

Meharrys were givers from Montgomery County's past



By Karen Zach, Around the County

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Those of us who grew up in Montgomery County know about as much about the Wallaces, Lanes, Elstons and such as we do about Abe Lincoln or George Washington; however, there is another (well probably lots more really) who deserves a great deal of glory in the annals of MoCo! I suppose many of you have heard of the Meharrys but may not know the amazing philanthropy involved with that name. I'm including Alexander Jr's findagrave photo as I've seen several other family men and they all resemble this handsome fellow.

It all began with Alexander Meharry born in Ireland 5 August 1763. A good and righteous family, his folks were driven from their Scottish birthright property by Papist persecutors and ended-up in County Cavan, Ireland. Alexander married Jane Francis there in early 1794 and almost immediately embarked in a tumultuous 13-week voyage landing on the shores of New York. From there they removed to Lancaster County, PA. In Connersville, that state, Hugh, their first child was born two days before Valentine's in 1797 on a rented farm. The next year they settled in Adams County, Ohio where the whole family suffered dreadfully with the ague as well as lost every ear of their first crop of corn due to an early and complete freeze. Then life smoothed out and all was well. In that place, the rest of their eight children were born, six more sons and one daughter: Thomas, Mary, James, Jesse, David, Samuel and Alex. In fact, Jane was carrying Alex when on the way home from a camp meeting, riding his favorite horse along, discussing their religious get-together, a huge Oak tree fell in the road with one of the large limbs breaking Alex's skull (21 June 1813). Jane's oldest was barely 16. The others left were 14, 12, 10, 8, 5 and 3. Plus, don't forget the one on the way. Can you imagine?

It was the family's strong faith as active Methodist Episcopalians that saw them through, add to that an amazing work ethic, visions foreseen and perhaps some pure dumb luck. Jane was highly intelligent, courageous, an amazing human being and encouraged Hugh to continue running the family mill. He construed a bell to ring when the grist was finished and basically ran it 24-hours daily, napping until his bell rang. The other boys cleared land and raised hogs. They put in and harvested large crops of garden produce that Thomas yearly took to New Orleans to sell.

Here comes the good part! The family used this money and invested in land warrants that many Revolutionary War soldiers resold because they thought Indiana and Illinois land worthless. They bought a great deal of land, in fact, some as little as 25 cents per acre. Eventually, 15,000 acres of land (a huge amount for the time) was owned in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and elsewhere.

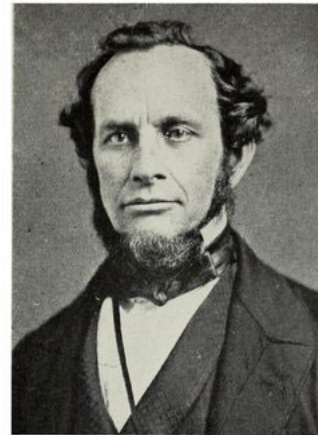
In a few years, James and Jesse went on a speculation trip to Texas. They even met the Houston brothers, but the land too harsh and the people mainly fugitives from justice was not to the liking of the refined, pleasant Ohioans. Upon their return James along with Hugh and Thomas came to Indiana to speculate on land. They all purchased property in upper Montgomery and lower Tippecanoe Counties around the Shawnee Mound area. The others followed. All but the youngest two are buried in the family cemetery, Meharry (north of Wingate). Jane is buried with these children, while Alex is back in Ohio. Kind of sad. Two of the children, Samuel and Alex became ministers of the ME Church.

Now, to the philanthropic points and how they came about. It was Samuel Meharry who at a young age was driving a salt wagon south and in his trek became stuck in a swamp in Kentucky where a family of freed slaves opened their home to him and helped him out by lifting the salt wagon from the mud. Having had little camaraderie with any of the race, Samuel was so impressed he told them, "I have no money now but when I can, I shall do something for your race." Well, he kept his promise and he with four brothers, donated more than \$30,000 in cash and real estate to aide in creating what became the Meharry Medical College for black students. That was just the beginning. Samuel would later help start the Cary Home for Children (Lafayette) making it possible to extract 36 young ones the first year who had lived in the county poor farm.

Alexander financially helped Ohio Wesleyan University, even serving as their financial agent. Jesse offered Purdue his farm of 400 acres to begin their college but others wanted PU in the city. Education was important to the Meharry family. Jesse also donated handsomely to Wabash and Asbury (DePauw) plus aided in the erection of the first school house in Jackson Township, Tippecanoe county. He enticed the powers that be to build a high school there when they became popular. Proof that he never indulged in liquor or tobacco suggests that his brothers probably did not as well. It was certainly something his mother purported as making a top-notch man.

David and Alexander Meharry were very much involved in aiding the railroad in coming through the Coal Creek area. They also gave freely to the Meharry college and Illinois Wesleyan University. The giving didn't quit with Alexander and Jane's children. The 25 plus grandchildren continued the traditions. One of the brothers gave to the wives of ministers who passed away as he saw it being hard for them to exist. They gave to the Foreign Missionary Society and to Shawnee Mound Church. The list goes on! There was really only one taint on the local Meharry family and let's suffice to say that this particular historian feels that it was a mean man misguiding a lonely widow in order to get hold of her money. Yet, that's not the point of this article, it is to let Montgomery Countians know that the Meharry family was truly awesome and giving!

Karen Zach is the editor of Montgomery Memories, our monthly magazine all about Montgomery County. Her column, Around the County, appears each Thursday in The Paper of Montgomery County.



Rev. Alexander Meharry

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