

Up from Slavery

Up from Slavery

A History from
Slavery to City Hall
In New England

THIRMAN L. MILNER



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Acknowledgments



WHY NOT WAS the slogan that I used for my first campaign for mayor of the city of Hartford, Connecticut. Why Not Milner For Mayor became a successful campaign and rallying call. To those of you with aggressive ambitions, determined desires, or grandiose goals, never say can't but Why Not?

I dedicate this book to generations that preceded me, from the early days of slavery up to the present. Enduring untold hardships through sweat and labor, these men and women paved the way for me and many others. They left footprints in the sands of life for us to follow and stood tall with courage against all odds, saying, "Why Not?" when others asked why?

This book is also dedicated to my mother and father, Grace Stewart Milner Allen and Henry Marshall Milner. When I was only three years old, my mother became a single parent due to my father being hospitalized; he remained in hospital and died there when I was twelve. My mother died in 1984 at the age of 83. My father, whom I knew little about because of his hospitalization, fought in the first World War. After marrying my mother, they had nine children. He was one of the few African Americans in Hartford at that time to have his own business.

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I also acknowledge some of those who played a role in my life.

- My grandmothers, Elizabeth Milner and Florence Stewart
- My brothers and sister. My oldest brother, Marshall, and the third oldest, Albert, are both deceased, as well as my sister, Shirley, the youngest of the family who died a year before my mother; my brother Stanton, who was the family historian and saved family information and most of my political records; Nelson and Gary, who still live in the Hartford area.
- My children and stepchildren. Theresa, who was as close as any daughter could be, and her brother, my son, Gary Rogers; stepchildren Ray, Manuel, Joseph and Virginia Monteiro.
- My nephew and godson, Anthony Milner, who at the time of this writing is an assistant chief of the Hartford Fire Department. He was partly raised by his mother, my mother, and me and who became my special nephew.
- My grandchildren, Anthony, Wayne, Shawneka, Shawnea, Reene, Antwan, and Dominique Rogers, my great grandchildren,
- My godchild and niece who I am very proud of, Danielle Milner, daughter of another of my special nephews, Hartford firefighter, Duane Milner, a good friend and confidant, who keeps an eye on me.
- My Aunt Flossie and her son, Chester, who became a popular funeral director in New York, both now deceased. His sister, Pat Harris, who devoted her life to help him until he passed and then moved on to her own career.
- My niece, Dalia May, who has contributed greatly to this book.
- My niece, Signe Milner-Martin, daughter of my oldest brother, Marshall, who was my proofreader.

Acknowledgments

- My niece, Nina Milner, oldest daughter of my brother, Albert, a nurse who became somewhat of a daughter to me after her father's death. Thank you for being there for me during periods of my illnesses as well as a dear companion, along with her mother, Dorothy, who sometimes came along with us on fun trips.
- To the group we called *The Mayor's Crew*: Anthony Napoleon, my former executive assistant in the mayor's office, and my executor and close friend; Ruth Hall, now deceased, who I called "the love of my life," because of our close and sincere relationship; Barbara Wiggins, my newly found cousin and close friend; Roberta Jones, my niece by marriage; Debra Callis, a retired Hartford police detective and special friend; and Tina McDonald, with whom I share my birth date. These close friends were my eyes and ears during my term as mayor and have remained a "crew" ever since.
- To my early supporters who were with me throughout my political career, and beyond.
- Jim Monroe, now deceased, entrepreneur and my first political advisor, supporter, friend, and even boss, as I once worked for his local home oil delivery service as office manager.
- To Curtis Robinson, a successful businessman, whom I have known for many years, an early supporter, and friend who is also a financial backer of this book. Curtis is a successful entrepreneur, and during my term as mayor he graciously allowed me to host a weekly radio talk show *The Mayor's Corner* in his restaurant *The Staircase Lounge* in downtown Hartford, where guests would call in or come in and have brunch with me for an hour. After leaving the mayor's office, I took a part-time position handling the insurance needs of several of his successful companies.

