

“Blacksmith by Trade”: The Journey of African-American Shaker Justinian Cartwright

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September 29 1828 SPECIAL MEETING CALLED –
for the purpose of allowing the mulatto brother Justinian
Cartwright [to] confess and ask the forgiveness of the
church. For his base and disorderly conduct which he did
on his knees with tears.¹

Justinian’s name first appears in the journals at South Union on August 9, 1813. The entry names “two yellow boys,” Aaron Nash and Justinian Cartwright, who were taken from the School Order, where the society’s youngest members resided, to join South Union’s adult population who were assigned to various tasks supporting the common good of the village. Aaron Nash was assigned to haul water for the North Family while Justinian, who was approximately thirteen years of age, began at the blacksmith shop. In 1813, the village was still in its infancy, its newly converted families having gathered for communal living only six years before. As the society feverishly worked to improve its landholdings and living conditions, its population of three hundred souls suffered a setback during the spring and summer of 1814.²

Believers were already showing signs of illness when a South Union journal keeper noted that the nearby town of Russellville was suffering an epidemic. Three deaths had already occurred in Russellville and many others were near death throughout the region. Once the “cold plague” arrived at South Union in March 1814, it swept through the village, sickening nearly half of the Believers. Roughly ten percent of those infected at South Union succumbed to the disease. Justinian was among those who fell ill and later recovered.³

The village settled back into a regular rhythm in the months and years after the cold plague struck. In 1817, journals describe Justinian working in the blacksmith shop alongside fellow Believer John Johns. John Johns was the son of Dr. William Johns, a Revolutionary war veteran living in

Kentucky. William Johns was an early convert to the Shaker faith who helped establish the new village on the Gasper River, later called South Union. With William came his wife, their six sons, and four enslaved people owned by him. Young enslaved boy Justinian Cartwright was one among those possessions William Johns brought with him to South Union as the village was taking shape.⁴

Over the next decade Justinian grew into a young man while among the Believers, and in 1817, he was regarded as a free man within the confines of the village. During the previous year all slave-owning families were encouraged by the village elders to free their slaves, and in July 1816, a “Declaration of Freedom” was drafted by the Believers. This document freed many of the enslaved people living at South Union who were owned by white Shaker converts, yet the document held no legal authority outside of the village. Despite its lack of legality beyond the village borders, in the months after the Declaration of Freedom was drafted several members of color began leaving their home. After bringing their former slaves back to the village and working to try to convince them to stay, the Shakers relented. Rather than force these individuals to remain at South Union, the Shakers acted, instead, to further secure their freedom.⁵

Four slave-owning Shakers traveled to the court at Logan County for the purpose of registering emancipation papers for ten enslaved people at South Union. Though he had decided not to leave the village, Justinian, along with three additional Johns slaves, was manumitted on June 28, 1819. The emancipation papers described him as, “about 19, 5’10 to 11, yellow man, blacksmith by trade.”⁶

The Shakers understood the threat these individuals faced as free people of color living apart from the village and any measure of protection such a connection offered them. No doubt these individuals understood the risks as well. Their departure in the months after the Declaration of Freedom was signed made clear to the Shakers something they neglected to foresee: that, given the choice, many of the village’s formerly enslaved people preferred to leave South Union for a life on their own terms, regardless of the risks.⁷

Concluding that they must do more on behalf of those made quasi-free by the Declaration of Freedom, the Shakers traveled to the court at Logan County for the purpose of securing the status of these individuals outside of the village. The Shakers’ act of freeing people within the village had unintended consequences as those newly free began to assert their

individual will. While the former slave owners and others struggled to keep these people in the faith, it became increasingly apparent that many were determined not to remain Believers. With the situation quickly reaching an impasse as a result of the steadfast determination of those once held in bondage, the Shakers relented by drafting papers recognizable by law.⁸

