

'... do you not think that we [the people of Earth] could work in harmony?'
- Rev. Lylburn Downing, 1927

THE REV. LYLURN DOWNING (right), who was born into slavery and went on to become a longtime minister, is having his story fleshed out for modern generations thanks in part to the efforts of Michael Blankenship (below). Blankenship, who gave the graduation speech at Lylburn Downing Middle School in the spring, is the author of a history of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Roanoke where Downing preached for 42 years. Under Downing's direction, a stained glass window (shown at far right) was installed in the church featuring the dying words of Confederate Gen. T.J. "Stonewall" Jackson.



The Man Behind The Name

Researchers, Descendents, Students Helping To Reveal Rev. Lylburn Downing's Story

Over the past year, different groups and generations have connected in Lexington in a common goal, from varied angles: looking to more fully detail the life and legacies of the Rev. Lylburn Liggins Downing.

Born into slavery in 1862, Downing is familiar to local residents as the namesake to Lexington's middle school. But most here know little about him beyond that, save for the noted stained glass window honoring Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson that the Rev. Downing had installed in Roanoke's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, where he ministered for 42 years.

The days of Downing remaining just a name from the past may be coming to end, though, thanks to the research of a Roanoke man and others and the efforts of the current executive director of the Rockbridge Historical Society, Eric Wilson.

"Over the past year, we've seen some real momentum jointly provided by careful scholarship, family genealogy, social networks of local and church communities, and their extension into the public audiences of schools and museums," said Wilson. "As I think about how these different 'points of light' connect and reveal new patterns, I keep landing on the word 'constellation.'"

In due credit, the metaphor – a genuinely stellar cluster – draws on some of the interstellar images and 'blazing orbits' that Downing would summon in the dedication speech he delivered at the school newly named for him in 1927."

In that speech, Downing built to a finish in a soaring, optimistic, universal, futuristic key (all the more prescient, 50 years before the first moon landing):

"If, by some trick of magic, I could grip your minds, and with them, soar out and up and on and away, through the immeasurable star-depths, beholding millions upon millions of whirling burning worlds as they roll on and on in their blazing orbits, all working together in perfect unison," Downing said. "From some prince of a ringed planet we might have the vision of our life, then returning to Earth and applying the lessons [we learned], do you not think that we [the people of Earth] could work in harmony?"

In May 2019, nearly 100 years later, those very words were echoed by Michael Blankenship, the commencement speaker for Lylburn Downing Middle School, and author of a newly completed history of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, where he is a congregant, himself.

Earlier this year, Blankenship's inquiries to the Rockbridge Historical Society, and subsequent visits to explore the archives of the formerly segregated Lylburn Downing School, proved the crucial spur to these ever-broadening points of view. His visit, in turn, led then-LDMS Principal Jason White to invite Blankenship to speak about Downing to this year's graduating eighth-graders and families.

A Journey Of Discovery

In his speech at LDMS's May graduation, Blankenship referred to his research on the Rev. Downing as a journey both men had undertaken together.

"He and I make an interesting team and like all traveling companions sometimes we agreed and sometimes we very much disagreed," Blankenship said. "Sometimes he'd want to go in one direction and I'd want to go in another. Sometimes we wouldn't see each other for weeks at a time but I knew he was always there and our companionship would return and continue, just like all good partnerships."

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GREAT-GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN of the Rev. Lylburn Downing sit on the steps of the original Lylburn Downing School building during a visit in August. Related to Downing through their mother, the Park siblings include (from left) Mackenzie, Joel, Donovan, Benjamin, Jenna and Kayla, who brought along her daughter Grace, the great-great-granddaughter of Rev. Downing.



JOEL T. PARK, who is married to the great-granddaughter of the Rev. Lylburn Downing, brought his six children and great-grandchild to Lexington in August, visiting the historic Lylburn Downing School building and other sites. (Harrison Mines photo)

Lexington Science Festival Sunday

Main Street Lexington will present the sixth annual Lexington Science Festival & Maker Faire this Sunday, Oct. 13, from 2 to 5 p.m.

