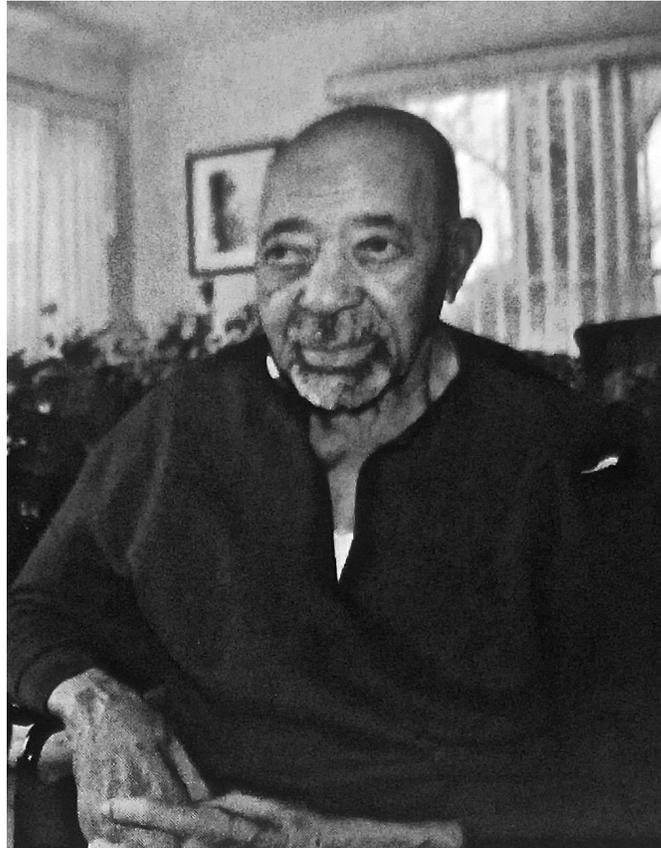


George Lewis Grandson of Slaves

From *Orange County Chronicles* by Patricia LaLand:¹



“Born and raised in Orange County, George Lewis had a long and lucrative career as a horticulturist in California and came back to ‘the home place’ to spend his final years.

“His grandfather, Chester Lewis, was owned by Bill Morton, who had a large number of slaves. During the Civil War, while Morton was away, he charged Chester with the safekeeping of the gold-plated table flatware. Afraid to leave it untended during the day, Chester built a small compartment into the bottom of a hay wagon for it and then filled the wagon with hay to take to the cattle. At night, he hid it in a haystack. It’s easy to imagine his nervous tension when Northern troops came into the area, but the family recalls that he remembered that they always spoke to him in a friendly way and, fortunately, did not find the flatware.

¹ Patricia LaLand, “George Lewis, Grandson of Slaves,” *Orange County Chronicles, Stories from a Historic Virginia County* (Charleston: History Press, 2011), 25-30.

“When the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the largest slave owner in the area was Dr. Mason, who owned large tracts on both sides of today’s U.S. 522, off State Route 20. He deeded eighteen acres to his carriage man, Robert Ellis, known as ‘Punch,’ and said that he would sell adjoining acreage to Ellis’s friends so that they all could be together. After the people heard the words, ‘You are free’ at the local store, the Ellis, Lewis, Lindsay, Chapman, Chandler, Hall, Towles and Quarles families with a total of some thirty children, settled in the community that they named Freetown to raise corn, hay, and cattle.

“In rural areas, the population was predominantly black, and there were many opportunities for people to become acquainted. Wagons brought work parties to the various farms during harvest and haying seasons. After the first frost in the fall, which would eliminate most of the flies, hog-killing time was another important occasion—beginning at 4:00 a.m., it involved the slaughter of probably a dozen or more hogs.

“Huge tubs of hot water scalded the carcasses, and then they were hung up overnight. The next day, the butchering began. Hams were covered with a mixture including salt, pepper, brown sugar and saltpeter for six weeks and then put in a smokehouse over a slow fire of hickory or fruit tree fuel to further dry the moisture from the meat in order to preserve it.

“Summer revival meetings were also eagerly anticipated. Meetings went on all week and culminated with dinner on the grounds of the Bethel Baptist Church on the second Sunday in August and at Mount Pleasant Baptist on the fourth Sunday. Boards were nailed from tree to tree (some of which are there still) for the feasting, a time when the area’s many good cooks had a chance to show their skills.

