

James Griffin – Wright County Pioneer

Wright County has had few African American settlers, but one that made his mark in Buffalo was James Griffin. He was born a slave in Price George County, Maryland, in 1822 or 1824. According to tradition in order slave owning families, Griffin served in place of his master in the US Navy aboard a ship. He was in the Navy from age 19 to 24 and learned the carpenter's trade. Griffin married Mary Brown in Philadelphia in 1849 and was give his freedom in exchange for his service in the Navy. Mary Brown was born in Virginia – circa 1817.

Griffin worked as a steamboat builder in Pittsburgh. When the steamboat "Minnesota Belle" was completed in 1853, he came to Minnesota on her first trip and settled in Shakopee. By 1856 he was a teamster and had wagons and teams to pull them. Griffin helped families to settle in the territory. One day he brought the Ackley and Overton families from Shakopee to the shores of Lake Buffalo, from which they saw about 50 teepees of a Winnebago settlement. Also, they met Jim Sturges and an army man who both had a small log cabin trading post on the outskirts of the American Indian village. Sturges had convinced the Ackley and Overton families into moving to the area and when he saw Griffin he tried to convince him to move away from Shakopee. Descendants of the Sturges family say that he and Griffin knew each other before this meeting. The Sturges descendant also say that they must have been good friends because Sturges stood on the lakeshore up to his hip boots in ice and snow while talking Griffin into the move.

One year later the Griffin family was back at the Sturges place and that spring they took a claim just outside the new townsite of Buffalo on the shores of Lake Mary. Since he had the only team in the neighborhood for the next two years, James Griffin became a man of importance. Griffin started a stage line in the 1860's. According to his advertisements of the 1879's he had a daily stage route between Buffalo and Monticello and second stage line which ran three times a week between Monticello and Minneapolis. The Griffin's fourth child was born in 1859 and was named Guilford, probably for Guilford D George, one of the founders of Rockford. As time passed, Griffin bought an additional 80 acres in his children's names. They had a fifth child, named Louisa, and built a large frame home on the shore of Lake Mary. (This home was torn down in 1983).

When he was older and retired from the stage line Griffin became the first janitor at the new Wright County Courthouse. The Delano Eagle, a local newspaper noted his comings and goings as they did for other prominent men of the county.

Louisa Griffin married Edmund James, one of the leaders of the successful struggle, after the Civil War, to extend the right to vote to African Americans in Minnesota. Their son, Charles James, became one of the best-known and most-admired leaders of the Minnesota labor movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century, according to the Union Advocate of December 22, 1997. Charles James was elected

President of the St Paul Trades & Labor Assembly at age 35. He served three terms and then went on to serve as Secretary for 7 years.

Mary (Brown) Griffin died on August 22, 1882 of cholera sporadic. She was at the Minneapolis home of her son-in-law, C.F. Wilkins. An obituary from the Delano Eagle (July 7, 1891) says that James Griffin died at Host Springs, Arkansas on June 26, 1891. The obituary stated that after several years of employment at the courthouse, he had to give it up because of failing health and sometime after that he sold his farm. The Eagle also stated that Daniel Gray, John M Keeler and John Odell, in 1857, made claims adjoining the then just laid out townsite of Buffalo. Daniel Gray preempted land for James Griffin (Griffin not being eligible on account of color or race, under the constitution as it was then to acquire land directly from the government). Gray then sold the land to the Griffins.

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HISTORICAL

WRIGHT COUNTY
SOCIETY

The following was originally published in the Northern Statesman's (Monticello, MN) 'Around The Town' column on April 11, 1868, and describes the ceremonial move of Wright County's Seat from Monticello to Buffalo. Note that James Griffin, as both a drayman and respected citizen, was honored with leading the parade of dignitaries.

Wednesday was a great day for Buffalo a great day for the county officers. Early in the morning the county Auditor and Treasurer came down town. It was to be to them, the last morning of official dignity in this city. They were bound for the rural districts.

So mote it be an Auditor, with a new suit of store bought clothes and large chew of fine cut in either cheek calmly seated himself on a dry goods box in front of Mealy's store, and sent Frank off to hunt up the rest of them. Frank soon returned, accompanied by the sedate Judge of Probate, the irrepressible county Surveyor. He said that the Register, Warren, had gone ahead to prepare the denizens of the Seat for the grand entrée but would meet them with a dog cart and two mules at Lake Pulaski and escort them in. Brookins had vowed that he would not go unless he was allowed to lead, the van, on horseback, and with a streamer hitched to his coat tail. It was at once apparent that he wished to make himself the center of attraction and his absurd proposition was voted down. The Clerk of Court could not be found for some time, but after a while was descried, back of Fred Hitters store, playing marbles with Constable Fuller, and quickly brought to the group of sad but resigned officials. All was now in readiness.

Griffin the first settler at the Seat, was on hand with two vehicles with which to transfer the honorable body, the county Chattels and effects, to Buffalo hereafter the center of gravitation for Wright County. Griffin, (sly dog,) knew very well that now was the appropriate time to make a speech of welcome to the assembled official dignity, and a proffer of the freedom of the city of "Buffalo" after they got out there, providing they behaved in a demure manner. Mr. Griffin's impressive remarks were ably and neatly responded to by the Auditor, who by virtue of a new suit of clothes and gutta percha cane, had been unanimously chosen leader and spokesman for the crowd. All being in readiness, the official conglomeration of talent, store clothes, wisdom and &c.--, piled into the chariots and as soon as the squabble for the best seats was over, they swiftly rolled away, stopping only long enough in lower town for Parcher to get a small bag from Hitters saloon, which he stoutly maintained was part of his baggage, and entitled to a free ride. It was cheerfully, eagerly taken on board.