

Aunt Polly Podcast Transcript

Narrator: In 1861, Muskogee leader Yahola led thousands of Union-loyal Indians North to escape Confederate attacks. Not everyone who followed Yahola was a traditional tribal member. Among the refugees were black slaves and freedmen.

Like their southern neighbors, some of the Muskogees and Seminoles, including Yahola, owned black slaves. In fact, by 1860, black slaves and freedmen made up more than 14 percent of the Muskogee Tribe.

The already limited rights of the so-called “African Indians” were further threatened at the start of the Civil War, when Confederate-loyal Indians adopted strict slavery laws. The tribal laws limited the freedoms of not only slaves, but also free blacks. Responding to Yahola’s promise of freedom, as many as 500 slaves and freedmen from Indian Territory joined his campaign.

The African Indians played a crucial role in the events that followed – helping the tribes fight to regain their lands from the Confederates, serving as interpreters between Indians and Union military officers, and hauling supplies between Fort Gibson and Fort Scott.

Among the black men and women who answered Yahola’s call were Polly and Ed Crosslin, whose story is an extraordinary testament to faith in freedom.

Narrator: The little that is known about Polly and Ed Crosslin comes from post-war military and census records. Although Polly, who came to be called “Aunt Polly,” was illiterate, transcribed interviews are included in her widow’s pension files.

According to newspaper accounts, Aunt Polly’s parents were slaves to Cherokee Indians in Florida. Her maiden name is recorded as Sullivan or Sylvan. Polly was born in Alabama or Mississippi, where she was a slave to members of the Creek tribe, also known as the Muskogees. Like many African Indians, Polly joined her owners on the Trail of Tears, the trek from their ancestral homes to Indian Territory. By Polly’s own account, she was an adult by 1836, when the first parties of Creeks reached Indian Territory.

Polly: I don’t know how old I am but I was a grown woman when the war began. I was grown when the Creek Indians came from Alabama. I am not an Indian but my owners were Indians.

- Aunt Polly 1895

Narrator: According to Aunt Polly, Ed’s father, a Frenchman named Crosslin, was the owner of his mother, a black slave. Census records indicate that Ed was born in Indian Territory, where he was living at the start of the war. Ed’s owner may have been a French Trader living among the Indians.

Polly: When the war broke out my husband was living with his master down there and at that time all the slaves scattered.

Narrator: After his apparent escape, Ed tried to drop his master’s name, and briefly took on the name Edmon Gess. Polly and Ed were married at Fort Gibson, where the Indian Home Guard was stationed for most of the war.

By then, Ed and Polly were a part of a community of African Indians. Among these was Monday Durant, an African Creek who was a Baptist minister and

storeowner who had interpreted for Yahola and represented the African Indian community in negotiations between the Union government and the Creeks in 1863.

Polly: We were married at Ft. Gibson in the winter time but I can't tell the year. We were married by a colored preacher named Monday Durant who is dead. He was a Baptist preacher and we were married in the church.

He was driving a government team when I married him and then he went off with the soldiers. He had a gun and was a regular soldier and was in the Indian Home Guard.

Narrator: After the Indian Home Guard Regiment was mustered out in May 1865, Aunt Polly and her husband Ed were reunited. Native Americans who served in the regiment returned to Indian Territory. But many of the African Indians chose Kansas as their home.

While at Fort Gibson, Ed met E. C. Amsden, a Humboldt man who traded in the Indian Territory. According to an account by Mrs. Amsden, E. C. Amsden brought the Crosslins from Ft. Gibson to their Humboldt farm.

In August 1865 the Crosslins were among 64 blacks who made their homes in Humboldt. Among their neighbors was Monday Durant, the Baptist preacher and interpreter. Humboldt was familiar to the African Indians. After the First Indian Home Guard Regiment was inducted in LeRoy, the troops marched to Humboldt's Camp Hunter.

Polly and Ed worked for the Amsdens for four years before moving to town. Ed Crosslin died just a year later.

Aunt Polly came to live in a small cabin on the property of Minister D. D. Paine and his wife Elizabeth, a woman born in Indian Territory. As a widow, Aunt Polly's role in the community only expanded. In 1879, she became a charter member of the Poplar Grove Baptist Church. Polly was first "Mother of the Church," which gave her the traditional role of assisting the minister and serving as a role model for women.

Under the leadership of Aunt Polly and the Paines, according to local historian Eileen Robertson, the church grew.

Eileen: Well, she out grew her cabin and they did find that upstairs in the livery there was a building that they let them have for awhile and soon that was outgrown and they decided it was time to venture into getting a building.

Narrator: In 1881, just two years after the church was chartered, the congregation built its first building.

Despite assistance from the congregation, life was difficult for Aunt Polly. By the 1890s, she was dependent upon the county for aid. Twenty years after Ed's death, Polly followed the lead of other Humboldt widows and filed for a Civil War pension.

Polly: I have no occupation and I live on the county. The county furnish [sic] me my wood and my grub and the people give me my clothes. I own this house and the two lots on which it is and that is all I own.

My house has gave to rack and the friends has gave to work and rebuilt it best they could. Now it is comfortable yet for winter I have a house and two lots and I don't got anything in the way of support – only from the charities of the people. Now do for me what you can if you please I am old and feeble and afflicted with rheumatism.

Narrator: Despite her pleas, Aunt Polly's widow's pension was denied. There was no legal record of her marriage to Ed. And a few years after Ed's death, Polly had remarried a man named Philip Kellum. Although Kellum had abandoned her after only a week of marriage, this jeopardized her pension claim. In addition, despite accounts that Ed had died after displaying symptoms of "dropsy" a disease that afflicted many veterans, the officials were not satisfied that Ed had died from a war-related condition.

Polly continued to live on the charity of the county and her church until her death in 1912. By then, she was believed to be 100 years old. Aunt Polly came to represent the story of the African Indians who fled their homes in Indian Territory to make new lives in Kansas.

Every three years, Humboldt celebrates its Civil War heritage at Civil War Days. After the war, Camp Hunter became a city park. Interpretive markers at Camp Hunter and throughout town tell the stories of Humboldt's role in the Civil War, including the story of Aunt Polly.

Ernestine Cheney portrayed Aunt Polly in the podcast.