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- John Allen, editor and chief of Hartford's oldest Black newspaper *The Northend Agents*, a weekly community newspaper in which I wrote a column for more than 26 years. John was an early supporter dating back to when I first ran for state representative.
- Joy Rodman, Edgar Richards, John Fulse, Jeffrey Pounds, Craig Stallings, Gregory Perkins, and Anthony McCann, all who served as staff during my terms in public office, as well as my high school coach, good friend, and advisor to this day, Bill Faber of Glastonbury, Connecticut.
- I must acknowledge another friend and financial backer of this book, Greenwich, Connecticut businessman Ned Lamont, who I supported for governor of our state and who was a supporter of mine in my last bid for the mayor's office. Ned is a friend and an individual dedicated to the concerns of the people and the concerns of our state and nation.
- To all those I've mentioned and many more who were/are my supporters, advisors, staff, confidants, relatives, and friends. There are far too many of you to mention, but you're such an important part of my life. This book is dedicated to all of you with gratitude and thanksgiving.

The Research Begins



WHERE TO BEGIN? I can trace my family's history back to the slavery era in the United States. Court documents trace my family roots, on my mother's side, to Middlesex County, Connecticut. My sincere thanks goes to Judith Ellen Johnson who, in the late 1900's, as a staff genealogist with the Connecticut Historical Society, in Hartford, Connecticut, personally contributed her time and effort to trace my family's history. Using just a suitcase left by my grandmother, a list of names, one family letter, two family albums handed down from my grandmother, and from what little family oral history that I had written about in a Hartford African American community newspaper called the *Northend Agents*, Judith painstakingly reconstructed my family tree. She then wrote the following:

Normally, when you trace a family history, you begin with the present generation and work backward. However, for my purpose I'd like to begin with a lady named Abigail Stanton Stewart, Mayor Milner's maternal great-grandmother. Abigail Stanton Stewart has been the keystone in my research. Besides being a remarkable woman in her own way, she was also a saver, and the materials the family has shared

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have provided me not only with a sense of Abigail's personality, but the answers to some of my research problems as well.

Abigail Stanton came to Hartford as early as 1860, where, according to the 1860 census, she and her mother, Abigail, were listed in the household of the recently married William B. Smith and his wife, Virginia, a Hartford couple with whose family the Stantons would have a long association. They may have found this position through young Abigail's brother, Chester C. Stanton, who, according to the Hartford City Directory, was working for Mr. Smith in 1869. It is not clear where she met her husband, or how long she stayed in Hartford, but in 1869, in Middletown, Abigail Stanton married Albert E. Stewart, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, who had probably migrated to Connecticut after the Civil War. According to the Middletown City directories, the Stewarts lived in that city until 1878. During those years Albert Stewart worked in a variety of positions including a coachman, hackman, and laborer. While never listed in the city directories, several family records also revealed that Albert had a business selling ice cream.

Sometime during 1878 Albert and Abigail Stewart moved to Hartford and took up residence at 116 Albany Avenue. The 1886 and 1887 directories contained listings not only for Albert but also for Abigail, who apparently had begun her own business as a laundress. The next few years must have brought changes to the Stewart household; by 1891 it seems that Albert and Abby were living apart from one another.

In 1892 Abby moved from 116 Albany to 10 Green Street with her son Henry B. Stewart, the only one of Abby's five children to survive beyond the age of twenty, and by 1893 Albert Stewart was no longer listed in the Hartford directory. Abby and her son remained at the Green Street address until 1900, during which time Henry B. Stewart married Florence L. Thompson of Hartford and started raising a family that would ultimately, like his mother's, number five children, three boys born by 1900, and two girls shortly after.

