

Dr. George Washington Buckner
Evansville, Indiana
Interviewed by Lauana Creel
Vanderburgh County, Indiana



A SLAVE, AMBASSADOR AND CITY DOCTOR

This paper was prepared after several interviews had been obtained with the subject of this sketch.

Dr. George Washington Buckner, tall, lean, whitehaired, genial, and alert, answered the call of his doorbell. Although anxious to oblige the writer and willing to grant an interview, the life of a city doctor is filled with anxious solicitation for others and he is always expecting a summons to the bedside of a patient or a professional interview has been slated.

Dr. Buckner is no exception and our interviews were often disturbed by the jingle of the doorbell or a telephone call.

Dr. Buckner's conversation lead to ever-widening circles, away from the topic under discussion when the events of his own life were discussed, but he is a fluent speaker and a student of psychology. Psychology as that philosophy relates to the mental and bodily tendencies of the African race has long since become one of the major subjects with which this unusual man struggles. "Why is the negro?" is one of his deepest concerns.

Dr. Buckner's first recollections center within a slave cabin in Kentucky. The cabin was the home of his step-father, his invalid mother, and several children. The cabin was of the crudest construction, its only windows being merely holes in the cabin wall with crude bark shutters arranged to keep out snow and rain. The furnishings of this home consisted of a wood bedstead upon which a rough straw bed and patchwork quilts provided meager comforts for the invalid mother. A straw bed that could be pushed under the bed-stead through the day was pulled into the middle of the cabin at night and the wearied children were put to bed by the impatient step-father.

The parents were slaves and served a master not wealthy enough to provide adequately for their comforts. The mother had become invalid through the task of bearing children each year and being deprived of medical and surgical attention.

The master, Mr. Buckner, along with several of his relatives had purchased a large tract of land in Green County, Kentucky and by a custom or tradition as Dr. Buckner remembers; landowners that owned no slaves were considered "Po' White Trash" and were scarcely recognized as citizens within the state of Kentucky.

Another tradition prevailed, that slave children should be presented to the master's young sons and daughters and become their special property even in childhood. Adhering to that tradition

the child, George Washington Buckner, became the slave of young Master Dickie Buckner, and although the two children were nearly the same age the little mulatto boy was obedient to the wishes of the little master. Indeed, the slave child cared for the Caucasian boy's clothing, polished his boots, put away his toys, and was his playmate and companion as well as his slave.

Sickness and suffering and even death visits alike the just and the unjust, and the loving sympathetic slave boy witnessed the suffering and death of his little white friend. Then grief took possession of the little slave, he could not bear the sight of little Dick's toys nor books nor, clothing. He recalls one harrowing experience after the death of little Dick Buckner. George's grandmother was a housekeeper and kitchen maid for the white family. She was in the kitchen one late afternoon preparing the evening meal. The master had taken his family for a visit in the neighborhood and the mulatto child sat on the veranda and recalled pleasanter days. A sudden desire seized him to look into the bedroom where little Master Dickie had lain in the bed. The evening shadows had fallen, exaggerated by the influence of trees, and vines, and when he placed his pale face near the window pane he thought it was the face of little Dickie looking out at him. His nerves gave away and he ran around the house screaming to his grandmother that he had seen Dickie's ghost. The old colored woman was sympathetic, dried his tears, then with tears coursing down her own cheeks she went about her duties. George firmly believed he had seen a ghost and never really convinced himself against the idea until he had reached the years of manhood. He remembers how the story reached the ears of the other slaves and they were terrorized at the suggestion of a ghost being in the master's home. "That is the way superstitions always started" said the Doctor, "Some nervous persons received a wrong impression and there were always others ready to embrace the error."

Dr. Buckner remembers that when a young daughter of his master married, his sister was given to her for a bridal gift and went away from her own mother to live in the young mistress' new home. "It always filled us with sorrow when we were separated either by circumstances of marriage or death. Although we were not properly housed, properly nourished nor properly clothed we loved each other and loved our cabin homes and were unhappy when compelled to part."

