

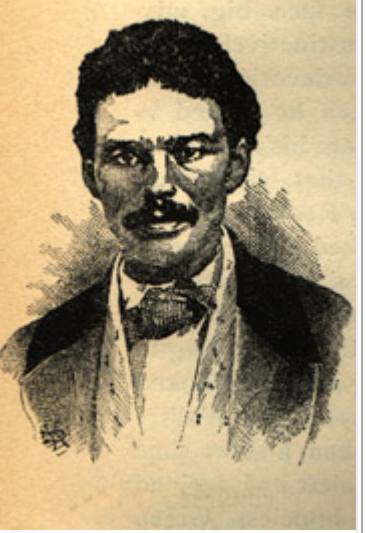


# Hiram Revels Related to Men in John Brown's Army

by Jean Libby, Hannah Geffert, and Jimica Akinloye Kenyatta -- "Allies for Freedom"

		
<b>Lewis Sheridan Leary</b>	<b>Senator Hiram Revels</b>	<b>John Copeland</b>
Richard Hinton, <i>John Brown and His Men</i> (1894)	Carter G. Woodson and Charles H. Wesley, <i>The Negro in our History</i> (1922)	Richard Hinton, <i>John Brown and His Men</i> (1894)

## The Relationships of Hiram Revels, Lewis Leary, and John Copeland

The linking of Hiram Revels, the first African in America to be elected to the United States Senate, with a blood relationship to Lewis Leary and extended kinship to John Copeland, members of Brown's army who died in the battle and on the Virginia gallows, is new information. The presence of Hiram Revels, a minister in Baltimore at the time of Brown's raid, provides new evidence of the connections of black abolition leaders near Harpers Ferry. John Brown deliberately sought these leaders to fulfill his intended plan of an independent state with a black majority -- probably Kansas -- within the United States. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1850s and its African leadership has many keys of interrelationships that reveal the commitment of these men and women through their families, independent churches, and fraternal organizations to the abolition of slavery and the establishment of citizenship rights for all people of color. Hiram Revels' priority was social action.

The role of Africans in America, slave and free, in John Brown's raid is conventionally described as passive, cowardly, or accidental, except for five men who were in his original

small army of twenty-two. Lewis Leary and John Copeland, natives of North Carolina like Hiram Revels, are among the five. All were freeborn, of mixed racial and ethnic heritage. Revels and Leary, whose mutual ancestors include two soldiers in the American Revolution, were members of a triracial (African, Indian, European) community in Fayetteville with its own legal definition since colonial times: Free Men of Color.

The mutual ancestor of Hiram Revels and Lewis Leary was Aaron Revels, a soldier of African descent who fought in the American Revolution. His daughter, Sally Revels, was Lewis Leary's grandmother and Hiram Revels' aunt. John Copeland, who was born in Raleigh, was the nephew of Leary through another branch of the extended family. All three moved to the midwest in the 1840s and 1850s to achieve better economic and educational opportunities, using a kinship network to begin migration. They moved to areas of Ohio and Indiana which had white Quaker communities that strongly favored abolition.

### **The Independent Black Church, the Reverends Hiram Revels and Willis Revels**

During the 1840s, Hiram Revels joined an older brother, Rev. Willis Revels, into the African Methodist Episcopalians (AME), an independent denomination formed in 1816 among free skilled workers protesting discrimination in the Methodist Episcopal Church. They were ordained ministers in the 1840s, serving in Indiana and in Missouri, which was a slave state. Rev. Hiram Revels was arrested twice in Missouri for "preaching to slaves," according to his memoir. Members of his wife's Bass family were active AME ministers in Indiana and Ohio. However, her grandson states that Phoeba Bass Revels was a practicing Quaker, based upon her midwestern education that was also shared by Hiram Revels.

The AME ministers, Willis and Hiram Revels, are mixed in the manuscripts and the indexing of church histories. Both of them were deeply involved in creating the Missouri District in 1854, which placed all of the AME churches in any slaveholding state in the west or southwest into one episcopality. Rev. Willis Revels was ordained in 1842 (Payne) -- he is one of the founders of the Indiana Conference of the church.