Aware of the atrocities that could be committed upon members of the free black population, the Shakers included a set of stipulations intended to serve as an additional protective measure. Several of the emancipations authored by the Shakers and issued in 1819 included strict instructions the person must follow in order for their free status to be acquired and maintained. The conditions set limits on where the individual could live. In order for freedom to be granted and maintained, the person manumitted was required to leave the state of Kentucky and set up residence in one of three states—Ohio, Indiana, or Illinois. All were free states. If the individual refused to leave the state or ever returned to Kentucky they would forfeit their freedom. This stipulation was likely included as a reaction to the news from the previous year that Ned, the former slave of Shaker convert John Lacy, was kidnapped, taken South, and sold back into slavery. Those issued emancipation papers in 1819 were also welcome to remain with the society as Believers, and Justinian chose to continue as a Shaker at South Union.⁹

Like his fellow brethren, Justinian participated in job rotation within a framework of labor divided by gender. Chiefly, Justinian served as a blacksmith. He was one of a team of Shaker craftsmen who constructed the very first carriage made by the society. A journal credits Justinian with crafting the “iron works.” When not at the blacksmith shop Justinian drove an ox cart hauling materials to supply South Union’s ambitious building projects or moving goods over land in preparation for annual trips that took Shaker peddlers as far as New Orleans.¹⁰

Throughout the 1820s, Justinian joined fellow brethren on local trips and to destinations out of state. In the fall of 1820, he traveled to West Union, a Shaker village located in Indiana. Four years later he arrived at Clarksville, Tennessee, with a caravan of wagons from South Union. Trips outside the village, whether local or out of state, familiarized Justinian with the world beyond South Union. Joining brethren conducting business on behalf of the society offered Justinian valuable training on how to establish and maintain business relationships—training he would apply to future endeavors.¹¹

Justinian also enjoyed the privilege of being a member of the Centre

Family and resided among them at the Centre Family dwelling. The society's most devoted and longest serving members made up the Centre Family, and Justinian was among a few formerly enslaved people who were members of this family. Other Believers of color who were Centre Family members included David Barnett and Sampson Freeman.¹²



In the foreground is a limestone walk made up of stones likely hauled by Justinian in 1828. Seven teams of oxen were needed to transport the stones which were laid across the "Great Road" the same day.

Image courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

In the summer of 1828, Justinian drove a team of seven yoke of oxen hauling a load of large limestone slabs used to complete a sidewalk running across the "Great Road." Bisecting the village, the Great Road was the main thoroughfare connecting the towns of Bowling Green and Russellville in Kentucky. Just weeks after Justinian assisted with completing the limestone sidewalk he found himself tearfully asking for forgiveness, on his knees in a meeting orchestrated for him to make out his confession. But

what was he confessing to? What egregious act had he committed or been a part of?¹³

Lucinda Smith is first mentioned in the journals in 1827, but it is likely that she was a member of the society as early as 1821. At the time she is mentioned, Lucinda is seventeen years old, white, and living among the sisters at the North Family dwelling. Journals at South Union do not reveal when Justinian and Lucinda's relationship began and there is no indication in the records that anyone suspected them. However, by September 1828, Lucinda's growing belly was increasingly harder to hide. She was nearly seven months pregnant. When her condition was finally revealed, Justinian was given the opportunity to confess his "base and disorderly conduct" and ask for forgiveness. There is no evidence that Lucinda was ever required to give a public confession or that she ever voluntarily gave one.¹⁴

On January 10, 1829, the journal notes "BABY BORN – Lucinda Smith the mother. Justinian the daddy." Forgiveness was granted but punishment for Justinian ensued. He was removed from the Centre Family—the family of most committed Believers—to the East Family, among new Believers. Lucinda was not required to move from her home at the North Family. However, with Justinian living at the East and Lucinda remaining at the North the physical distance between the two was now greater.¹⁵