"There are many beautiful spots near the Green River and our home was situated near Greensburgh, the county seat of Green County." The area occupied by Mr. Buckner and his relatives is located near the river and the meanderings of the stream almost formed a peninsula covered with rich soil. Buckner's hill relieved the landscape and clear springs bubbled through crevices affording much water for household use and near those springs white and negro children met to enjoy themselves.

"Forty years after I left Greensburg I went back to visit the springs and try to meet my old friends. The friends had passed away, only a few merchants and salespeople remembered my ancestors."

A story told by Dr. Buckner relates an evening at the beginning of the Civil War. "I had heard my parents talk of the war but it did not seem real to me until one night when mother came to the

pallet where we slept and called to us to 'Get up and tell our uncles good-bye.' Then four startled little children arose. Mother was standing in the room with a candle or a sort of torch made from grease drippings and old pieces of cloth, (these rude candles were in common use and afforded but poor light) and there stood her four brothers, Jacob, John, Bill, and Isaac all with the light of adventure shining upon their mulatto countenances. They were starting away to fight for their liberties and we were greatly impressed."

Dr. Buckner stated that officials thought Jacob entirely too aged to enter the service as he had a few scattered white hairs but he remembers he was brawny and unafraid. Isaac was too young but the other two uncles were accepted. One never returned because he was killed in battle but one fought throughout the war and was never wounded. He remembers how the white men were indignant because the negroes were allowed to enlist and how Master Stanton Buckner was forced to hide out in the woods for many months because he had met slave Frank Buckner and had tried to kill him. Frank returned to Greensburg, forgave his master and procured a paper stating that he was at fault, after which Stanton returned to active service. "Yes, the road has been long. Memory brings back those days and the love of my mother is still real to me, God bless her!"

Relating to the value of an education Dr. Buckner hopes every Caucassian and Afro-American youth and maiden will strive to attain great heights. His first efforts to procure knowledge consisted of reciting A.B.C.s from the McGuffey's Blue-backed speller with his unlettered sister for a teacher. In later years he attended a school conducted by the Freeman's Association. He bought a grammar from a white school boy and studied it at home. When sixteen years of age he was employed to teach negro children and grieves to recall how limited his ability was bound to have been. "When a father considers sending his son or daughter to school, today, he orders catalogues, consults his friends and considers the location and surroundings and the advice of those who have patronized the different schools. He finally decides upon the school that promises the boy or girl the most attractive and comfortable surroundings. When I taught the African children I boarded with an old man whose cabin was filled with his own family. I climbed a ladder leading from the cabin into a dark uncomfortable loft where a comfort and a straw bed were my only conveniences."

Leaving Greensburg the young mulatto made his way to Indianapolis where he became acquainted with the first educated Negro he had ever met. The Negro was Robert Bruce Bagby, then principal of the only school for Negroes in Indianapolis. "The same old building is standing there today that housed Bagby's institution then," he declares.

Dr. Buckner recalls that when he left Bagby's school he was so low financially he had to procure a position in a private residence as house boy. This position was followed by many jobs of serving tables at hotels and eating houses, of any and all kinds. While engaged in that work he met Colonel Albert Johnson and his lovely wife, both natives of Arkansas and he remembers their congratulations when they learned that he was striving for an education. They advised his entering an educational institution at Terre Haute. His desire had been to enter that institution of Normal Training but felt doubtful of succeeding in the advanced courses taught because his

advantages had been so limited, but Mrs. Johnson told him that "God gives his talents to the different species and he would love and protect the negro boy."

After studying several years at the Terre Haute State Normal George W. Buckner felt assured that he was reasonably prepared to teach the negro youths and accepted the professorship of schools at Vincennes, Washington and other Indiana Villages. "I was interested in the young people and anxious for their advancement but the suffering endured by my invalid mother, who had passed into the great beyond, and the memory of little Master Dickie's lingering illness and untimely death would not desert my consciousness. I determined to take up the study of medical practice and surgery which I did."

