

making SPACE

Part 2: Establishing Roots by Chasity Gunn

Maggie Oates was one of the 77 children who arrived in Elgin from the Corinth Contraband Camp. She was born in Tusculumbia, Alabama, which is about 50 miles from Corinth, Mississippi. Maggie attended Elgin's colored school; and later, Arthur Newsome petitioned the city to allow her to attend Elgin High School. In 1879, she became the high school's first African American graduate. She was also the valedictorian and gave a speech, "Elements of an ideal character," to her graduating peers. Maggie was one of 11 graduates. Shortly after, she died on December 31, 1880, after battling tuberculosis for ten months.

Newsome was a pillar in the African American community. Affectionately known as "Uncle Arthur," he was born on a North Carolina plantation in 1826, and as a child, he was taken to Cherokee, Alabama, which is near Corinth. He married and had three children during a seven-year marriage. However, his wife and children were later sold to an enslaver in Arkansas. He asked to be sold with them but was denied. He asked to visit them at Christmas but was denied. Eventually, he remarried.

Shortly after the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, Newsome fled the Alabama plantation to an area occupied by Union troops. There, he drove wagons for a Minnesota regiment, while his wife, Minerva, was sent to Elgin along with other contrabands. Newsome did not go with them but continued working with the Union troops. Almost a year later, Newsome was brought to Elgin by a soldier in the Minnesota regiment who was returning home.

He was reunited with his family and worked at Lansing Morgan's lumber yard. He bought materials from his employer to build houses along Ann Street, which became the location of Elgin's African American community. Newsome also served as a trustee for Second Baptist Church, one of Elgin's early African American churches. His home was the informal meeting place for prayer and worship services.

During the late 1860s, African American children were forced to attend a segregated school that was considered unsuitable. Newsome, along with 16 other residents, signed a petition protesting the unequal facility, despite them being taxed by the city to fund all public schools. In 1872, Elgin's schools were integrated.

Newsome was not only a man of faith, principle, and enterprise; he tended a large garden and was known for his meats at the annual Emancipate Day barbecues. He died in 1913.

His daughter, Mary Newsome, was an infant who was among the contraband. In 1882, she married John H.C. Hall, who was born free in Chicago. He was a preacher's son and a veteran who served in the Civil War in the 29th U.S. Colored Infantry. He guarded Confederate prisoners of war at Camp Douglas in Chicago.

Hall was an active member of Elgin's community. He was the Sunday School superintendent of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church. Hall was the first African American man to be called to serve on a Kane County jury and the first to be a candidate for the city council. He also worked to help create the Kane County Afro-American League. John and his brother, Gus, had a barbershop in Elgin.

Mary and John had a son, Pete, who played football at Elgin High School and was elected team captain. In 1903, he became Elgin High's first African American male graduate. Due to employment discrimination, Pete had limited work opportunities, so he moved to Minnesota in 1906. He was a bellhop and was musically gifted. He managed a professional quartet, directed a church choir, and was a composer.

Another well-known Newsome was Edward, who was born in Cherokee, Alabama. His grandfather, Abraham, brought him to Elgin. Abraham was the uncle of the Newsome children who died in the smallpox epidemic in 1862-1863.

In 1898, Arthur Green came to Elgin with his mother. He worked as a janitor until 1901, when he went to Chicago to work for Simmons Cigar Company. When the company moved to the West Indies, he became a Pullman porter. Green retired after 40 years and moved back to Elgin. He and his wife, Adellia, had three children: Dorothy, Arthur Jr., and Alberta.