Though Justinian and Lucinda were allowed to remain members at South Union, tension may have been building over the winter and spring of 1829. As the weather turned warmer, Lucinda left the village accompanied by another member, Sydney Smith, a relative of Lucinda's and most likely her sister. The journal writer expressed his relief at the women's departure, adding to the notation the words "good riddance." Lucinda's departure may have prompted another series of events. Days later Urban Johns, another son of the late Dr. William Johns, set out to obtain the signatures of his brothers. As heirs to their father's estate they were required to give their consent in order to free Justinian by registering a second set of emancipation papers for him in court. A second set of papers was required as the first set drafted and recorded in 1819 became null when Justinian refused to leave Kentucky, choosing instead to remain at South Union as a Believer. Urban went to some effort seeking these signatures, as doing so required him to travel outside the village to obtain signatures from siblings who were no longer members of the society. All agreed to free Justinian as their father wished.¹⁶

<u>Benj. D. Rice</u>	Thomas Lill	John R. Cads
Frederick Smith	Isaac P. Bocalan	Milton H. Robinson
	Lacy Shannon	Charles P. Johns
	Hannah Trubart	H. L. Linder
	Barbara Davis	Daniel M. Wright
	Elizabeth Rowland	John H. Small
	Sarah Rice	Justinian ^{his} Cartwright _{mark}
	Polly Rankin	Urban E. Adams
	James M. Wing	
	Polly Hyster	
	Nancy E. Stone	
	Lancy Rankin	
	Maria Price	
	Polly Rice	
	Prudence S. May	

Justinian ^{his} Cartwright _{mark}

Justinian Cartwright's signature on the 1830 covenant (with detail).

Image courtesy of South Union Shaker Village.

Between the fall of 1831 and the winter of 1833 Justinian left the society again. In November 1833 a journal notes, “ARRIVED Justinian Cartwright, the mulatto apostate arrived at the Office – has now no doubts of his ability to be a good Shaker.” Though the journal entry appears to mock his efforts, Justinian was readmitted once again. The brethren assisted him in recovering approximately \$400 worth of iron and other blacksmithing material left in Clarksville, Tennessee. In the summer of 1835, Justinian and another brother were returning from a trip to Nashville.¹⁹

The years between 1829 and 1835 exemplify a man’s inner turmoil—one in which Justinian struggled to find his place in the world—a world that was more hostile, suspicious, and threatening to a man of his race than welcoming and filled with opportunity. While we witness glimpses of Justinian’s struggle, journals reveal even less about Lucinda, never mentioning her eventual return or any information about the young son she bore.

The fall of 1835 offers a final reference to the trio in a bitter entry, “TO THE WORLD – LOW DOWN Neglected in its place. On the 5th Instant, the Mulatto, Justinian Cartwright, took Lucinda Smith, with her copperas colored Bastard, and departed for other timber – This is one case in which Charity has been liberally, but wrongly extended – They should have been driven from Eden on first transgression – This same mulatto has been here off and on some three times within the last three or four years.” Justinian, Lucinda, and their five-year-old son, Hernando, left South Union for the final time in 1835. They married and were living in Louisville when Madison Smith, a likely relative of Lucinda’s, assisted Justinian, who was illiterate, in writing a letter to the Shakers at South Union requesting \$27 for blacksmithing tools sold by the Shakers on his behalf.²⁰

Three years later Justinian moved his family to New Harmony, Indiana, at the request of Dale Owen. Dale was the son of Robert Owen, a social reformer and industrialist who established the Owenite community in 1825 after purchasing New Harmony from the Rappites. It is highly likely that Justinian was already familiar with New Harmony prior to moving his family there. The Shakers at South Union and other western Shaker villages, including West Union in Indiana, interacted with Owenites and the Rappites before them. Justinian had been to Indiana in 1820 while on a trip to assist Shakers living at West Union. Furthermore, Shakers

from West Union had on more than one occasion sought refuge at South Union, with several choosing to make South Union their permanent home after West Union closed in 1827. With Indiana Shakers residing at South Union, trade and other correspondence taking place between the Shakers and New Harmony, and Justinian's own travel to the state, it is likely that he was acquainted with New Harmony prior to making his home there.²¹