Dr. Buckner graduated from the Indiana Electic Medical College in 1890. His services were needed at Indianapolis so he practiced medicine in that city for a year, then located at Evansville where he has enjoyed an ever increasing popularity on account of his sympathetic attitude among his people.

"When I came to Evansville," says Dr. Buckner, "there were seventy white physicians practicing in the area, they are now among the departed. Their task was strenuous, roads were almost impossible to travel and those brave men soon sacrificed their lives for the good of suffering humanity." Dr. Buckner described several of the old doctors as "Striding a horse and setting out through all kinds of weather."

Dr. Buckner is a veritable encyclopedia of negro lore. He stops at many points during an interview to relate stories he has gleaned here and there. He has forgotten where he first heard this one or that one but it helps to illustrate a point. One he heard near the end of the war follows, and although it has recently been retold it holds the interest of the listener. "Andrew Jackson owned an old negro slave, who stayed on at the old home when his beloved master went into politics, became an American soldier and statesman and finally the 7th president of the United States. The good slave still remained through the several years of the quiet uneventful last years of his master and witnessed his death, which occurred at his home near Nashville, Tennessee. After the master had been placed under the sod, Uncle Sammy was seen each day visiting Jackson's grave.

"Do you think President Jackson is in heaven?" an acquaintance asked Uncle Sammy.

"If he wanted to go there, he's there now," said the old man. "If Master Andy wanted to do any thing all Hell couldn't keep him from doin' it."

Dr. Buckner believes each Negro is confident that he will take himself with all his peculiarities to the land of promise. Each physical feature and habitual idiosyncrasy will abide in his redeemed personality. Old Joe will be there in person with the wrinkle crossing the bridge of his nose and little Stephen will wear his wool pulled back from his eyes and each will recognize his fellow man. "What fools we all are." declared Dr. Buckner.

Asked his views concerning the different books embraced in the Holy Bible, Dr. Buckner, who is a student of the Bible said, "I believe almost every story in the Bible is an allegory, composed to

illustrate some fundamental truth that could otherwise never have been clearly presented only through the medium of an allegory."

"The most treacherous impulse of the human nature and the one to be most dreaded is jealousy." With these words the aged Negro doctor launched into the expression of his political views. "I'm a Democrat." He then explained how he voted for the man but had confidence that his chosen party possesses ability in choosing proper candidates. He is an ardent follower of Franklin D. Roosevelt and speaks of Woodrow Wilson with bated breath.

Through the influence of John W. Boehne, Sr., and the friendly advice of other influential citizens of Evansville Dr. Buckner was appointed minister to Liberia, on Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, in the year 1913. Dr. Buckner appreciated the confidence of his friends in appointing him and cherishes the experiences gained while abroad. He noted the expressions of gratitude toward cabinet members by the citizens of that African coast. One Albino youth brought an offering of luscious mangoes and desired to see the minister from the United States of America. Some natives presented palm oils. "The natives have been made to understand that the United States has given aid to Liberia in a financial way and the customs-service of the republic is temporarily administered headed by an American." "A thoroughly civilized Negro state does not exist in Liberia nor do I believe in any part of West Africa. Superstition is the interpretation of their religion, their political views are a hodgepodge of unconnected ideas. Strength over rules knowledge and jealousy crowds out almost all hope of sympathetic achievement and adjustment." Dr. Buckner recounted incidents where jealousy was apparent in the behavior of men and women of higher civilizations than the African natives. While voyaging to Spain on board a Spanish vessel, he witnessed a very refined, polite Jewish woman being reduced to tears by the taunts of a Spanish officer, on account of her nationality. "Jealousy," he said, "protrudes itself into politics, religion and prevents educational achievement."

During a political campaign I was compelled to pay a robust Negro man to follow me about my professional visits and my social evenings with my friends and family, to prevent meeting physical violence to myself or family when political factions were virtually at war within the area of Evansville. The influence of political captains had brought about the dreadful condition and ignorant Negroes responded to their political graft, without realizing who had befriended them in need."