“Another extremely popular August activity was the famed Orange [Black] Horse Show, which flourished during the Great Depression. It began with a racing oval and show ring built by Lewis Ellis and his sons, Gus and Marshall, on his property near Meadowfarm on State Route 612. It was an offshoot of the Orange Horse Show, a Triple-A event licensed by the American Horse Show Association that reflected the strong local interest in fine horses and horsemanship.

“Ellis teamed up with others to form a corporation that issued stock in the operation, and by 1919 it had become an annual event that drew homeward local people who had migrated out of the area.

“Interest in racing took precedence over horse showing, however, and mules also took part in some of the contests, which included flat track and sulky races, as well as jumping contests. Nobody wanted to win the prize for one of the mule races, however, as it was given to the last-place contestant. Loving cups and show ribbons were awarded along with lesser prizes that might include sacks of flour or meal or an automobile tire.

“A few autos would be seen in the parking area along with a variety of carriages and wagons. There was a happy carnival atmosphere with a Ferris wheel, hot dogs, hamburgers, soft drinks, picnicking, the greeting of old friends and relatives and lots of flirting. Timely tips for a person's love life could be had from a phrenologist or a palm reader.

“It was after dark, though, when the fun really went on. Bands like Kid Rainey's Trio from Richmond and the Honey Drippers, who also appeared at the Apollo Theater in New York, played far into the night for jitterbugs under bright lights on the dance floor that was located under the grandstand. By World War II, however, those lights had to go out, as blackout restrictions were imposed; sadly, those years also saw the end of the Orange [Black] Horse Show.

“ ‘Freetown was a happy place. We had fun there. And it was picturesque,’ recalled George. ‘Long lanes with fences for horses and cattle, corn eight to ten feet tall and lots of apple and peach trees. Everyone had chickens, a cow or two, a horse that might be hitched to a plow during the week and a buggy to go to town on Saturday and church on Sunday. The houses mostly were made of logs, sealed with a mixture of cement and lime and with lath and plaster on the inside. They were nice and warm in the winter, with a wood stove and fireplace, both of which were used for cooking.’

“George continued: ‘We hunted deer and rabbits, trapped fox and mink for pelts. We packed melons in straw, and kept at an even temperature, we could have them until Christmas. We picked gallons of wild grapes and berries for jams, jellies, and wine. A slice of cake and a small glass of wine were enjoyed in the evenings. Blackberry and elderberry wine also were medicinal, and we made beer from persimmons.’

“Persimmons are one of Lewis's favorites. He gave the formal Latin horticultural name, *Diospyros virginiana*, ‘food of the gods,’ and agreed with that terminology.

“All of the family members had their duties. ‘I used to dry five bushels of apples every year,’ said Lewis. ‘They were peeled and sliced, and I spread them on paper in the sun on the roof of a shed for a week. I had to take them up before night to keep off rain and dew. They were stored in gallon crockery jars or hung up in white cloth bags. Mother would make them into pies and on winter mornings boil two cups of dried apples in water for ten minutes to make delicious apple sauce.’

“Grandfather Chester Lewis believed strongly in education, and since there was no school for black children in the area, he built a twelve- by thirty-foot addition to his house for that purpose. George Lewis’s aunt on his mother’s side had married a Jamaican, Robert Stubbs, a former teacher, and he schooled thirty to forty children, each of whom contributed one dollar per month toward his salary.

“The children walked to school, some as far as seven miles. George lived two miles from school and attended there for eleven years. Some of Stubb’s students went on to lead professional lives as lawyers and doctors.

“By 1928, there was a segregated county elementary school, and seven years later, Elizabeth Lightfoot founded a high school for the black students. After integration, the children attended Lightfoot Elementary School in Unionville.

“Over the years, and especially during wartime, many Freetown people migrated north for better jobs and for the opportunity to own their own homes. Several of the women, relying on their cooking skills, found positions with wealthy families in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Some of the men went with their families to the Pennsylvania coal mines and steel mills.

“Lewis’s sister, Edna, became a well-known cook. She started at a hotel in Washington and then went to New York, where she had her own restaurant, and she eventually started a cooking school in Atlanta. A frequent guest on TV talk shows, she produced several elegant cookbooks, the last of which, *The Gift of Southern Cooking*, was published in 2003.

“Pearline Ellis, a Freetown acquaintance of Lewis, was encouraged by her friend, Matt Henson, an envoy to Admiral Robert Perry, to go even further afield to Alaska to trap for furs, which she bought annually to an uncle in New York who had business connections with furriers. She ultimately took her earnings to California and became active in real estate in the Los Angeles area. A millionaire when she died, she was known as a generous philanthropist.