Rev. Hiram Revels' exact date of ordination is unclear. He was acting as Secretary of the Indiana Conference in 1852. His training during the 1840s was in Baltimore, where he was active in the Lyceum, an African American organization of speakers and other intellectual pursuits.

Not all slaveholding states allowed the AME to organize congregations. South Carolina expelled the denomination in 1822, after the attempted insurrection led by Denmark Vesey in which AME ministers were heavily implicated. The denomination was strong in Maryland and Delaware, both slaveholding states with large quasi-free populations. It is evident from minutes and records that regional differences were strong among African Americans, just as they were among European Americans, during the antebellum period, as the following incident indicates..

Rev. Willis Revels was in a dramatic confrontation over the issue of slaveholding church members among African Methodists in 1856. He represented the "conservative" group, and

personally shouted down a group of "radical" ministers who wished to expel all slaveholders, regardless of the circumstances, including legal processes that were occurring to achieve the freedom of slaves held in legal bondage by other Africans. Revels pointed out the frequent purchase of enslaved relatives to assist in freedom. He (they) then challenged the northern ministers to pick up "rifles and field pieces" and "go down South and fight the enemy on their own ground", joining their quasi-free African ministerial brethren on the slaveholder's turf, where they "are without arms without the protection of those who have the power to protect ... gagged and fettered beneath the iron heels of the powers that be..." (Payne)

### **The Baltimore Connections**

Rev. Hiram Revels left his AME ministry and enrolled in Knox College in Illinois, a liberal arts college with a Presbyterian seminary, in 1856. He was then posted to the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, where he remained until late 1863, when he organized two regiments of soldiers for the United States Colored Troops (4th and 39th). At the same time, he may have taught in an African high school connected with Bethel AME Church in Baltimore.

Some historians believe that Rev. Hiram Revels left the AME Church due to disagreement. His subsequent career of movement among denominations as he moved around the country indicates more strongly his commitment to social action. He worked where he could effect progress.

His Knox College associations brought him the Presbyterian appointment, and was assisted by the previous attendance of his wife, Phoeba, in a Presbyterian School in Galesburg.

The number of schools and colleges available to Africans in the midwest was extremely small. Those like the Revels and Bass families who sought education needed to attend schools and seminaries that were funded and operated by whites. Most white-run schools would not allow students of color. Knox College also pioneered in education of women of all colors. It is clear that education, not denomination, was their key interest..

Baltimore in 1859 had the largest free African population in the United States, existing alongside a substantial population of people still enslaved. The churches served both groups. Both congregations and ministers continue today in the forefront of Civil Rights leadership in Baltimore. They cooperate today in social action strategy just as they did when the Revels brothers and other Baltimore area Africans were ministers. These ministers were in the forefront of the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement that is better known than the one of the 1850s.

In Baltimore, the large quasi-free population was restricted by legislative measures that applied only to people of color. A scheduled conference of the AME denomination was cancelled by Baltimore authorities following John Brown's raid: heavy surveillance of African congregations was the rule.

Black congregations and ministers were active stations and agents of the Underground Railroad for people escaping bondage. Their churches served as schools for the community. The Watkins' schools in Baltimore were known for teaching abolition as well as literacy --

supported by the quasi-free people who brought their children. The African community leaders knew each other, tied with family relations and intermarriage, church organization, and the fraternal structure of the Prince Hall Masons. With these many connections it is likely that Hiram Revels knew his relatives were part of John Brown's army, and their intention, before the event took place.

### **LEWIS SHERIDAN LEARY and John Copeland in Ohio**

In March, 1859, Lewis Leary went to Cleveland to hear John Brown deliver a public speech about his militant abolition plans. Leary then recruited his nephew (by marriage) John Copeland, age 23, into the Harper's Ferry plans.