This is a free, one-day, interactive event where children and adults can watch, learn, and do a wide variety of science and technology-oriented activities.

Families can start their science adventure in the classrooms and auditorium of Lexington Presbyterian Church, where attendees will be able to listen to mysterious sounds, learn hands-on astronomy, try virtual reality, watch drones fly, create magic with static electricity, test themselves with optical illusions and more. Lending their enthusiasm, time and expertise are university professors, high school teachers, and local citizens with a passion for sharing the wonders of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics).

From there, families can get tickets to athletic attractions at Virginia Military Institute, where children ages 6 years and over can discover their physical motivation factor, or children 10 years and over can explore VMI's Exercise Physiology Lab. Children must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian and a shuttle bus will be provided for service between the church and VMI.

"Since our first science festival in 2014, this event has grown to attract more than 400 attendees from Rockbridge and surrounding counties," said Rebecca Logan, executive director of Main Street Lexington. "The future lies in STEM learning; what better way to create enthusiasm than with hands-on science fun?"

The Science Festival is made possible through sponsorships from CornerStone Bank, Kendal at Lexington, The Community Foundation for Rockbridge, Bath and Alleghany, Virginia Military Institute, and Charles W. Barger & Son Construction.

Fairfield PTO Carnival This Saturday

Fairfield Elementary School's Parent Teacher Organization will present its fall carnival at the Fairfield carnival grounds this Saturday, Oct. 12, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

In addition to the carnival games, there will be a silent auction, a touch-a-truck activity, bounce houses, a dunking tank, vendors and concessions.

The Fairfield carnival grounds are located at 20 Greystone Lane.

Downing

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Blankenship first became interested in Downing's life when he began attending Downing's church in Roanoke. "He was the third pastor of that church and while the other pastors are mostly forgotten, he is still remembered and frequently the subject of conversations," Blankenship said.

In their journey together, Blankenship said that he and Downing had a verbal squabble over the stained glass window dedicated to Stonewall Jackson that Downing had erected in 1906 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian. Blankenship wanted to know why "a black minister, in a historically black church, whose parents and grandparents had been slaves, been so eager to commemorate the life of someone who fought to keep them all enslaved?"

When growing up in Lexington, Downing heard his parents, and others in the African-American community, speak of the Sunday school Jackson taught at Lexington Presbyterian Church before the Civil War.

"[Downing] heard numerous stories about Jackson's kindness and care for his African-American students," Blankenship said. "Jackson even went against the law and taught them some basic reading and writing so they could study the Bible."

When Downing was a young boy, he paid his respects to Jackson by visiting his grave. It was at that young age that Downing was resolved to some day erect a monument to the Confederate general "so the world would know of the wonderful things Jackson had done for African Americans."

Downing himself was a well-educated man and attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. His children followed in his footsteps. "His four sons included a doctor, two dentists and the dean of a university. His daughter was an educator," Blankenship said.

So why was a school in Lexington named for a Roanoke Presbyterian preacher? "The reason for naming it the Lylburn Downing School was because of his exemplary educational plan for himself, for his children and for all the black children in Virginia," Blankenship concluded.

Bringing His Descendants Home

Wilson credits the value of Blankenship's history of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, not just for new understandings of Downing's biography, but those around him: "It's the most comprehensive account of Downing's life I've yet read: unearthing new finds in local court records and archives of slave ownership; alumni records from Lincoln University; files and publications

from both fraternal, civic, and ecclesiastical organizations in Roanoke and across Virginia."

Blankenship also shared with Wilson a remarkable document found at Virginia Military Institute by Joel T. Park, who has undertaken extensive family genealogy himself, having married Downing's great-granddaughter.

In early August, Park brought the youngest generations of his family to see for the first time the places in Lexington and Roanoke where Lylburn was born into slavery, preached in Roanoke, and honored by the school that still reflects his legacy today.