"The negro youths are especially subject to propoganda of the four-flusher for their home influence is, to say the least, negative. Their opportunities limited, their education neglected and they are easily aroused by the meddling influence of the vote-getter and the traitor. I would to God that their eyes might be opened to the light."

Dr. Buckner's influence is mostly exhibited in the sick room, where his presence is introduced in the effort to relieve pain.

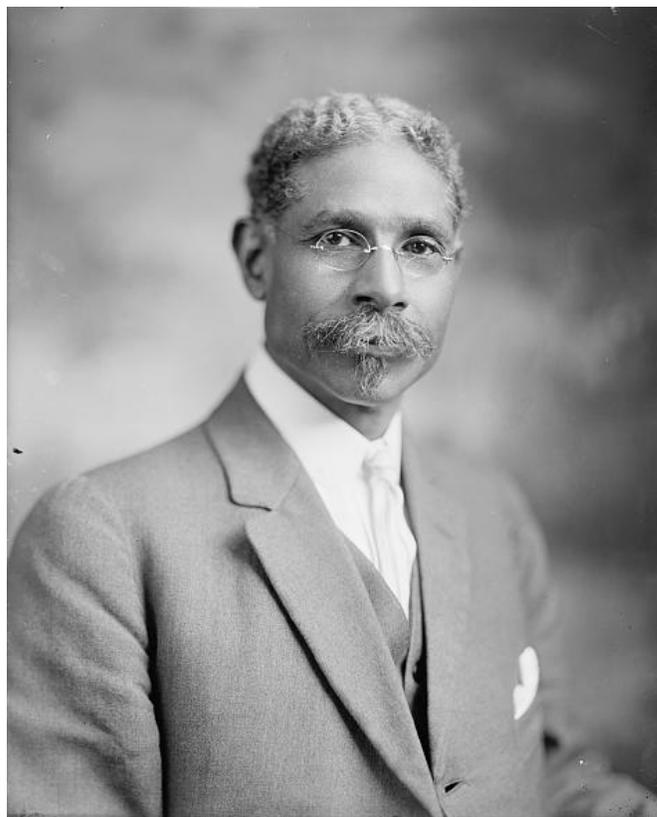
The gradual rise from slavery to prominence, the many trials encountered along the road has ripened the always sympathetic nature of Dr. Buckner into a responsive suffer among a suffering people. He has hope that proper influences and sympathetic advice will mould the

plastic character of the Afro-American youths of the United States into proper citizens and that their immortal souls inherit the promised reward of the redeemed through grace.

"Receivers of emancipation from slavery and enjoyers of emancipation from sin through the sacrifice of Abraham Lincoln and Jesus Christ; Why should not the negroes be exalted and happy?" are the words of Dr. Buckner.

Note: G.W. Buckner was born December 1st, 1852. The negroes in Kentucky expressed it, "In fox huntin' time" one brother was born in "Simmon time", one in "Sweet tater time," and another in "Plantin' time."

—Negro lore.



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References:

- (A) Dr. Geo. Washington Buckner, former slave, Evansville.
- (B) R. D. O'Hara, colored attorney, Evansville.

Dr. George Washington Buckner, a man well acquainted with the traditions of the American negro, was born a slave and ranks among the colorful personalities of Evansville, Indiana.

Dr. Buckner is a well educated man and is active in the interests of the city of Evansville. He was born in Green County, Kentucky and received his elementary training in Green County schools. He later attended public school in Indianapolis and then attended the State Normal at Terre Haute for two years.

Buckner, always interested in the welfare of his negro companions, decided he could serve them best by becoming a physician, so he took a medical course at the Electic Medical College in Indianapolis, graduating from that institution in 1890.

He began practicing medicine in Evansville soon after his graduation and continued his work here until 1913, when his name was recommended to the President by Secretary of State Bryan, for the post of United States Minister to Liberia, the negro republic on the west coast of Africa. His name was sent to the senate by President Woodrow Wilson and the appointment was confirmed.