John Copeland, born in Raleigh, had lived in Ohio since childhood, where his parents moved to improve the family's economic, political, and educational opportunities. Their migration was influenced by increasing legal restrictions on Free People of Color. John Copeland, Sr. was active in among free Africans in Ohio as a Larain County delegate to Black Conventions in 1849 and 1850. His son who would join Brown's army was indicted for assisting a fugitive, John Price, to freedom in the Oberlin-Wellington rescue in 1858. He was able to evade arrest. John Copeland was a student at Oberlin College in 1859, working as a harness maker, and unmarried. His letters from prison to his father and brother are considered classic expressions of the universal need for liberty. They are fully described in Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*.

### **Saving Lives: John Brown, Lewis Leary, and John Copeland**

In order to save the lives of the Virginia slaves who willingly participated in the raid with John Brown, the captured men limited their "confessions" to only their own involvement. This confession was particularly poignant in the case of Lewis Leary, who lived for eight agonizing hours under interrogation by the local militia and citizens about the scope of the operations. He denied any major plans, telling them the whole thing had been cooked up by Brown at a recent Agricultural Fair in Cleveland, and he and Copeland had joined impulsively.

In reality, John Brown had extensively consulted with African leaders. He utilized the Black Conventions, where elected delegates organized petitions to state and national legislatures to end slavery. After passage of the *Dred Scott v Sandford* decision in 1857, which denied all persons of African descent citizenship rights, a Convention of Colored Men in Cincinnati resolved they had no allegiance to a country that did not allow them the rights of citizenship and placed them in physical danger of enslavement. This November, 1858, meeting was attended by six active participants in Brown's proposed war on slavery, including Rev. William J. Watkins, Frances Watkins (an invited woman), and William Howard Day, who printed Brown's proposed *Constitution* for a democratic, cooperative government of liberated slaves.

**John Brown's final speech to the court, upon hearing his death sentence in November, 1859, is among the classic documents of history, defining the reasons for fighting -- and dying -- to end slavery by acknowledging the everyday sacrifices of the millions of**

enslaved as equal to his own execution. This may be viewed at [University of Alabama Professor Epperson's history site](#):



[John Brown's Final Address to the Court, November 2, 1859.](#)

### **The Deaths of Leary and Copeland at Harper's Ferry and Charlestown**

John Copeland was buried near the site of his execution on December 16, two weeks after John Brown, in Charlestown, Virginia, despite requests from the mayor of Oberlin to claim his body to be buried. He wrote his father from prison that he was proud to die to fight slavery. John Copeland was hastily buried in a shallow grave with of Shields Green, another black army member, with whom he was executed. It was vandalized by medical students from Winchester. There is a monument to Copeland, to his uncle Lewis Sheridan Leary, and to Shields Green (who was not from Ohio but now forever linked with Copeland) in a cemetery in Oberlin, known as "the town that started the Civil War" for its abolition activities.

Lewis Leary, in his death, had a kinder fate. Most of John Brown's ten men killed in the battle -

- including a son -- with three local black men who fought willingly with Brown's army, were buried together in wooden boxes on the banks of the Shenandoah River opposite the Hall's Rifle Works in Harper's Ferry. Some were also buried in boxes in the Loudon Heights overlooking the Shenandoah. This is on the present border of West Virginia and Virginia, the burials remaining on the Virginia side. Sympathetic Washingtonians found the riverbank burials in 1899, and reinterred them with ceremony by John Brown at his New York farmhouse, now a state historical landmark. The bones were so mixed that there was no attempt to separate them.

### **Was Hiram Revels also a Militant Abolitionist?**

Rev. Hiram Revels is notable for recruiting two regiments of soldiers in Maryland immediately upon the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which lifted the restriction on free Africans to serve as combatants as well as arming slaves in states in rebellion. Revels first assisted in recruiting the famous 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry, consisting almost entirely of educated men from Baltimore. Then, after raising the 39<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the United States Colored Troops in Maryland, he went to Missouri (where he had been an AME pastor in 1854) and raised a third regiment of soldiers among refugees from slavery. In his religious career he is clearly a social activist, changing denominations several times in order to serve the enslaved and newly freed communities. His constant association with known Underground Railroad areas -- indeed, moving to them -- in Indiana, Illinois, and Maryland needs more exploration. Some of ties that have been ignored may be stronger than is now known.

