

**Reminiscences of Philena Carkin:
Reminiscences of My Life and Work among the Freedmen of Charlottesville Virginia from
March 1st 1866 to July 1st 1875**

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These are excerpts from the papers of Philena Carkin, who was one of the original teachers to serve in the Albemarle Freedmen's School in 1866. Rives Minor, a freed slave, then approximately 10 years old, was among her first students. Ms. Carkin reproduced extracts of some of the letters she and Rives Minor exchanged much later in their lives.

My Dear Friend and Teacher.

I regret that I can't do more for you than to thank you for teaching us our first lessons. ***I am sure you were not aware when kindling the little flame of education here among us that you were doing a work that was to be so far reaching.***

Rives C. Minor

Excerpt from Letter to Philena Carkin, January 31, 1910

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Charlottesville Va. Jan. 3/10

Miss Carkin

My Dear Friend and Teacher.

It is a long, long time since you were here, and I've been thinking for several years of writing to see if you were still numbered with the living, but have kept putting it off from time to time until I've made it very late, but I hope not too late.

I have taught in the public schools thirty three years and retired this session, and am now farming. I own a farm of 80 acres, two horses; a colt, four cows, two calves and we raise hogs every year. I succeeded (they say) very well as a teacher and am doing very well as a farmer. I have been twice married — first in 1891 and second in 1902. By my first marriage two girls, by the second three girls and a boy — the baby, by name Frederick Douglass.

I am sure you have all along heard very bad reports of the colored people. True they have not always done as well as they might have done any more [than] the white people, but many of the stories are without foundation and others much exaggerated, and highly colored.

I hope this letter will find you well and that you will let me hear from you. I shall be glad to give a full account of myself, and of the immediate community.

I know you would be greatly surprised to see what wonderful progress the colored people have made along all lines. You would find it much pleasanter, as there is more civilization, and so many pleasant homes among your pupils, that you might visit. Trusting that this may find you well, with bright prospects for the New Year

I am your scholar.

Rives C. Minor

P.S. My mother died in 1880, my father in 1893 and many others have passed away since you left among them Mr. Scott whom you probably remember.

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Charlottesville Va Jan. 31/10

My Dear Miss Carkin

Your letter of the 10th inst was duly received. It found us well, and indeed, more than glad to hear from you. I am sorry to know that your sight has gotten so poor, but my prayer is that it may not grow much worse for years to come. I was glad and thankful to receive the picture of the "Minute Man" I remember so distinctly about your telling, and trying to have us understand about them years ago. And not only that, but you told and read to us so much that I recall and which has since become real to me, that I have often wished that I could see you, and make some apology for my ignorance and ingratitude, for then it was meaningless to me, and as with me, so I presume it was to a greater or less extent with the others. But much of the ignorance, inexperience and darkness that met you here, have disappeared, and it is beginning to look like a real dispensation of freedom in which every one has some sort of a chance in the race of life.

I taught, with the exception of the first three sessions, in my own county (Albemarle) near my home — the first two in Harrisonburg Va. the third in Bath Co. Va. My parents owned nothing and I was early called upon to get some sort of a home for them, so I had to go to work in real earnest about the time you left. By perseverance and the most rigid practice of economy I succeeded[.] My mother lived in her new home just five years and my father eighteen. Now I guess you don't remember my brother Dabney, for he was one of the younger pupils. He was about 10 years of age and stammered a little. Well he has been going to school the greater part of the time since you left, and has not got through yet. He graduated from the Richmond Va Institute and from a theological seminary in Michigan, and became a B. A. from Oberlin college, Ohio in 1897 and lacks four months of finishing a four years course in medicine in the medical college in Indianapolis Ind. His eyes failed him and he is now preaching in Cincinnati Ohio.

As for myself I have been a great slave to public school, Sunday school, church and farm. My farming has been done largely in the night. I attended the Storer college West Va. two sessions after I began to teach. My sessions were only five months. I entered school 1st March and remained until August. I left lacking two years of finishing the Academic course. I attended the schools held for the benefit of teachers in the different in different parts of the state 15 summers. The last three summers I was an instructor.

There are but few of our people who do not own their homes. There are farms er all around me, ranging in size from half an acre, to one hundred and fifteen acres. Most of them are doing well. My first wife was from Culpepper Co where I spent several summers in teaching school. Her name was Mary Green. The second — Elizabeth Curry was born and reared near Monticello the home of Jefferson, My oldest daughter Mabel will be 17 in March. Frederick Douglass is 14 months old.

Now I must tell you something of the town people. Benjamin Tonsler had been Principal of the town school ever since you left The building is a large brick structure of eight rooms, and with all female assistants. Robert Scott used to assist him but he died about 20 years ago. The school is doing well, and a class graduates about every year. The colored people have five churches in town, and some of them are very fine. Mrs. Gibbons who taught in the lower schools has been dead several years. Mr[.] Lewis also died about 8 years ago. Mrs[.] Lewis is living but most of her children are dead. Mrs. Gibbons son,