By accepting the appointment of Minister to Liberia, Dr. Buckner was embracing the opportunity to render further service to people of his own race, for the republic of Liberia was founded by an association called the American Colonization Society. This society was founded in 1816 and at one time was presided over by Henry Clay. The idea of the original colonization movement was the founding of a colony for emancipated negroes and of giving them a chance for self government and self improvement in the mother continent, Africa.

Little promise of successful colonization was realized until a treaty was concluded with native chiefs. By that treaty the American Colonization Society seemed the greater part of the territory now included within the boundaries of Liberia.

The first permanent colony of emancipated negroes was sent to Liberia in 1821. The colonists were lauded on an island at the mouth of the St. Paul's River. They called it Providence Island. However, the colonists soon decided to go to the mainland and there they founded the town of Monrovia at Cape Mesurado. This has been their chief town from that time and is still the capital city.

The American Colonization Association allotted to each man thirty acres of ground and the means to cultivate the same. Soon the area became crowded and it became necessary to purchase new tracts and enlarge it.

Native chiefs were welcomed into the colony; unfriendly chiefs were subdued. In 1847 the American Colonization Society ended its guardianship and Liberia became an independent republic.

The old slaves or their descendants organized their own government, using the United States Government as their model.

The three divisions of government agree with the divisions of the Government of the United States. The constitution provides for a president, a senate and a house of representatives. The supreme court exists as do subordinate courts.

The president is elected for a term of four years and senators for four years. Representatives are elected for two years.

Citizens may exercise the rights of electors when they reach the age of twenty-one years.

Any tribes or members of tribes in Liberia are received into the colony after making the oath of allegiance and are granted equal rights and civil liberties with other colonists.

Jehudi Ashman, a white American, was the leader of the expedition that founded Liberia. The projects' chief aim, the gradual extinction of slavery from the United States and of the negro race by deportation, has never been accomplished.

The number of negroes deported from the United States has never been great in any one year.

It was the delightful privilege of deported American slaves to put the nucleus of christianity in a Dark continent. Between 50,000 and 75,000 negroes in Liberia now speak the English language and about half of that number are members of the Christian church.

Dr. Buckner made a sacrifice by leaving his own family to fill his appointment in Liberia.

Stella, his oldest daughter was fifteen years of age. Helen was eight. George was six and Zachariah was four.

The mother did not consent to go because of the children and believed it would be unsafe to expose them to the voyage and long sojourn in a hot climate.

Dr. Buckner came back from Liberia possessed of the above facts and many others concerning the natives of the African colony. He hopes for improvements in sanitation, which he declares is an almost unknown art in Monrovia and other Liberian cities.

"The colonists have neglected gardening and have developed slothful habits," he relates.

Many of the houses are constructed of brick and corrugated iron and because the climate is hot the citizens live almost entirely out of doors or on verandas.

"Schools and colleges are constructed of corrugated iron and are too hot for the comfort of students." Dr. Buckner thinks this condition should be remedied.

"At home men wear only loin cloths and women only scantiest attire.

"Men follow the professions of fishermen and boatmen. Some few are painters, smiths and carpenters but the majority of the men and women despise labor. Being sons and daughters of slaves, they desire freedom from toil and desire only to loll in comfortable idleness, eating and drinking upon their verandas and not leaving their homes for days together.

"The emancipated slaves have always been gentlemen of leisure in Liberia. They aspire to serve in church or affairs of state. Their most appreciated attire consists of black suits made from cool cloth, a high collar and a cane; much like their parents have described 'Ole Masterer' or 'Young Masterer' whom they knew and loved on some southern plantation.

"May God bless them and protect them and give them knowledge!" is the prayer of Dr. George Washington Buckner. He holds these Liberian citizens dear as he does the negroes of Indiana where he administers to his own people.

"I'm glad they were not all deported to Liberia," he said. "I believe they are much better off here."

Dr. Buckner has been happy with his family and enjoys living in Evansville. "It has been a sweet home to me," he said.

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