### **Evidence in the Leary family**

His relatives in North Carolina, the Learys, immediately joined the Civil War action supporting the Union troops from within the Confederate South. Seven family members, including Lewis Leary's brother, John S. Leary, attached to James Montgomery's Brigade when the 1st North Carolina Colored Infantry became the 35th Regiment Infantry, U.S.C.T. James Montgomery was a former Kansas guerilla fighter associated with John Brown -- one who was on his way to assist at Harpers Ferry when it ended too soon -- known for rough and rapid liberation of enslaved Africans along the Atlantic coastline during the Civil War. John S. Leary became a representative of the North Carolina legislature in 1868. He then earned a law degree from Howard University, becoming the first African in America to be a member of the bar of North Carolina.

Whether or not Hiram Revels specifically approved of John Brown's plan, as his relatives in Brown's army did, is not known. But by his immediate Civil War leadership it is certain he and his relatives in North Carolina supported armed resistance to slavery when protection was offered by the United States government through the Union Army. As a pointer to his views, the fragmented scrapbook of clippings he kept includes a description of the death of John Brown's widow in 1884. With the exception of an article about a speech by Frederick Douglass, this is the only clipping on a subject other than career notices and his own speeches in the preserved material.

### **Senator Hiram Revels**

At the end of the Civil War, in which he served as a chaplain as well as recruiter, Hiram Revels went to Leavenworth, Kansas, to continue his AME ministry. He then went to Mississippi as a part of the Freedmen's Bureau, an assistive organization for refugees in the area of the home of the defeated president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. Revels now formally left the African Methodists, joining the Methodist Episcopal North denomination, who sponsored many missionary activities in the area. He became active in restructuring the Constitution of the state, along with Isaac Shadd, a black newspaper editor who was actively involved with John Brown's plans in 1858 and 1859. Shadd became the Secretary of State of Mississippi's Reconstruction government, which had 35 African legislators among a total of 130. Jefferson Davis had been a United States senator from Mississippi -- as well as once the Secretary of War -- before secession. There was still an unexpired year of Davis's term. Following passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote unrestricted by race, color, or previous condition of servitude, Hiram Revels was elected in Mississippi in 1870 to fill it, becoming the first African in America to be elected to the Congress of the United States. Elections to the Senate at that time were made by state legislatures, not popular vote.

Among his legislative achievements are the inclusion of black seaman in Baltimore in the United States Navy, which was only accepting white recruits. This was accomplished because of personal petition by the Baltimoreans. He also followed the leadership of Frederick Douglass in supporting the inclusion of Santo Domingo as a potential territory of the United States.

At the close of his year-long term in the Senate, Hiram Revels became president of the first land-grant college for African Americans in the United States, Alcorn A.& M. He remained

active in Mississippi politics, trying to forge a coalition with Democrat ex-Confederates. Angering the Republicans for these attempts, his last years were bitter. In his memoir Revels describes his conviction that anyone who was willing to swear to abide by the new amendments to the United States Constitution should have citizenship reinstated.

He is not a popular subject for modern historical analysis because he is considered a race traitor for pardoning ex-Confederates who swore loyalty and for his attempts to achieve integration in postwar Mississippi. Hiram Revels died at a Methodist Episcopal conference in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1901, and was buried with full Masonic rites at Natchez. His wife of more than fifty years, Pheoba Bass Revels, followed him in death within a month.

## **Conclusions**

It is likely that Hiram Revels knew of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry before it occurred, because of the presence of his cousin Lewis Leary and the proximity of known supporters in Baltimore, where he lived in 1859. Revels lived in many areas where the Underground Railroad was active, in territory that was expanded by John Brown in the mid 1850s for the purpose of establishing a black majority state following armed liberation. When Hiram Revels became the first African member of Congress in 1870, he exhibited caution over the responsibility of his position as the highest-ranking person of his ethnicity, and the need to be "a credit to his race" in interactions with the white majority in order for others to follow in positions of power.

## **References, Acknowledgements, and Links**

The name of our research group is taken in honor of historian Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (Oxford, 1974), his seminal work, and especially for his personal encouragement to find new information.

