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Lewis Winter, Nashville Entrepreneur (1839-1911)

Gloria McKissack

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Lewis Winter lived an amazing life in an era when most Blacks suffered from poverty and the hardships that resulted from Jim Crow laws and practices established after Reconstruction. It was indeed a rare phenomenon for a former slave to find an avenue for success that led to the building of a business empire that made him and his descendant's millionaires.

Winter's amazing story from the rags of slavery to the riches of a successful entrepreneurship in business and banking started in 1839, the year of his birth to a slave mother in Lebanon, Tennessee. Separated from his mother at the age of six and sold to another farmer, he remained enslaved until 1865. With the outbreak of the Civil War and Tennessee's occupation by the Union, Nashville had become a center for a large contraband camp and he was able to seek safety and opportunity there at age 26. Nashville had become a center for a large contraband camp. With only a few dollars to his name Winter started selling chickens and eggs. Before long he had nurtured his modest poultry business into a success. By 1895 he had turned a cart operation into a four-story brick building, which he owned at 211-213 Cherry Street (now Fourth Avenue) and employed twelve people.

Located near Broad Street, competition between black and white merchants selling the similar products became intense. However, much of Winter's business came from blacks who lived in the old contraband camps behind Union Station, in the area now known as the Gulch. When the age of big business caused economic prosperity for whites, blacks suffered economic instability. Nevertheless, Winter prospered because he used the newly invented refrigerated railroad box cars to ship his products throughout the South. He sold live and dressed chickens, as well as other country eggs, wool, ginseng and bacon in his expanded business. In 1900 he chartered L. Winter Produce Company with $3,000 in capital and five board members.

Lewis Winter had become one of Nashville's leading elites. He served on the board of Wilberforce (Ohio) University, which is the oldest private historical black colleges in the nation, helped establish two of Nashville's financial institutions, was president of the home Banking Loan Association, and was also one of the founders of the One Cent Saving Bank. In 1920 the latter bank became Citizens Savings and Loan Bank and Trust, which remains today.

When the state of Tennessee decided to celebrate its Centennial Anniversary in 1895, Winter was appointed to the Negro Committee to plan the prominent Negro Building and special events for the exposition, now the cite of Centennial Park. Booker T. Washington was invited to be the keynote speaker on Negro Day, a Jim Crow day set aside for Negro visitors to the Exposition.

Lewis Winter married Elinora Davis (1847-1919) in 1860. She would become a leader
among black women to promote relief programs for the poor. She was active in women’s groups, such as the Phillis Wheatley Club. They made their home at 74 Maury Street. The prominent couple had four children: a son and three daughters. Only Miranda P. Winter would outlive her father (1879-1955) and become the sole heir of her father’s fortune. Miranda married Moses McKissack III, a pioneer architect and co-founder of McKissack and McKissack Architect Firm. Lewis, without a son to bear his name, paid Moses a nice lump sum to name his first-born son Lewis Winter. As the sole heir to a fortune worth over a million dollars, Miranda was able to help her husband financially while he pursued his business venture and established clientele. The company became the oldest black architectural firm in the nation. It is credited with countless homes, public schools, city buildings and structures on Fisk, Tennessee State University, and Meharry campuses, all built during Moses III lifetime. In 1912 the couple built their spacious home in the historic Edgehill neighborhood. It remains today.

Unfortunately, in 1911 Lewis Winter had become paralyzed, but the quiet and unassuming, yet bold and daring businessman, did not let his health stand in the way. He continued to manage his produce business from a wheel chair until his death on May 12, 1911 of dysentery. He was buried in the city’s black Mount Ararat Cemetery. Many of his direct descendants still live today as part of Moses McKissack’s family.

Gloria H. McKissack