Sometimes in researching a family's history you find that the events of one generation parallel another. Albert and Abigail Stewart's fourth child was a little girl who, unfortunately, died a month after she was born. Abby named this daughter Grace. The fourth child of Henry and Florence Stewart was also a little girl named Grace, who was more fortunate than her namesake, and grew up to become the mother of Hartford's first Black mayor.

Between 1900 and 1910, Abigail Stewart was not listed in the Hartford city directories. Although the old Hartford directories had a section that reported peoples' migrations out of the city, Abby's move was not reported. At that time many of the smaller communities did not have directories, but fortunately for me Abby Stewart saved many cards and letters from family and friends. For instance a letter postmarked the 28th of September, 1907, was addressed to Abby Stewart in care of her daughter-in-law in Windsor, Connecticut. In this letter Charlie Beaman of Middletown, an old family friend, expressed his condolences to Abby on the loss of her brother, Chester.

If I may digress from Abby's story, I'd like to talk about Chester for a few minutes. Charlie Beaman's sympathy letter triggered some research on Chester Stanton, leading me to some very interesting information. At the time of Chester's death, rarely did members of the minority communities, black or white, warrant more than a brief death notice in the local papers. Chester Stanton, however, was an exception. When he died on September 22nd, 1907, his death was noted in an extensive obituary in the *Hartford Courant*.

Chester had a long association with the Governor's Foot Guard, but even though he was listed in the Hartford City Directory from 1858 to 1868, and again from 1877 through 1907, nothing in his occupational listings gave any indication of his 25 or so years with the Foot Guard. However, his affiliation with this group was clear through his obituary, and through the funeral memorabilia that Abby Stewart had saved.

Throughout his entries in the city directories, Chester was listed as a laborer, porter, gardener, and driver. While in the employment of

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William B. Smith, he was an “ostler” an old term for someone who took care of horses. Perhaps as early as 1888, but definitely by 1899, Chester had his own cab business.

Why Abby Stewart moved to Windsor and what she did while she was there is unclear. By 1910 she was back in Hartford living at 94 Ann Street, the residence of Rebecca Morgan Brainard, in whose employment Abby remained until Miss Brainard’s death in 1917 at the age of 90. It was during these years—in 1914 to be precise—that Abby suffered her final loss as a mother. On the 20th of May, 1914, Henry B. Stewart, Abby’s only surviving child, died in New Haven, Connecticut, of tuberculosis.

From 1918 to 1919, Abby’s mail was sent to her in East Windsor in the care of Miss Sarah Coleman. By 1920 Abby had returned to Hartford, this time residing at 106 Brown Street with the family of Morris Mitchell, a porter for the Sisson drug company. For the first time Abby was listed in the city directory as the widow of Albert Stewart.

Up to this point what had happened to Albert Stewart had been a complete mystery; when he disappeared from the Hartford directories, there was no indication of what happened to him. The directories listed Abby as “Mrs. Abigail Stewart, laundress,” not “Mrs. Abigail Stewart, widow,” nor was she listed as a widow in the 1900 or 1910 census. Up to that point I hadn’t been able to find Albert Stewart on the 1900 census, nor had I located a death certificate for him in Hartford or Middletown. Abby’s 1920 directory listing was the first mention of Albert in a 28-year period. The mystery finally unraveled when the Milner family brought in an old suitcase full of Abby’s belongings. Among some papers in the suitcase was a bill dated Nov. 26, 1919, from the J. C. Lincoln Company of Willimantic for the burial expenses of Albert Stewart, who had died at St. Joseph Hospital in Windham on November 10th. A quick check of the Willimantic city directories revealed that, when Albert left Hartford an 1893, he moved to Willimantic where he remained for the rest of his life.

Besides being the year that Abby was first listed as a widow, 1920 was also a census year. Abby's entry in the 1920 census listed her in a household headed by Henry and Margaret Green, including Morris Mitchell and his wife, and among others, Abby's granddaughter, Grace. Abby and Grace remained with the Mitchells at 106 Brown Street until 1924, when on January 20th, two days shy of her 23rd birthday, Grace Nelson Stewart married Marshall Milner and established her own household. For the next thirteen years, Abby made her home with Grace and Marshall Milner, until on the 22nd of May, 1937, when Abigail Stanton Stewart, at the age of 89, passed from this life.