Justinian and Lucinda lived at New Harmony for the better part of ten years, growing their family and saving money. However, little is known about their level of involvement within the community or to what extent either may have associated with its progressive thinkers. Lucinda gave birth to four children during this time period: sons Finis, Fidela, and Theodore, and one daughter named Sydney. Finis and Fidela both attended school while the family lived at New Harmony. Hernando, the couple's oldest son, worked as a blacksmith, the trade taught him by his father. Justinian was supporting not only his family but also an extended member of Lucinda's. Sixty-four-year-old Margaret Smith was residing with the Cartwrights during this time.²²

In 1848, Justinian moved his family to the city of Racine, Wisconsin, where he established a successful blacksmithing business and continued teaching his sons the trade when they were not attending school. Lucinda gave birth to another son, Henry, born about 1849. Justinian and Lucinda's marriage endured until her death in 1850. Justinian continued at his shop in Racine until his death in 1862. Justinian and Lucinda are buried together along with their little daughter Sydney in the Cartwright family plot in Racine.²³

Prior to his death Justinian strove to equip his sons with the skills and abilities he mastered during his time as a Shaker at South Union. The village served as a perfect training ground for many young men, Justinian included. Yet the cards were stacked against Justinian in a way they were not for the majority of boys taught a trade by the brethren at South Union, and this difficulty had everything to do with race. Despite insurmountable odds, Justinian succeeded, and the knowledge he carefully passed on laid the groundwork for future generations of his family to do the same.

In 1890, decades after the death of Justinian Cartwright, the *Grinnell Herald* published a detailed memorial paying tribute to a young lady gone too soon. The memorial included all the flowery language characteristic of the Victorian era, listed her best qualities, and recounted her struggle to finish the 1890 college term despite suffering a cold that quickly overtook her.

The memorial indicated that this young woman had a sibling, and further research reveals she had a younger brother who later attended the same school, Iowa College (later Grinnell). The young woman memorialized in the Grinnell Herald was Carrie Lucinda Cartwright and her brother was Theodore Charles, known as T.C. Carrie and T.C. were the children of Theodore Smith Cartwright, Justinian and Lucinda's fourth son. Hard work, perseverance, and skill enabled Justinian to transcend slavery, but it was not enough just for him to overcome. As a caring father, Justinian nurtured his family, laying the groundwork for his sons and their families to thrive.²⁴

Notes

1. Elder Harvey L. Eades, compiler, "Shaker Record A: History of the South Union Shaker Colony from 1804-1836," September 29, 1828, transcribed copy South Union Shaker Village Collection (hereafter cited as, "Shaker Record A").
2. "Shaker Record A," August 9, 1813; For reports on the cold plague and its impact on the Believers at South Union see "Shaker Record A," February 8 & 28, 1814, March 25 & 27, 1814, April 1-2, 1814, April 13, 1814, May 2 & 7, 1814, and June 3, 1814.
3. "Shaker Record A," March 25, 1814. With half of the village population suffering from the epidemic and the loss of nearly fifteen members, the cold plague had a devastating effect on the society at South Union. Meetings ceased for several weeks and outsiders avoided the village. The epidemic reached its peak in May with the last cold plague deaths occurring in June. The society rebounded, hosting two Christmas meetings at the village in 1814, one for the public and the other for the family of Believers. The final journal entry for the year 1814 reflects on the events of six months earlier noting, "Believers now in good health and prosperity so ends the year 1814," "Shaker Record A," December 31, 1814; "Shaker Record A," April 13, 1814.
4. "Shaker Record A," May 13, 1817; Mrs. T.L. Johns, "Dear Mrs. Curry Sloss," July 5, 1963, South Union Shaker Village Collection. Logan County Archives "Deed Book G" June 28-29, 1819. Dr. William Johns freed Gilbert, Kezia, and Matthew along with Justinian in 1819.
5. "Shaker Record A," July 11 & July 20, 1816, and July 12 & July 24, 1817. Thus began a series of formerly enslaved members leaving with some returning. "Shaker Record A," July 29, 1817, and March 3, 1819.
6. Logan County Archives, Deed Book G, 255.