The family connections of Aaron Revels, Hiram Revels, Matthew Leary, and Lewis Leary are found in an essay by a descendant, Matthew Leary Perry, in *The Story of Fayetteville and The Upper Cape Fear* (Fayetteville Women's Club, 1950) and indirectly in *Men of Mark* by William Simmons (1887). We express appreciation to Rhonda L. Williams, Local and State History Specialist at the Cumberland County Library for researching these documents.

Leary and Copeland as members of Brown's army are in Richard W. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men, With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled to Reach Harper's Ferry* (1894). John Copeland's relationship to the Oberlin-Wellington rescue is in *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865*, by William and Aimee Lee Cheek (1989,329). The interesting story of this rescue, and of the Langston brothers, Oberlin residents who were deeply involved with John Brown's plans for a self-governing state, is online by the

[\*\*Electronic Oberlin Group.\*\*](#)

No study of Africans in America would be complete without Freedom Center's

### [Underground Railroad History.](#)

The quotations of Rev. Willis Revels on ministers in the South are in Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1891, 343).

Two Revels biographies: Julius Eric Thompson, *Hiram Revels 1827-1901*, a Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton University reprinted by Arno Press (1982); Elizabeth Lawson, *The Gentleman from Mississippi, Our First Negro Senator*, (1960). A precis of his life, related mainly to his Senate career is online at the *Congressional Times* site: [Hiram Revels brief biography](#) It is also in book form in Bruce A. Ragsdale and Joel D. Treese, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-1989* (1990).

Hiram Revels dictated "Autobiography" to Horace Cayton, Sr. is on microfilm at the University of California, Berkeley, 5801LB. His fragmented scrapbook is microfilmed as well: 5702 LB.

Horace R. Cayton, *Long Old Road* (1965). Hiram Revels' grandson's autobiography.

The Watkins family: Leroy Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (1982).

Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882). This is the original source for John Brown's plans for a new nation. Martin Delany's participation may be seen in Frank Rollin (Frances Rollin Whipper), *Life and Public Services of Martin A. Delany* (1883). The quotations of Roger B. Taney are found in *Dred Scott v. Sandford, A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Paul Finkelman (1997). The Black Conventions background is from *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, edited by Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (1980). Linking the 1858 Cincinnati Convention with John Brown's plans, and the West as their ultimate place of self-government within the United States are original conclusions of the authors.

California librarians Betty Bortz and Patricia Dentinger made special inquiries for publications on Hiram Revels, not easily obtained in that state even though his grandson, Revels Cayton, was an active labor leader in the San Francisco waterfront strike of the 1930s.

Since first publishing this site on October 16, 1998, people have responded with additional facts, questions, and corrections. Enrique Gildemeister, a librarian whose Ph.D. thesis on triracial islands brought communication on the active Melungeon Association, and Paul Heinegg, author of *Free African Americans of North Carolina and Virginia*, who has developed documentary primary sources of Hiram Revels' birth and early life, shared and discussed resources, as did Gary Kornblith of the Electronic Oberlin Group. The Afrigeasis Group, operated by Mississippi State University, recently had a thread on Revels that is now being explored -- many thanks to Larry Hamilton of this network, who corrected Darke County, Ohio.

We most warmly acknowledge Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Interpreter Gwyneth Roper for hosting a reunion at Storer College in June, 1998, which became this exploration of African American history that continues to unfold.

Also in Baltimore, a source of the Civil Rights Movements of both centuries is pivotal in creating this philosophical discussion of African leadership: John Wayman Henry of the Office of the Mayor, Kurt Schmoke, and Dr. Frank Madison Reid, III, pastor of the historic and active Bethel AME congregation, shared research and encouragement in January, 1999.

### **The Authors**

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Jimica Akinloye Kenyatta (James Fisher), of Charles Town, West Virginia, curator of many local history exhibitions in the counties of Jefferson, Berkeley, and Morgan, West Virginia, in honor of Carter G. Woodson and John Brown.

We invite linking of this page to your educational or social activist site, and welcome discussion and review. We are continuing to document and write on many of the facets of this study.

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