“‘In the meantime,’ said George, ‘I was working as a field hand for fifty cents a day and [was] in the Civilian Conservation Corps until World War II. The war was a turning point. I was drafted and went to Frankfurt, Germany, where I was a corporal in the medical corps.’

“He took advantage of the GI Bill when he was discharged in 1946, earning a bachelor’s degree in horticulture from Hampton College and later doing graduate work in entomology.

“What made him choose to go to California? ‘I met a girl,’ he said simply. How many destinies are determined by those four words?

“It was a happy destiny for George and his wife, Hortense. He became the director of La Canada, an eighty-acre botanical garden and arboretum near Los Angeles where he supervised a permanent crew of twenty-five plus a large number of volunteer workers. He grew the roses for the Pasadena Rose Parade, for which he was a float decorator, and after he returned, the city flew him back to conduct Christmas decoration workshops.

“He retired after thirty-three years, and since Hortense had died and they had no children, he returned to the Freetown area where he had relatives and built a beautiful home.

“Orange County did not present the opportunity to be idle, however, and his talents were graciously and freely given to, and greatly appreciated by, the town of Orange. Multiple flower beds and planters still give testimony to his skill and generosity. He was a popular speaker at garden clubs and offered his skills as a landscape designer. He also was active in the Baptist Center in Rixeyville where he helped with fundraising, landscaping and construction.

“George died in 2007. A memorial in one of his gardens on Madison Road at Main Street in Orange is a tribute to his dedication and skills [see below]. He will not be forgotten.”



George Herman Lewis

April 30, 1922 - March 3, 2007



May his love of the Lord, horticulture
and Orange always be remembered.

Share

From the *Daily Progress*
By Drew Jackson

Garden, monument honor Lewis²

"It's a rare and special thing when something is constructed and intended to exist forever. George Lewis built a garden on the corner of Main and Madison in Orange in 2002, and last Friday it became his. The strip next to the Virginia National Bank boasts a striking display of yellow flowers and other greenery, and situated between Orange's most prominent collection of fauna is a large pink boulder bearing a plaque dedicating the space to Orange's greatest gardener.

" 'George was a man of flowers,' said Ruth Lewis-Smith, sister of George Lewis and president of Orange County's NAACP. 'I know he's looking down on us, and is pleased with this.'

The garden is roughly 20 yards long and is punctuated by bright yellow flowers. It appears to be serving as a sort of protector for the bank, managed by Lewis' friend Arthur Bryant, shielding the building from the harsh rumbling sounds of Route 15. Bryant says he first met Lewis in 2000, when the famed horticulturist sought the air-conditioned refuge of the bank on a particularly muggy day.

" 'George was a good friend who did a lot of good for the community,' said Bryant. 'He was a man that was very generous with his time and talents.'

"The garden dedication was organized by the Orange Downtown Alliance (ODA). The original design of the park is Lewis', using plants donated from Grelen nursery.

" 'He intended it to be a cottage garden. He just wanted to brighten up this spot,' said Dan Gregg, owner of Grelen and president of the ODA's board of directors. 'Eighty percent of the park is his design. We just filled in the gaps.'

Gregg said that there's a plan in the works to extend the length of the garden down Route 15.

Atop the park's boulder is a small bronze statue of gardening gloves and a baseball cap, a replica of Lewis' own signature items.

² Jackson, Drew. "Garden, monument honor Lewis." *Daily Progress*, July 21, 2010-reprinted August 5, 2020, Accessed February 3, 2023
https://dailyprogress.com/community/orangenews/entertainment/garden-monument-honor-lewis/article_24857f1a-d703-5af9-ae2a-72efaa799d9c.html

" 'When we were thinking of what to use to represent George, our first idea was to use gardening gloves and a hat,' said Jeff Curtis, the director of the ODA. Curtis then removed a floppy tan hat and dark knit gloves from a plastic bag, and the statue's sculptor Thomas Marsh arranged them to mimic their bronze likeness.

The dedication served as a procession of old friends and admirers to pay tribute to a man who spent his life making the earth more beautiful. Page Sullenberger said Lewis was one of the most elegant and intelligent men she had ever known, and Dr. Barry Mangum, with whom Lewis built the small park, said he was a wonderful friend who was simply etched in your memory.

" 'What a wonderful place the world would be if we could all leave a garden like this behind,' said Mangum.

In an effort to outmatch her brother's flowers, Ruth Lewis-Smith wore a long skirt covered with bright purple, pink and yellow flowers.

" 'This park certainly reflects George. It shows his true colors,' " said Lewis-Smith. " 'He loved colors and he loved variety.' "

