

The Community of Gleedsville: A Story of Hope after the Civil War

After the Civil War, many of the people who had been enslaved at Oatlands and the Carter's plantation in western Loudoun County, Bellefield, remained in the area. While this might seem odd to modern sensibilities – why wouldn't everyone leave after they had their freedom? – it makes sense from a practical and personal standpoint. Most newly freed people could not read or write. Most did not have money. Most had family and friends who they did not or could not leave behind. This is evidenced in the 1870 federal census listings for Oatlands and Bellefield, the first federal census taken after the war and the first time formerly enslaved people were enumerated by name.

Living in the Oatlands household with Kate and George Carter Jr. were Joshua Washington (70), house servant; Gerard Day (60); Elizabeth Grigg (35), cook; Heba Fisher (13), nurse; and Wesley Nelson (70), a farm laborer and his wife Jennie (70). Recorded nearby were Robert and Mahala Buchanon, Clara Gleed and her family; Gabriel and Dinah Day; Jeremiah and Amelia Mason; James and Lethia Russ, Joseph Russ and Daniel Russ, and their families; Henry and Margaret Johnson; Basil and Hester Bryan [Bryant]; John and Lucinda Gleed. Many were probably still living in the dwellings that housed them during the time of slavery.

Elizabeth O. Carter was living at Bellefield, along with Jacob (34) and Sophia Howard (35) and their children, Matilda (6), Paton [Peyton] (4) and Luticia (9 months). Also in the household were Eva Moten (50) and her daughter, Frances (9); Hannah Warner (62); and Hannah Fisher (16).¹

By 1879, women and men who had once been enslaved at Oatlands and nearby plantations began to buy small parcels of land to the northeast of Oatlands.² Most of the tracts came out of the larger, 146-acre Greenup tract, which had been purchased by John F. Elgin at auction in 1878.³ The land had been in the Elgin family since 1830, but at some point prior to the Civil War, Elizabeth O. Carter of Oatlands had expressed interest in buying it. A formal contract was never made, but she made small payments toward the purchase price and is believed to have taken possession of the land while not the legal owner. After the war, Elgin family members filed a lawsuit demanding that Carter fulfill what they considered to be a binding contract. She refused, stating she had never signed an agreement and was no longer interested due to the "altered condition of the country." The result of the lawsuit was the public auction of the tract.⁴

Whether Carter had ever farmed the Greenup tract or built structures of any sort is not known, but the parcel would have been familiar to people enslaved at Oatlands and nearby plantations. It was close-by and spanned the Carolina Road, which led from Leesburg to Carter's Mill Road (now present day Gleedsville Road and Oatlands Mill Road respectively). In John F. Elgin, formerly enslaved people found a white property owner willing to sell land and give them a start.

The first person to buy land from Elgin was a woman – Margaret Johnson in July 1879.⁵ It was a small, 1-acre parcel on the east side of the Carolina Road. It is not clear if Margaret was the same woman enumerated in the 1870 Census as the wife of Henry and the mother of Charles.

Other purchases soon followed. Although some deeds were not recorded until the final payment of the purchase price, the 1881 land tax records list the following landowners in what became Gleedsville:

George Briant [sic-Bryant] – 3.25 acres⁶

Emanuel Day – 4.25 acres⁷

Thomas Day – 3 acres⁸
John Gleed – 7.5 acres⁹
James Johnson – 4 acres¹⁰
Alexander Johnson – 4.25 acres¹¹
Margaret Johnson – 1 acre
Alexander Lucas – 15 acres¹²
Bazil Turner – 5.75 acres¹³

