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Black School an early monument to civil rights

By Justin McClelland, Staff Writer

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HARVEYSBURG — On the surface, the Harveysburg Black School is a typical one-room school house located just off Ohio 73 in this small Warren County village. Inside, rows of empty desks face a blackboard lined wall, while bookcases show artifacts from the village's 180-year history.

But the story behind the school means so much more — a monument to bravery and equal rights erected at a time when such ideals were considered revolutionary and dangerous. The school/museum will be open for its biannual open house from 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday, May 16.

The Harveysburg Black School was started by Dr. Jesse and Elizabeth Harvey in 1831 for black children who were not allowed to attend regular public school because of segregation laws. The Harveys were devout Quakers, who believed slavery was evil and that education provided a way to freedom. The school, founded just two years after the village of Harveysburg was created, is believed to be the first in the state dedicated to the education of blacks.

"The Harveys were very devoted to their ideals and drew a lot of bravery from that," said Lucy McCarren, a member of the Harveysburg Historical Society, which cares for the school.

The school typically taught 30-40 students from all grade levels, McCarren said. Children of southern whites and their slaves were sometimes sent to the school by their owners, according to McCarren.

Among the notable students who attended the school was Orindatus S. B. Wall, who became the first regular commissioned African American captain in the U.S. Army during the civil war.

In large part due to the large Quaker communities in northern Warren County, the area was fairly progressive in abolition and providing equal rights, according to local historian John Zimkus. Several towns in Warren County provided stops on the underground railroad for slaves attempting to escape to Canada.

Nevertheless, times weren't easy. Free blacks had to carry papers proving their freedom or they could be accosted and even taken to the south and sold into slavery, Zimkus said.

The school was closed around 1909 when area schools became integrated, McCarren said.

The one-room school house also houses a number of other artifacts from the history of Harveysburg, including mementos of famous residents and early clothing.

The Harveysburg Black School hosts two open houses annually, one in the spring and one in the fall. It is otherwise open only by appointment by calling McCarren at (513) 897-6195.

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