Abigail Stanton Stewart spent the better part of 60 years of her life in Hartford but she was not born there, nor was her birth ever recorded. She is the person who brought this family to Hartford; she is also the bridge to their past.

Based on her marriage record and the ages given in several other records, Abby was born in Middletown between 1845 and 1848, and probably on May 15th. On Abby's death certificate, Grace Milner listed Abby's parents as Samuel V. Stanton and Abigail, with the name Peters and a question mark, Mrs. Milner wasn't sure. The 1850 census for Middletown listed a Samuel V. Stanton with a wife whose first name was Abigail. Included amongst the six children in the household were a son, Chester, aged thirteen, and a daughter Abigail, aged five.

The census further indicated that the Stanton family owned property. It was on Cross Street in Middletown, and is incorrectly listed as the C. Stanton Estate on the 1874 map of Middletown. There is an 1871 deed to this property, which can best be described as a genealogist's dream because of the information it provides linking Abby to her parents, and a couple of other people as well. The grantors of this deed are Abigail Stanton of Middletown and Chester C. Stanton of Hartford; the grantee, if Abigail Stewart, is identified as the "daughter of said Abigail Stanton, sister of said Chester and wife of Albert Stewart." The property description in this deed refers to "other land of the estate of Samuel V. Stanton"

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and ends with the statement “our interest in the aforesaid premises being derived as heirs at law of the said Samuel V. Stanton.”

Abby’s father, Samuel V. Stanton, left only a few records to tell us who he was or what he did in his life. Like his daughter, Abigail, Samuel’s birth was not recorded. However, his marriage was, and in this record I also learned his wife’s maiden name. On February 14, 1835, Samuel V. Stanton of Middletown married Abigail Caples, also of Middletown. In 1835 Middletown included not only Middletown as it is today, but also the present towns of Portland, East Hampton, Cromwell, and Middlefield. Samuel and Abigail were married by James Noyes, Pastor of the Third Congregational Church in Middletown, which was probably Abigail Caples’ church. The Third Congregational Church of Middletown was actually in Middlefield. Samuel and Abigail may also have been married in a double ceremony, for if you look at the next entry on the page you will see recorded, on the same date and by the same minister, the marriage of Ezekiel Caples, Abigail’s brother, and Harriet Beaman.

For at least part of his life, Samuel Stanton worked as a day laborer, judging from the account books of William Lyman, a Middlefield farmer and active abolitionist, which are in the collections of the Middlesex County Historical Society in Middletown. Connecticut’s economy through the middle of the 19th century was based on the barter system, trading goods for services or vice versa. William Lyman probably purchased these supplies for Samuel Stanton in return for which Samuel agreed to work for Lyman at rates ranging from \$12 to \$15 per month. There are several entries of this sort for Samuel from 1835 until 1839, when Samuel settled his account with William Lyman and probably moved into Middletown proper.

On Dec. 4, 1851, Samuel’s then youngest son, John, died at the age of 11. The local undertaker at the time was J. B. Southmayd, and the expenses to Samuel for the funeral of his son can be found in the Southmayd account books, which have been deposited at the Godfrey Library in Middletown.

Samuel himself died in 1856 at, according to his death record, 44 years of age. His death certificate is typical of the time period, giving virtually no personal information, but by using his age of 39 on the 1850 census and his age at death of 44, we can figure a birth year somewhere between 1810 and 1812. The Southmayd funeral records might have provided a little more information; unfortunately, the account books for the years 1853 through 1880 are missing. However, according to the first volume of burial records in the Middletown Health Department, Samuel Stanton was buried by J.B. Southmayd, probably in the Washington Street Cemetery.