The afternoon of Aug. 5, Park brought along six of his children to tour the Lylburn Downing Middle School campus, including his grandchild, the great-great-granddaughter of Rev. Downing.

The Park family was greeted by new LDMS Principal Dr. Abbott Keesee in the renovated school building. Wilson, representing both the Rockbridge Historical Society and Lexington City Schools, began the tour by leading the Park family one building over to the historic Lylburn Downing School, now the central office for the Lexington division. Inside, Wilson ushered the group into the office's board room, aptly named "The Heritage Room," where the original school's memorabilia is carefully displayed.

The Parks observed photographs, documents and artifacts that detailed the special culture of the original segregated school. On their tour, the Park family, hailing originally from Rhode Island, was able to ask questions about everything from notable alumni to original Lylburn Downing School athletics.

In chatting with Wilson about their genealogy journey, J.T. Park explained that two of his sons honor their great-great-grandfather's namesake as Benjamin Downing and Donovan Lylburn Park.

Downing's Parents

Blankenship has also more fully fleshed out the generation of Lylburn's parents, Ellen and Lilburn (spelled distinctly from his son, Lylburn). Lilburn was born in St. Augustine in the early 1820s, enslaved at birth, and baptized in the Catholic Church, by Charles Downing, who was elected U.S. congressman from the Florida Territory in 1837.

Later moved to Charlottesville, Lilburn would eventually be sold to Fairfield native Gov. James McDowell, serving the governor during his tenure in Richmond. When McDowell died in 1851, Lilburn was valued

at \$850 (the highest of all the 26 slaves McDowell owned), and then conveyed in 1852 into the estate of James McDowell's daughter Sophonisba. She married VMI's Col. James Woods Massie who, according to Blankenship, appears to have approved an extra-legal "slave marriage" of Lilburn and Ellen Hopkins in 1853.

Blankenship clarified that their son Lylburn was not therefore born into the McDowell household in 1862, but that of wealthy Lexington merchant David Hopkins (children of slaves would become the property of the mother's owner).

As Wilson notes, "Michael's careful combing of the archives, and consistent double-checking with others, has really shed some new light on these antebellum families, enslaved and otherwise. It's a thick local web, and helpful grounds for other researchers to keep looking further."

Never Forgetting Lexington

Thanks to the input of Lexington Vice Mayor Marilyn Alexander (herself a student at Lylburn Downing before its de-segregation), Blankenship was delighted to learn that the Downing family had lived in a small house on what now remains a vacant lot on Diamond Street, by the corner of Carruthers Street. But curiously – given his prominent local recognition 50 years later – the traces of Lylburn's own time in Lexington goes dark, after he left as a young man.

Lylburn had moved to Washington, D.C., by 1879, working as a waiter there and Atlantic City before enrolling at Lincoln University in 1885, first as an undergraduate and then as a seminary student.

Nevertheless, after taking the pulpit in Roanoke, Lexington ties were clearly on the Rev. Downing's mind when an 1895 issue of the Alexandria Gazette announced his plan to install at his Roanoke church a stained glass window that featured the dying words of Jackson (a famously devout Presbyterian, himself). Unveiled in a well-publicized event in 1906, the surprising choice presumably witnesses Downing's sincere desire to recognize the VMI professor's leadership of the "Colored Sabbath School" that his own parents attended before the Civil War.

As illustrated in another document shared by Blankenship, Downing was still working to reckon with those generational and spiritual ties in a 1917 article he published in Hampton University's journal, *The Southern Workman*. Recalling his own childhood visits to Jackson's first gravesite, Downing there states his desire to "make this modest little frame church a



MEMBERS of this year's eighth-grade class at Lylburn Downing Middle School participate in a scavenger hunt in the historic Lylburn Downing School building, now home to Lexington school offices, as they search for information about the Rev. Downing among the materials in the Lylburn Downing School Alumni Room.

stone building, to be known as the Stonewall Jackson Memorial." How his congregation and community may or may not have agreed, is not recorded, though this vision of re-edification was never materially built.