John West, who came to school when you were here has been a barber since before you left. His owner gave him several thousand dollars to start with and now he is said to be worth a hundred thousand dollars in real estate. Mr. Ferguson owns a nice residence on Main St. The old Farrars are all dead. Some of the younger ones are here and have nice homes. The Rickmonds all went to Pittsburg many years ago and never returned. The Taylors are here and doing very well. The Buchanans went to Philadelphia. The Buckners are here. One of them owns and conducts a large grocery store near the University. Mr. Inge, Mr. Fergusons son-in-law owns and conducts a large and well kept store on Main St. and there are countless smaller concerns run by the people who owned nothing when you were here. Now a word about the scholars you knew best. David Smith died about 7 or 8 years ago very poor. William Jackson taught 10 or 12 years and then lost his sight entirely. He is totally blind. Jesse Sammons taught about 20 years and died of a fever. Henry Cash went west and never returned Egbert Terry married Maggie Halestork and they live in Ch-ville. Maggie is one of Mr. Tonslers assistants. Two of Mr. Fergusons daughters and one of John Wests daughters also assist. Now a word about professionals. One of John Wests sons, and one of Fergusons are medical men, and doing very well. Lawyers have failed to succeed here so not one in town. Jesse Sammons married Lula Gibbons who used to attend your school. She was left with four children—two 2 boys and two girls. She is doing very well. The oldest boy is nearly 20 years old so with farming and dressmaking she is doing nicely. She is my neighbor. I shall have a group picture of my family taken to send you as soon as the weather gets so we can all get into town. I regret that I can't do more for you than to thank you for teaching us our first lessons. I am sure you were not aware when kindling the little flame of education here among us that you were doing a work that was to be so far reaching.

I told you I would give a full account of myself, but that would fill many pages, and I'll only say but little now about my experience. I acquired knowledge of music, and can sing and play very well. My older girls, Mabel and Irene can also play very nicely, and in town you would be well entertained at any of the churches by the singing Now I've written a long letter for you to read and hope it will not be too much for your eyes

Your Friend and once Pupil

Rives C. Minor.

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[I will copy some extracts from a third letter I received from Mr. Minor dated May 3 — 1910. After answering various questions I had asked he continued as follows.]

"The old building where you taught has long since been torn away and all that part of the town is laid out in streets and thickly settled It would be hard for you to tell where the old school house stood. The new school house is farther down, near the Court House. If you remember where the gas house was, it is on the same street. x x x I should be glad if you could see this place again and witness the strides the colored people have made from barbarism to civilization. I did not think to tell you in my last, that they own and publish one newspaper in Charlottesville x x x I will tell you my age as well as I can. I call myself 54. The farm house where I was born was burned in May 1865, and with it all the records. My mother, a short time before her death, took me with her to the old place to get our ages, and what they gave us was all guess work. I was born in January 1855 or 1856 Mother knew it was three weeks after Christmas. That was all she knew about it. I am still vigorous and can do more work at almost anything than the average man."

[After telling of the sickness and death of his first wife, he continued by saying that he was left with all the household cares, two babies to look after, the farm to attend to, and a school of 70 or 80 children

to teach. He managed by hiring one and another to take care of the children until he made a second marriage six years later, after which, he adds, "It was better for me and the children.]

[Extracts from a letter dated June 14 1910: I had sent Mr. Minor some pamphlets of the Humane Society and asked him if there was anything of the kind yet in Charlottesville. To which he replied as follows.]

"No, they have nothing like a humane society any where in Virginia that I ever heard of certainly not in Charlottesville or in Albemarle County I hope to see a "Red Acre Farm" here in our state some day. At present worn out horses as well as worn out men fare tolerably rough. There is nothing like a "Rescue League" These things have not been thought of yet x x x x

I will give you an account of a trip I took to Highland Co. Va. in 1879 to teach school. It is a hundred miles from Ch-ville to Highland Co. No railroad sixty miles of the hundred. I walked (wading the rivers and creeks) the entire distance. It was snowing about all the way. I went very near the sources of the Potomac and James rivers which geographers say are so near each other that a rider may hold the reins and drink from one spring while his horse drinks from the other, but I did not think of that at the time. I arranged my school business, taught five months and walked all but 40 miles back home. I began my school Feb. 15th and closed about the last of June. I waded rivers and creeks about 15 days in February of that year and was not made sick by it x x x It may interest you to know what it was worth to me. I got 20 dollars a month. x x All schools near home in the country were closed that year is why I had to go from home. They generally paid 25 or 30 dollars in the different districts in our county x x x

Your friend and old pupil

Rives C. Minor.

[Extract from letter dated March 4 1911: (I had sent him an article I cut from a paper called "The Horses Prayer" which is what he refers to in his letter. The Mabel and Irene whom he mentions are his two oldest daughters)]

Dear Miss Carkin

Your last letter of Sept 16th was duly received. We were glad to hear from you and to learn of the many helpful Societies among you. I thank you very much for the "horses prayer." Some horses do need to say it daily, but I am thankful to say mine have not said it this winter though the winter has been long and severe, interspersed with a day or two of mild weather now and then. x x x x I am quite busy preparing for my crops, and at present the prospects before me are quite bright. I have a great deal more work than I can do but and cannot afford to hire help but am doing very well alone, and when school closes in April Mabel and Irene will help me a little.

|African-American Families Database www.centralvirginiahistory.org/SammonsCemetery5.shtml |

Rives Minor (1856-1926), showed remarkable determination in achieving an education and sharing his knowledge. He attended the Freedmen's school in Charlottesville and Storer College in Harper's Ferry. He taught for thirty years, many of them at the Union Ridge Graded School; he was its principal after the death of Jesse S. Sammons. Through inheritance and purchase he accumulated over sixty acres of land close to Union Ridge Baptist Church. His daughter Asalie Minor Preston was a noted educator in Albemarle County, including at the Albemarle Training School. In 1982, she endowed the Minor-Preston Educational Fund that to this day supports and recognizes worthy public school students in the Charlottesville-Albemarle community and awards scholarships to graduating seniors.