Since he had no birth record, and his death record provided no information, finding parents for Samuel V. Stanton required some detective work. On the 1840 census for Middletown, Samuel Stanton was listed next to a woman named Rachel Stanton, who according to the statistics and columns, was somewhere between 36 and 55 years of age. On the 1850 census, Rachel Stanton and Samuel Stanton were separated by one family, but still living very close to one another. In 1850, Rachel Stanton was listed as 58 years old and Samuel, 39. Women are known to have shaved several years off their ages in the census, so Rachel could easily have been more than 58 years old. However, even if she were 58, that made her 19 years older than Samuel, and old enough to be his mother. Rachel Stanton had virtually no vital statistics recorded in Middletown, not even a death certificate, but in 1850 Rachel's household included a young man named George Stanton.

In the Southmayd account book for 1851 – 1853, an entry was made on October 29, 1851, billing Rachel Stanton for the funeral expenses of her son, George G. Stanton, aged 31. There are a couple of things to note about this entry. Between Rachel's name and the debtor column the word "estate" is squeezed in, in a lighter ink, indicating that it was added to the entry later. Below the entry for George is another one, dated April 18th, for a funeral whose expenses included a coffin with a plate indicating that its occupant was 69 years old.

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Since the April entry followed the October one, I checked the local newspaper for April of 1852 and found that the second funeral was that of Rachel Stanton who died on April 17, 1852. Rachel's expenses were apparently not billed to another individual, and the word "estate" that had been slipped in told me to check for a probate record. In the Middletown Probate Court, I found that Rachel had written a will and had named as her son, Samuel V. Stanton.

At this point, Rachel's husband and Samuel's father is still a mystery. So far I have found no marriage record for Rachel, and there is no indication that she was anyone's widow in her probate records, so I can only present a possibility. To date the best candidate is John or Jack Stanton, assuming they are one and the same person. The evidence is weak and inconclusive. There was a John Stanton listed in the 1820 census for Middletown, who was clearly a black man; located at the Connecticut State Library, are the account books of Ebenezer Tracy, a Middletown physician, in which there are entries dated March 28th, and April 5th, 1821, for Jack Stanton. The Middlesex County Historical Society has a collection of bills to the city of Middletown which include one from Caleb Griffin, dated April 22, 1822, for digging Jack Stanton's grave, and another submitted in 1823 by Eleazer Barnes for a coffin made for Jack Stanton on April 3, 1822. Unfortunately, there is nothing in these records that indicates any kind of relationship between Jack Stanton and Rachel.

As for Rachel Stanton herself, the few records that exist for her are quite interesting. The fact that Rachel left a will disposing of her modest estate is unusual for a mid-19th century black woman, and her estate included a house and land, which she left to her surviving children and grandchildren. There are no deeds recording the transfer of Rachel's property to her children because it was passed through probate. But there was a deed recorded when Rachel received the property, and this deed is another genealogist's dream. On July 2, 1828, Martha Mortimer Starr entered this deed into the Middletown Land Records, from which I have abstracted the following.

Know all men by these presents that I, Martha Mortimer Starr, otherwise known as Martha Mortimer of Middletown in the State of Connecticut, because I know it was the desire of my Father and Mother as well as that of the late Philip Mortimer Esq., that the land hereinafter mentioned should belong to Jack Mortimer and after his death to his children, do, by these presents, give, release, and forever quit claim unto Amaryllis Bean and Rachel Stanton, children of Jack Mortimer and to Mary Conny and John Conny, children of Silva Mortimer who was a child of said Jack Mortimer and to their heirs and assigns, all such right, title and interest as the said Martha has in a certain piece of land with the buildings there on, formerly occupied by the said Jack Mortimer.

To have and to hold in the following portions: to Amaryllis Bean, Rachel Stanton and Charles Mortimer (who, the clerk notes was not listed earlier in the deed) one undivided fourth part to each and to Mary Conny and John Conny as representing their mother one fourth part.