Why The School Name?

Yet for all of Downing's travels and achievements, a central but unanswered question persists for Blankenship, as he's asked of many people in Lexington and Roanoke and family descendants: "What led the community to name the school after Lylburn Downing, even though he really doesn't appear to have maintained ties to his native town?"

Over the course of various conversations and library hunts, different theories have been proposed for this turn "outside" Lexington: a certain tact in choosing someone outside the local community, rather than privileging (or slighting) a current prominent resident; perhaps selecting a Presbyterian minister, in a politic alternative to differing preferences of the predominant black Baptist, Methodist, and AME churches here. Blankenship also highlights Downing's leadership in the Negro Organization Society, a statewide advocacy group for African-American schools as a strong credential for educational recognition.

New Finds

As to the continuity of the Downing family themselves, after emancipation, a striking document newly brought to life was found by J.T. Park in the VMI archives.

On Oct. 5, 1886, Sherman Downing (Lylburn's brother) wrote directly to Francis Henney Smith, then the longtime superintendent of the Institute, informing the local luminary of the death of his father, Lilburn.

The evident familiarity was warranted given

Lilburn's long service as a hospital steward, a position he had held even while enslaved, accompanying cadets at the 1864 Battle of New Market, and further stretching over three decades. The immediacy and assured candor of Sherman's letter to Smith, inviting him to attend Lilburn's funeral the very next day, reveals some shifting in social dynamics, even as the end of Reconstruction slid toward the new terms of Jim Crow.

An even more vivid portrait of Lilburn's professional service, and broadly earned trust, is evident in a letter written by the Rev. Downing himself:

"I believe my father was faithful and to a certain degree efficient. I have seen my father open the anteroom door and cadets [would] go into the [doctor's] office, the doctor being absent. He [Lilburn] would either prescribe [medicine or] send the cadet to the hospital."

For New Generations

Blankenship's research not only made for a timely invitation to speak at LDMS graduation in May, it also spurred Wilson, a teacher at LDMS, to develop a collaborative initiative between RHS and LDMS.

Wilson designed a scavenger hunt for the eighth-graders on the morning of graduation that drew on materials permanently displayed the Lylburn Downing School Alumni Room (now home to Lexington School Board meetings), supplemented by items from the collections of RHS, and a trove of resources gathered by Downing alumna Irene Thompson from the archives of First Baptist Church, for whom the Rev. Downing was one of the earliest donors in its noted expansion in the 1890s.

Among the people and activities that students explored were Downing alumni whose careers would include a Flor-

ida Supreme Court justice; an NFL Super Bowl winner with the Pittsburgh Steelers; a Washington and Lee history professor and head of a new Africana Studies program; professional musicians; and returning faculty at Lylburn Downing School itself.

Historic photographs and song lyrics helped LDMS students see continuities in some extra-curricular activities, including bands, choirs, cheerleading, and boys and girls basketball teams (games were then held in the wooden-floored "auditorium" in what is now Lexington's Community Center).

Students were notably struck by the fact that their school once fielded football and baseball teams, highlighted by the achievements of Lewis Watts, who set school scoring records in the former, and threw two no-hitters in the latter, despite being born with no arms.

A new class of LDMS eighth-graders undertook a similar exercise the first week of this school year, in order to ground their year's experience as school leaders more fully mindful of those precedents, said Wilson.

As the scavenger hunt, graduation ceremonies, and family history trip all reveal, these are cross-generational efforts at bringing the middle school's namesake more to the fore of public consciousness. At 6 years old, the Rev. Lylburn Downing's third-great-granddaughter was the youngest to recently explore the school, homesites, and church with her family, setting the stage for generations ahead.

As J.T. Park noted, "Most of us get interested in genealogy and where our people come from later in life. It's exciting when kids have the chance to learn about their family and their past, and to see when their eyes light up."

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