

HOW OLIVER BARKSDALE BOUGHT A HOME IN 1901

By Ellen Knight¹

During the early twentieth century, Winchester had a larger black population than at any other time in its history. This community was formed mostly of families who moved north from Virginia to find better opportunities. The rediscovery of a newspaper article from 1901 provides a portrait of one of the members of that community while also revealing the hard life of the men, of any ethnic origin, who worked in the local tanneries.

The subject of the article was Oliver Barksdale, a native of Halifax County, Virginia, born in 1851. Following the Civil War, he was enumerated in the 1870 and 1880 censuses in Birch Creek, first with his parents' family and ten years later with his wife Rachel White and two sons. After Rachel died, he married Sallie Farmer with whom he had several children born in Virginia and Winchester.

The family moved to Winchester in 1892. Here Oliver became a spiritual leader. Formerly a deacon in the Baptist Church of White Oak, Virginia, he was a founder of Winchester's New Hope Baptist Church. According to Thomas S. Bruce, who wrote an article about Barksdale published in the *Winchester Press* of May 3, 1901, "Mr. Barksdale is the 'father' of the Baptist mission here in Winchester.

"The mission started in his house, and he is looked upon as an upright man among the colored people. They all call him 'Brother Ollie' ... and Mr. Barksdale exerts a wholesome religious influence over the colored people. ... 'Brother Ollie' reads nothing except the Bible, and he spends all his leisure time in perusing it. He is always eager to have someone discuss its teachings and is quick to see the deeper meaning."

TANNERY WORKER

But it is the picture of his working life which is far more striking. In Virginia, Barksdale worked as a farm laborer. In Winchester, working in the tanneries paid better than working on the farms, but the tanneries were hard places to work in, with their filth, noxious odors, and corrosive chemicals. Barksdale had one of the worst jobs, as Bruce related.

"Mr. Barksdale came with his family, seeking to better his condition. He finally secured a job 'pitching leaches' in a tannery for \$9 a week, and for eight years he has stuck to his job. ...

"The work of 'pitching leaches' is very disagreeable and unhealthy. The leaches are 15 feet deep and as hot steam rises from them, very few men can stay in them long, especially in summer. To see men working in a leach reminds one of the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. It is remarkable that Mr. Barksdale has been able to stay in such a labor for eight years."



Barksdale at work, as pictured in the Winchester Press

But Barksdale had a goal in sight. "For eight years he has stuck to his job and bought and paid for a \$2,000 home." It was originally addressed 14 Winchester St., but after the street sign broke and everyone took to using the part of the name that was left, it became 14 Chester St.

"Mr. Barksdale paid the last dollar about one month ago," Bruce wrote, "and continues to 'pitch leaches' and to praise God, and may he continue long in both."

There are, however, problems with the figure Bruce presented. The property was actually assessed at \$700 (\$500 house and \$200 land). Barksdale bought the house from George P. Brown of Winchester for \$255.00 on Jan. 27, 1894. On June 15, 1894 Oliver and Sallie Barksdale received a five-year mortgage from Joseph Herbert Shattuck of Winchester for \$960.00. He had to repay at \$15.00 on the fifteenth of the month, with a "balloon" payment of the remainder. The interest, at the rate of 6%/year was paid semiannually. The mortgage was paid off on Feb. 8, 1901.² Thus it was the discharge of the mortgage Bruce wrote about in the *Winchester Press* story in May of 1901.

Nevertheless, the story of how Barksdale worked to buy a home remains an example of devotion to home and family.

NEXT GENERATIONS

The Chester Street house was home for Barksdales until 1969. Six young Barksdales moved into it with Oliver and Sallie. Two more children were born, and one of those who came up from Virginia died at the early age of 15. Two of the Barksdale boys left the home to serve in World War I, Frederick joining the Army and Chester the Navy, for which their names appear in bronze on Winchester's Veterans Memorial.

Soon afterward, most of the family moved away. Daughter Martha, educated in the Winchester public schools, was appointed to be a stenographer in the federal Department of Commerce in 1918. Subsequently, her parents and five siblings also moved to Washington. Oliver Barksdale died there in 1923, survived by his wife, seven children, and several grandchildren.

Simon Barksdale, the eldest son, was the sole Barksdale to remain in Winchester, living in his parents' home until his death in 1963. According to his obituary, he was known as "the little man who spoke to every one" and was highly esteemed by a wide circle of friends in town. He and wife Sarah raised four sons, all of whom served during World War II.

One of those sons, Richard Kenneth Barksdale, brought academic distinction to the family name. An honor student and member of the high school football team, he entered Bowdoin College on a scholarship from the Winchester Mothers' Association. After graduating from Bowdoin in 1937, he earned a master's degree at Syracuse University. After the war, he earned a second masters and a Ph.D. at Harvard University where he became the second African American to take a degree from Harvard in English literature. In 1972, Bowdoin College conferred upon him the honorary degree, Doctor of Human Letters. He went on to a distinguished teaching career.

The last Barksdale to live on Chester Street was Richard's brother Philip, who lived in the family home until his death in 1969. His executor sold the house for \$10,000. Although the family is no longer part of Winchester, the house that Oliver Barksdale worked so long and hard to own still stands. The home that cost \$2,000 in 1901 was assessed in 2018 at \$577,600.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 9, 2014. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The mortgage records are included in Book 2312, page 273, and Book 2874, page 350. The mortgage information was located and added to this article by Peter G. Engeldrum.