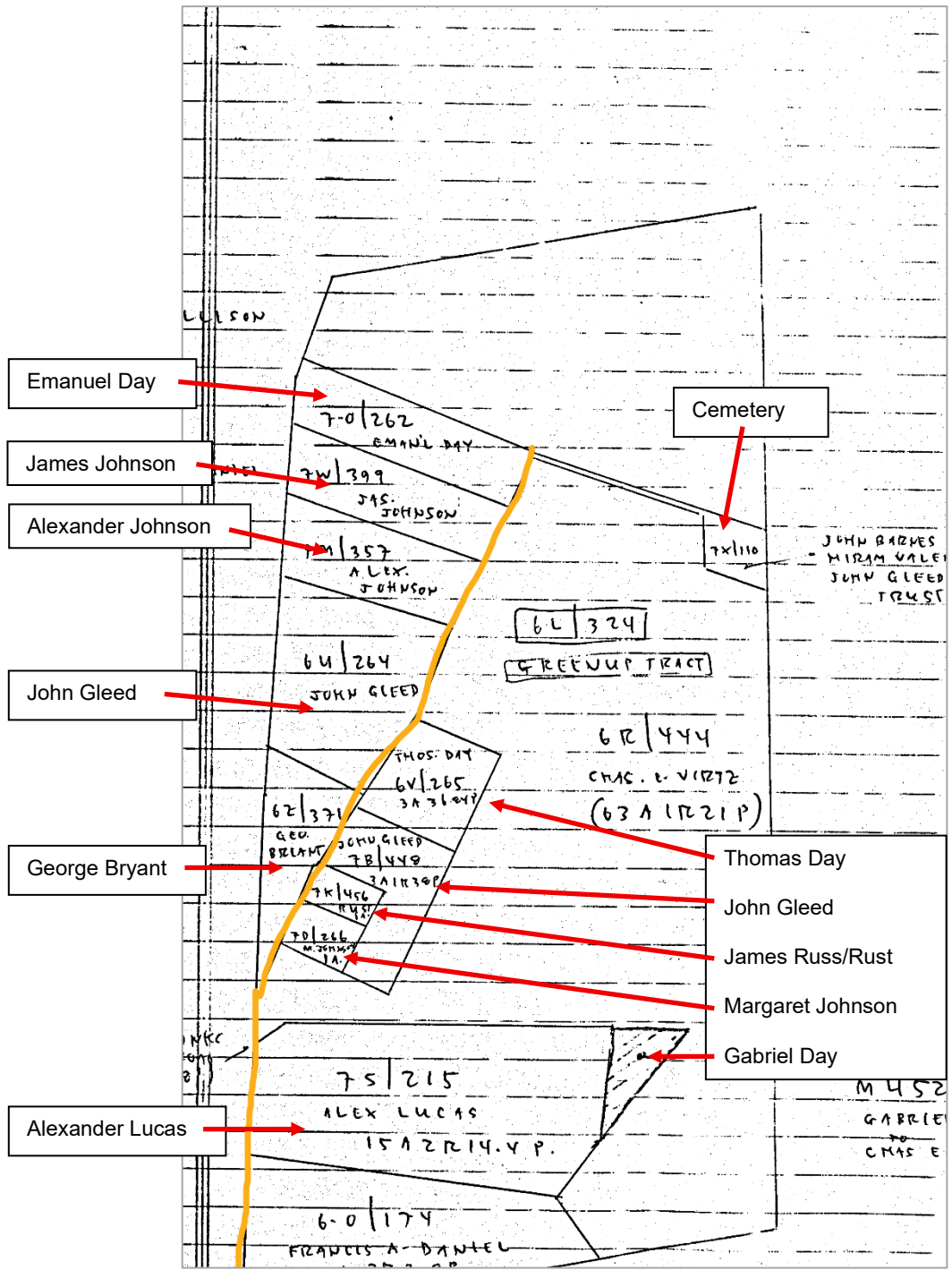
Gleed held onto his 7.5-acre parcel for two years before selling 5.5 acres to Frances A. Daniel, who was white and owned several other parcels in the area, and 2 acres to Harry Washington, who was Black.¹⁴ The latter transaction enabled another Black man to achieve land ownership and put down roots within the growing community.

By 1886, Gleed had purchased another parcel from John and Anna Elgin, this time on the east side of the Carolina Road. Three years later, he sold 1.5 acres to Murray Allen, creating another opportunity for Black land ownership as he had done with Harry Washington.¹⁵

Establishing a burial ground was a high priority for newly freed people. It meant a special place of their choosing to bury their dead and honor their memories unlike whatever land had been set aside by their former enslaver for burials. Legal title for a cemetery in Gleedsville was not made until 1886, however a burial ground was in place by 1881. It was on the northern border of John Elgin's Greenup tract across the road from Emanuel Day.¹⁶

Other men continued to purchase land in the area, and by the late 1880s, the small community of Gleedsville had been formed. Its residents included families who had not purchased land, such as Robert and Mahala Buchanan and Hiram and Elizabeth Valentine, but were active members of their community. Although the Johnsons outnumbered Gleed in land ownership and the Days would eventually, too, the area was named for him. The earliest documented reference to the name of Gleedsville was in the 1886 deed that was recorded for John Gleed's purchase on the east side of the road.¹⁷

A plat of the village from the early to mid-1880s is shown below. The yellow line is Gleedsville Road, and the lots purchased by original owners are shown on both sides of the road. Formerly enslaved people, fulfilling a dream of home ownership, built their homes, and raised food and livestock for their own consumption.



