

Adam Francis Plummer: Champion of faith, family and freedom

By Douglas Burton

Sometimes an agent of change is a person of modest means who influences many by virtue of moral example. Such is the case with Adam Francis Plummer, who was born a slave in 1819 but who refused to be defined by his circumstances.

Plummer was born into slavery at Goodwood Plantation, near Upper Marlboro, Maryland on May 14, 1819 and was owned by the powerful Calvert family until 1864. From the age of 10, he was separated from his parents, who were slaves on another plantation owned by the Calverts. His opportunity arrived when he was befriended by a manumitted slave, Reverend John Bowser, a Methodist, who traveled in the Bladensburg District in the 1830's. Bowser secretly schooled the boy



Adam and Emily Plummer.

in the basics of spelling and grammar. It was unlawful at the time for slaves to be educated or literate, and Bowser was risking execution or re-enslavement by teaching young Plummer to read.

Plummer's life is chronicled in his

diary, which he began on the day of his marriage to Emily Saunders at what is today known as the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Adam and Emily Plummer, along with their two babies, attempted to escape the Three Sisters Plantation in 1845. They believed that their marriage license would serve as "free papers" once they gained sanctuary in northern states.

Marital fidelity and family loyalty were traditions in the Plummer family and key to Adam's success in life. Adam's grandfather, Cupid Plummer, had been granted his freedom and a land grant as a reward for serving as a surrogate for his owner during the American Revolutionary War. He could have abandoned his wife and his children, who remained enslaved. Instead, he chose to remain with them

until the end of his life. Cupid Plummer's son, Barney, and his wife, Sallie, inspired young Adam to walk 13 miles on weekends to bring them gifts of cloth and food.

As a young man, Plummer refused to drink alcohol. His youngest daughter, Nellie Plummer, has written that "instead of spending his time among idle gossipers or with those who drank, Adam Plummer taught himself all he possibly could. If he had not taken advantage of this opportunity to learn to read and write, we would know very little of our family history, not even the births and deaths."

In 1866, Adam and Emily Plummer borrowed money from friends and dispatched their eldest son, Henry, to travel to New Orleans to retrieve his sister, Miranda.

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When the brother and sister returned to Riversdale Plantation on Friday, October 19th, the family and friends gathered to welcome Miranda home. Miranda told her story of a recurring dream regarding her people living in darkness and she leading them to the light of God. They prayed and sang into the night to express thanks to God.

In 1867, this band of believers was recognized as the First Colored Baptist Church. In 1873, the growing congregation purchased a building from the Presbyterian congregation in Bladensburg. That congregation, now known as the St. Paul Baptist Church, Inc. of Prince George's County, continues today as a vibrant community of faith with facilities in Capitol Heights and in Fort Washington.

In 1868, Plummer entered an agreement to purchase a 10-acre parcel of land



Reverend Jerome Fowler.

for \$1,000 in an area that would later be incorporated as Edmonston, Maryland. In order to make the purchase, Plummer

signed a contract with the seller to make full payment of the \$1,000 within two years. Only by scrimping and saving, selling home-grown roses and sending their children to take on diverse jobs were the Plummer's able to make the payments whenever demanded by the seller. Through their dedicated efforts, the family was able to pay off the note in eighteen months-six months short of the deadline.

It is worth noting that Plummer was willing to take risks to defy the laws of the land that were unjust: the law prohibiting slaves to marry and prohibiting slaves to obtain literacy. On the other hand, he kept the mandates of God: he honored his father and mother, and he was loyal to his wife and children. Plummer's children grew up to be respected ministers, teachers and farmers.

The County Executive of Prince George's County Maryland recently declared May 30, 2015 as "Adam Francis Plummer Day" in recognition of the "living legacy of faith, family and freedom

exemplified by Adam Francis Plummer, his descendants and the citizens who have learned from his determination, pride and endurance." Reverend Jerome Fowler, Plummer's great, great grandson, gave the keynote lecture at Maryland's first Plummer Day celebration at the Kingdom Missionary Baptist Church in Bladensburg on May 30th.

Based on her father's diary, Plummer's daughter, Nellie Arnold Plummer, wrote and published a family autobiography, *Out Of the Depths or the Triumph of the Cross* in 1927. Plummer's diary is housed at the Anacostia Community Museum (See "Hand of Freedom: The Life and Legacy of the Plummer Family," at anacostia.si.edu.)

Douglas Burton is a former Associate Editor of Insight on the News magazine. He is also a co-founder of the Committee for Plummer Day. Reverend Jerome Fowler, Administrator of St. Paul Baptist Church, Inc. of Prince George's County, contributed to this article.