7. Prior to and in the months after the Declaration of Freedom was drawn up, the journal does not indicate that the Shakers anticipated their former slaves would leave the village as a result. The same cannot be said after the 1819 emancipations were registered with the Logan County Court. After distributing emancipation papers to various society members, the journal keeper predicted, "So we may look out for a stampede soon." "Shaker Record A," August 1, 1819.
8. The journal reflects unrest arising among members of color in the months after the Declaration of Freedom was drafted. Several former slave-owning Shakers met with those contemplating a departure. For reasons unknown the Shakers eventually decided to banish one former slave from the village. "Shaker Record A," July 17, 1817. Despite this, they were unsuccessful in convincing others to stay. "Shaker Record A," May 24, 1817, and July 8 & 10, 1817.
9. Logan County Archives, Deed Book G, 255. This clause was included on Justinian's first manumission, "Johns to Justinian." See also "Lacy to Mary & Children," Logan County Archives, Deed Book G, 252. "Shaker Record A," January 17, 1818. The journal reports the re-enslavement of Ned. Despite taking the proper measures to grant and maintain the freedom of those they once held in bondage, several other formerly enslaved people who left the village were later kidnapped and sold back into slavery. See "Shaker Record A," December 8, 1822.
10. "Shaker Record A," September 11, 1823. With a team of men to "bring down logs." "Shaker Record A," May 30, 1823; With a team of oxen hauled ninety-five loads of stone. "Shaker Record A," July 17, 1823; Shingle hauling. "Shaker Record A," September 9, 1824; Driving ox wagon transporting boat. "Shaker Record A," December 19, 1826; Hauling joists. "Shaker Record A," June 14, 1828; Hauling stone for sidewalks. "Shaker Record A," August 7, 1828; Hauling rock. "Shaker Record A," October 4, 1828; Hauling stone. "Shaker Record A," February 20, 1830; Returning from sales trip. "Shaker Record A," April 5, 1830; Hauling sand. "Shaker Record A," September 12, 1831.
11. "Shaker Record A," September 2 & 7, 1820, December 28, 1820, and December 19, 1826.
12. "Shaker Record A," April 29, 1827.
13. "Shaker Record A," August 7, 1828.
14. "Shaker Record A," April 29, 1827, and September 29, 1828.
15. "Shaker Record A," January 10, 1829, and February 1, 1829.
16. "Shaker Record A," June 4, 1829, and June 9, 1829.
17. "Shaker Record A," June 21, 1829, and August 1, 1829.
18. "Shaker Record A," January 27, 1830. "The Constitution or Covenant of the United Society, South Union, 1830," October 12, 1830, South Union

Shaker Village Collection.

19. "Shaker Record A," November 21, 1833, February 25, 1834, and August 16, 1835.
20. "Shaker Record A," September 28, 1835. Justinian Cartwright to Eli McLean, July 19, 1836, copy, South Union Shaker Village Collection.
21. John Finch, "Notes of Travel in the U. States," *Council Grove Republican*, April 27, 1844, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/67710940>. "Shaker Record A," September 7, 1820, and December 28, 1820.
22. *1840 United States Federal Census, New Harmony, Posey, Indiana*, reproduced in Ancestry.com from Sixth Census of the United States, 1840. (NARA microfilm publication M704, 580 rolls), Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
23. "Obituary-Justinian Cartwright," *Racine Journal*, December 10, 1862, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/342239569#>. *1850 United States Federal Census, Racine, Wisconsin*, reproduced in Ancestry.com from Seventh Census of the United States, 1850 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432, 1009 rolls), Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives, Washington, D.C. Cartwright Family Plot, Block 5, #53, Mound Cemetery, Racine, Wisconsin, data provided by Racine Heritage Museum.
24. "In Memoriam," *Grinnell Herald*, August 5, 1890, scan provided by Special Collections and Archives, Burling Library, Grinnell College.