Plat created by title examiner and historian Jeff Ball

In 1884, Thomas Day put his land in trust to secure a financial note of \$100. Two years after that, in April 1886, the 3-acre parcel was sold to Washington Thornton for \$300.¹⁸ Thornton didn't retain it for long. In 1889, he and his wife, Margaret, sold half an acre to trustees Robert

Day, George Bryant, James Serors, Thomas Washington, Bushrod Murray, Thomas Waters and Emanuel Day for use as a “place of divine worship” for the Methodist Episcopal Church. By this time, the village of Gleedsville had a general store owned by the Daniels family, who were white.

Another pillar of a community is its church, and the citizens of Gleedsville knew the importance of creating a place for them to worship and share fellowship. Oral history relates that men and women often worked at night by the light of kerosene lamps to build their church. Stones for the foundation came from the fields on Jack Glead’s and Martin Buchanan’s properties.¹⁹ The wooden, Late Gothic Revival-style church, known as Mount Olive Methodist Episcopal, was dedicated on October 12, 1890.²⁰ The little, white church still stands and is presently owned and used for worship by the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Loudoun.

The second wave of families began to move in, such as the Smiths and Murrays, and the next generation of the founding families bought or inherited land, but in many ways, times got tougher rather than better for them. The hope of Reconstruction had faded, and fear of African American advancement led to the return of pre-Civil War attitudes in most parts of the south.

Aiming to be self-sufficient and supportive of their neighbors, many communities formed mutual aid societies and fraternal organizations. They provided a means for socializing in segregated society and philanthropic assistance for those in financial need. There is some indication that an Odd Fellows Lodge had been established in the area in the early 1800s, but the deed establishing the Mtn. Gap Lodge #2407 Grand United Order of Odd Fellows wasn’t filed until 1901. The quarter acre lot was adjacent to the church and is now part of the Unitarian-Universalist Church parcel.²¹

By the early 20th century, farming jobs were fewer due to changes in crop production and mechanization. Many residents of Gleedsville moved out of the area, some to Arlington and Washington, D.C., and others to the north. Of those who stayed, several worked for the Eustis family who bought Oatlands in 1903. James Buchanan served as Edith Eustis’ chauffeur. Deborah Buchanan Fox cared for Edith’s daughter, Helen. Basil Turner worked on the farm and in the garden and later in life, he helped with household chores.²²

Little remains of historic Gleedsville today, although several property boundaries are still intact. Many descendants of people who once lived there remain in northern Virginia, but the original properties have been sold and new houses have been built. But two pillars of the community – the church and cemetery – remain as testaments to “the struggle of one group of African Americans as they made the transition from chattel [slavery] to free, responsible citizens.”²³

¹ 1870 Federal census records for Loudoun County. Viewed on Ancestry.com.

² Loudoun County Land Tax Records.

³ Loudoun County Deed Book 6L:324. J.W. Foster, special commissioner, to John F. Elgin on April 6, 1878, a parcel of 146.5 acres.

⁴ Loudoun County Chancery Cause 1870-056 (former number M3570). Viewed on the Library of Virginia’s online chancery records database. https://old.lva.virginia.gov/chancery/case_detail.asp?CFN=107-1899-005#img The cause was Walter Thomas Rogers vs. William A. Elgin, James J. Elgin, Walter F. Elgin, Martha J. Elgin, John M. Elgin, and Elizabeth O. Carter. W.T. Rogers was the grandson of the late Walter Elgin who had purchased the Greenup tract from Christopher Greenup’s executor in 1830. Loudoun County Deed Book 3V:15. John Pope, executor of Christopher Greenup, formerly of Kentucky, to Walter Elgin on 20 December 1830, a parcel of upwards of 100 acres.

