

A History of the town of Martinsburg, Missouri

(New) Mt. Zion Baptist Church

The first Negro to come to Martinsburg as a free citizen was Ben Soil, familiarly known as "Uncle Ben". He had belonged to the John Fish family before the Civil War and continued to work for them until 1866. Then he came to town and was joined by a young man from Pike County. They lived in a two room brick house at the east edge of town.

In 1887 the first Negro family, that of "Uncle Mose" McMurtry and his wife, Mary, arrived. They had three children. "Uncle Mose" built a little log house, just east of the City Park and in their house religious services were conducted until a church was built. The next family was that of "Aunt Jane" Soil, of which Ben was the eldest. The children who came with her were Frank, Henna, Delilah, Mandy, Lucy, Adaline, Millie, Julia and Cora.

"Aunt Jane" Soil lived in a small frame house where the Herman Wieschhaus home is now located. She and her family had belonged to the John Fish family, who lived three miles south of Martinsburg, during slavery. All of her children married and settled here and were some of the most highly respected colored citizens in the county.

Other early settlers were Frank Chambers and his wife, Liza, with three children, "Aunt" Susan Nickens and five children, John Kemp (who died at the age of 105 years) and his wife, Delilah; Pleas and Missouri Brown, Garret and Linda Walker, John and Melissa Brown. All had been slaves of Callaway County farmers. Two of Aunt Susan's sons, Presley and Manuel Nickens, were Martinsburg's firm of plasterers and flue builders for many years.

Aunt Jane Soil's son, Ben's first employer was Patrick Gant. The young son, Ernest, who became a Missouri Supreme Court Justice, was Ben's special charge. It was with great pride that he told of teaching the Judge how to walk. Uncle Ben is survived by one son, the Rev. Thomas Soil. Frank, the other son of Aunt Jane, was one of Martinsburg's first blacksmiths and worked at the trade until 1923 when he was appointed U.S. mail carrier. He died suddenly in the discharge of his duty in 1934.

In 1887 a Baptist Church was organized. The first members were Mr. and Mrs. McMurtry and Mary, Mose Neald, Hannah and Frank Soil, Henna Brookins, Jr. and family, Mrs. Sallie Nickens, Mrs. Hazel Black, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Ike Green, Mrs. Mary Henderson, Mr. and Mrs. Ed Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Jay Mahaney, Mrs. Roseline Williams, Irving Nickens.