

Albert Ernest Meyzeek

Albert Ernest Meyzeek, the son of John E. and Mary (Lott) Meyzeek was born in Toledo, Ohio on November 5, 1872. His early childhood years were spent in Toronto, Canada. His father, an offspring of Huguenot French stock, married Mary Lott in Chatham, Canada, then the terminal station of the Underground Railroad.

Grandfather Lott, a Pennsylvanian by birth, often served on steamers traveling the rivers between Pittsburgh and New Orleans, where he saw first-hand the horrors and cruelty of slavery.

Later, settling on farms in the hilly country of Madison, Indiana, along the Ohio River, Lott, two of his former ship mates, and with the help of Henry Ward Beecher, then a young Presbyterian minister at Lawrenceburg, Indiana, organized the Ohio River Underground Railroad. Many slaves escaped along the highway were carried on the backs of these powerful men to hiding places on their farms, or were hid and fed in the grottoes, dells or caves surrounding Madison. The Rev. Beecher related many incidents of drowning and freezing while crossing the river to his sister Harriett Beecher Stowe, who gave exciting descriptions of these feats in her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Young Meyzeek's mind was greatly influenced by the stories of adventure related by his grandfather Lott who later escaped arrest in a Louisville jail, by the same underground route. Meyzeek's grandmother gave up the Lott farm and traveled with her children in disguise by the same route to Chatham, Canada where they continued to receive runaway slaves. It's ironic that this descendant of an Underground Railroad operator would make Louisville his permanent home.

Meyzeek's father was also a vigorous agitator for justice and equal educational opportunities. He has been credited with the winning of two suits against the Indiana School Board to abolish unhealthy and inadequate separate schools.

In Louisville, A.E. Meyzeek showed the same fighting spirit as his forefathers. After graduating with valedictory honors from the old Terre Haute Classical High School, where he was the only "colored" student, Meyzeek's first ambition was the law. Thinking that success at law might be doubtful, Meyzeek entered the Indiana State Normal School for teacher training and later won a Bachelor degree from Indiana University; and a Master degree from Wilberforce University in Ohio.

Coming to Louisville, he passed a competitive examination for principalship and was sent to direct a large elementary school known as Booker T. Washington. A few years later, he was given a temporary assignment as principal of Central High School. Meyzeek, concerned about the lack of adequate reference and reading materials at his school, boldly took his students to the Polytechnic Society Library, where after a few visits, they were refused admittance. Outraged by his students' humiliation, Meyzeek met with the library board and persuaded them to provide a "colored" branch library, with funds already pledged by the wealthy industrialist, Andrew Carnegie.

Meyzeek was different than some of the other black leaders in Louisville at the time. He charted a very independent course. The 1890's and early 1900's was the age of Booker T. Washington when accommodating to segregation as a means of making racial progress, particularly on economic terms, was the gospel that Washington preached; and what whites in power wanted to hear. While he might be willing at times to accept compromises, Meyzeek saw that ultimately segregation itself was the problem. Meyzeek, was much more in the vein of W.E.B. DuBois and Frederick Douglass. He believed that power conceded nothing without a demand. So Meyzeek persistently and persuasively agitated for equal access and opportunities. Most of his efforts were focused, one way or another, on trying to bring children into a new era, and trying to break down barriers that were in Louisville.

Summary of his other achievements include:

Treasurer and Director, Domestic Life Insurance Company; Director First Standard Bank; Director, Standard Building Loan Association; Chairman, Louisville Urban League; Chairman, Committee of Management, Y.M.C.A., 20 years; President, Kentucky Negro Educational Association; Member and one of the organizers, Kappa Alpha Psi; Executive Committee, Inter-Racial Commission; Executive Committee, National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools; Organizer fo Colored Branch, Y.M.C.A.; Masons; Past Grand District Deputy and Past Grand Senior Warden of Kentucky Jurisdiction; Political party affiliation, Republican; Religion, Episcopal Church; Residence, 1701 West Chestnut Street, Louisville, Kentucky.

Written by Louisville Free Public Library, <http://www.lfpl.org/western/htms/meyzeek.htm>