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- ⁵ Loudoun County Deed Book 7D:266. John F. and Annie Elgin to Margaret Johnson on 5 July 1879 for \$40.00. The property is present day 20540 Gleedsville Road (PIN 316393956000).
- ⁶ Loudoun County Deed Book 6Z:371. John F. and Anna Elgin to George Briant [sic-Bryant] on 1 February 1882 for \$84.37.
- ⁷ Loudoun County Deed Book 7O:262. John F. and Annie Elgin to Emanuel Day on 1 February 1882 for \$172.75, 4.25 acres on the west side of the Carolina Road. The land was eventually subdivided into 3 lots: present day 20369 Gleedsville Road (2 parcels: PIN 315193639 w/house (2.239 acres) and PIN 315196330 (1 acre)) and 20377 Gleedsville Road.
- ⁸ Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:265. John F. and Anna Elgin to Thomas Day on 1 February 1882 for \$79.80, 3 acres on the east side of the Carolina Road. Part of this tract would eventually become the site of the church.
- ⁹ Loudoun County Deedy Book 6U:264. John F. and Anna Elgin to John Gleed on 17 October 1881 for \$175.00, 7.5 acres on the west side of the Carolina Road. Gleed held onto the parcel for 2 years before selling 5.5 acres to Frances A. Daniel (Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:478) and 2 acres to Harry Washington (Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:478).
- ¹⁰ Loudoun County Deed Book 7W:399. John F. and Anna Elgin to James Johnson on 17 October 1881 for \$160.00, 4 acres on the west side of the Carolina Road. The deed was not recorded until 3 February 1903. The parcel was adjacent to and south of Emanuel Day's parcel. The land is present day 20407 Gleedsville Road (PIN 31519511000).
- ¹¹ Loudoun County Deed Book 7M:357. John F. and Anna Elgin to Alexander Johnson on 1 February 1882, 4.25 acres on the west side of the Carolina Road. The parcel was adjacent to and south of James Johnson's parcel. The property is present day 20429 Gleedsville Road (PIN 316494884000).
- ¹² Loudoun County Deed Book 7S:215. John F. and Anna Elgin to Alexander Lucas on 1 February 1882, 15.5 acres on the east side of the Carolina Road. It was in the area of present day 20644 Gleedsville Road.
- ¹³ Loudoun County Deed Book 9G:384. Edgar Jackson, special commissioner, to Basil Turner on 28 May 1919, 5.75 acres on the west side of the Carolina Road. The 1881 and subsequent land tax records show Basil Turner owning land, but a deed was not given to him until 28 January 1893, probably after he paid the full purchase price. Basil lost the deed, and a new deed was not made and recorded until this deed in 1919. The parcel was bounded by all or part of Emanuel Day's property on the south, which places Basil's property in the vicinity of present day 40473 Brown's Creek Place. Basil's land was eventually purchased and absorbed into a much larger tract, which was subsequently subdivided. Part of that larger parcel became Long Meadow Hamlet.
- ¹⁴ Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:478. John Gleed to Frances A. Daniel for \$600.00 on 29 October 1884, 5.5 acres. Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:478. John Gleed to Harry Washington on 29 October 1884, 2 acres.
- ¹⁵ Loudoun County Deed Book 7B:448. Edward Jackson, special commissioner, to John Gleed on 17 November 1886, 3.25 acres. Gleed had purchased the land earlier than 1886 but the court order to provide and record the deed wasn't made until October term 1886. Loudoun County Deed Book 7B:449. John Gleed to Murray Allen on 2 April 1889 for \$300.00, 1.5 acres. The 1.5-acre parcel is present day 20518 Gleedsville Road.
- ¹⁶ Loudoun County Deed Book 6R:444. John F. and Annie Elgin to Charles Virts [Virts] on 22 December 1881. One of the metes and bounds in the deed referred to the "line of the graveyard lot". Loudoun County Deed Book 7X:110. Edgar Jackson, special commissioner for John F. Elgin's estate, to John Barnes, Hiram Valentine, and John Gleed, trustees, "for a burial ground for colored persons in the vicinity thereof, under control of said trustees, and such others, as may from time to time be appointed by the Circuit Court of Loudoun County."
- ¹⁷ Loudoun County Deed Book 7B:448. Local author and map maker Eugene Scheel in his article, "Gleedsville Named After Ex-Slave", noted the first reference was in the deed to Murray Allen, but recent research identifies the earlier deed. Scheel's article was published in the *Loudoun Times Mirror* on 7 April 1977.
- ¹⁸ Loudoun County Deed Book 6V:266. W.E. Garrett was the trustee for the \$100 note from John F. Reeves to Thomas Day. Deed Book 7B:220 for the sale by Day, Garrett, and Reeves to Washington Thornton on 27 June 1884.

¹⁹ Although Martin Van Buren Buchanan did not purchase land in the area until 1902, it is possible that he was renting before the purchase. Loudoun County Deed Book 7W:106. Benjamin and Philena C.C. Tavenner to Martin V. and Amelia Ann Buchanan on 11 April 1902 for \$80.00, 2 acres. The plat with the deed shows the property bordering Day and Johnson on the east, which is likely Emanuel Day's and James Johnson's lands.

²⁰ National Register of Historic Places Nomination for Mt. Olive Methodist Episcopal Church, VDHR file number 053-0994. Written by Leslie Wright in June 2004. <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/053-0994/>

²¹ Loudoun County Deed Book 7U:454. Charles E. and E.C. Verts [Virts] to Jacob Bryant, James H. Johnson, and George W. Smith, trustees, on 5 October 1901. The property was deeded to the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Loudoun on 17 August 2004 in 20040903-0094569.

²² Oral histories in the Oatlands archives.

²³ National Register of Historic Places nomination. VDHR file number 053-0994.