

The "Pull of Home"

by David Ronka - June 7, 2011

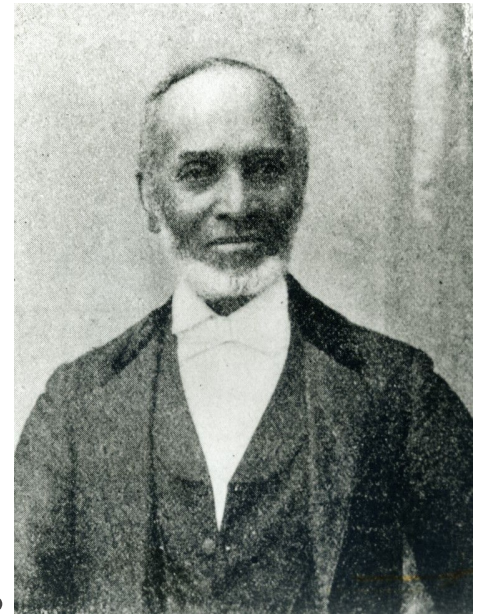
I often conclude my tours of Mulberry Row with the story of Peter Fossett, the son of Monticello's blacksmith Joseph Fossett and his wife Edith, Monticello's head cook. In his reminiscences, published in 1898 (read Fossett's account), Fossett recalled being sold away from his family at age 11 to Colonel John R. Jones of Charlottesville.

Colonel Jones threatened to flog Peter Fossett for carrying a book and teaching others to read; Jones ordered him handcuffed and jailed for running away. After attempting to flee a second time, Peter recalled, "I was put up on the auction block and sold like a horse."

Fossett gained his freedom in 1850 and was soon reunited with his family in Ohio. There he became a caterer, was active in the Underground Railroad, and, in 1870, founded Cumminsville Baptist Church near Cincinnati. In 1900, his congregation fulfilled his "lifelong wish" by sending him on a visit to Monticello, which he remembered from his youth as "an earthly paradise." So, at age 85, the Reverend Peter Fossett, who had left Monticello from an auction block more than 70 years earlier, entered the house by its front door a free man.

One day, after I told Peter Fossett's story, one of my visitors approached me, thanking me and shaking my hand. He said he'd grown up in the toughest section of the Bronx and, as a Hispanic man, had faced many struggles. He said he'd left that world as a young person to make a better life for himself outside of the city. But, at times, he told me, he felt drawn back to the place of his childhood, to the very neighborhood where life had been so difficult for him and his family. He knew now what tugged at him, he told me.

"It's the same thing that drew Peter Fossett back to Monticello," he said, with tears in his eyes. "It's the pull of home."



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Peter Fossett

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