as a warning to states in rebellion rather than the more commonly celebrated January 1, 1863 date when the proclamation went into effect. Based in Hamilton, the Emancipation Association was a county-wide organization with representatives from each district. Clark served as its first secretary. The association flourished and by 1910 was able to purchase ten acres of land in Purcellville.

The ten-acre site soon became known as “The Emancipation Grounds” and served as a gathering place of African Americans from near and far. A log cabin, transported from Hamilton, served as an office, and the association built a Tabernacle that seated 1,200. The Emancipation Grounds was the site of the annual Emancipation Day celebration. Thousands of people from the mid-Atlantic region attended, dressed in their Sunday clothes. Folks brought lavish picnic lunches, listened to music, and watched the pageants and parade, which featured people dressed as such historical figures as John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Abraham Lincoln. The highlight of the day was a speech by a distinguished orator, often a nationally recognized speaker such as Nannie Burroughs, Charles Houston, or Mordecai Johnson. These celebrations inspired a sense of racial pride, community, power, and a hopeful vision for the future during a sometimes violent time of mounting segregation. On the Emancipation Grounds, local schools held annual Field Days and baseball teams played groups from as far away as Alexandria, Winchester, and Culpeper; churches held revivals and conventions in the Tabernacle. The Loudoun county emancipation Association had a special reason to be proud. While emancipation Day was celebrated throughout the United States, few groups were organized as shareholding corporations, owned land, or held gatherings for such a large percentage of their communities.

Year after year, Howard Clark presided over the festivities. Because of Clark's sincerity and dedication to the cause, Lewis Rector, one of the other officers of the Emancipation Association, jokingly called him “Mr. Emancipator.” The nickname stuck and for years, especially on Emancipation Day, that is how people referred to him. Clark's name was forever joined with that of the Emancipation Association. For decades, he and his fellow officers served alternating terms as president, secretary, and treasurer.

### *Community Advancement and Involvement*

Clark expanded his community involvement when he became a charter member of Leesburg's Metropolitan lodge 161 of the Free and Accepted Masons in 1923. Always interest in providing recreations and job opportunities, he became the president of the Colored Horse and Colt Show in 1913 which featured racing and jumping at the Emancipation Grounds. Between events at the shows, Clark played his gramophone and sold trinkets to the many attendees. He never owned a car and thought nothing of walking to Purcellville or riding his horse and buggy to Leesburg, Middleburg, or anywhere duty called. His only surviving daughter remembers how she gleefully waited for him at the end of the road just to get a ride in the buggy.

### *Educational Advancement*

Clark worked tirelessly to improve African American education in Loudoun County. Because students, including his own children, had to walk as far as two miles and more to Brownsville to attend school, he appeared before the school board in 1916 to request that the school be moved to Hamilton, where it would be more accessible. A trustee of the Golden Hill Lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, he obtained permission from the order's members to use the downstairs room in the lodge's hall as a schoolroom. The school board accepted his offer and Lodge Hall was used as an elementary school until 1948.

Clark was also a trustee of the County-Wide League, and organization formed to improve educational opportunities for African Americans. According to Elizabeth Quisenbury, Clark and she were among those who donated money to purchase the land on which Douglass High School was built. He became a member of the NAACP, which was working with Loudoun residents to equalize the schools. Clark's children were grown by that time, but he was particularly proud that he was able to work briefly with Charles Houston, the lawyer who helped the community establish Douglass High School. Howard Clark lived to see the Supreme Court rule in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional, but not to see the integration of Loudoun County's schools.

### *The Measure of a Man*

During his life Howard Clark was considered to be a compassionate man who had faith in others. His stately countenance was balanced with a quiet sense of humor. On almost any evening, one could find him sitting on the front porch, smoking a cigar and reading his favorite newspaper, *The Washington Post*, or, with eyes closed, meditating.

Though his roots were planted firmly in the church, he was not an ardent church-goer until he married the pretty and popular Eppie Fields. Later, he became a pillar of the Mount Zion Methodist Episcopal Church. Among other duties, he served as a trustee, class leader, bell toiler, and sexton. Early on Sunday mornings, he would go to Mount Zion to build a fire or to stoke one he had banked the night before. In summer, he opened the windows so the sanctuary would be comfortable for parishioners.

To protect his wife from the indignity of having to wait while white people were served first, he did the grocery shopping every Saturday evening, carrying the food in a sack slung over his back. Regardless of how tough times were, he always brought home penny chocolates for his children.

When the need for a community cemetery in Hamilton become apparent, Howard Clark once again stepped forward. In 1922, he became a founder and first president of the Pleasant Valley Cemetery Association and remained a director of the association until the end of his life.

Howard Clark, Sr., had a strong awareness of history and carefully protected and preserved important documents for future generations. Though the books are now fragile and the writing is faded, the records he kept for the Mount Zion Methodist Church, Pleasant Valley Cemetery Association, and the Loudoun County Emancipation Association provide a glimpse not only into his character but into the era in which he lived.

*Howard Clark's Legacy*

Howard W. Clark, Sr., wanted all Americans to live in a country where justice and equality prevailed. He was a strong believer in self-help and education. He inspired these qualities in his family and all who knew him. He can best be characterized as a “great man, tender of heart, strong of nerve, boundless patience and broadest sympathy, with no motive apart from his country.”

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