



## A Message from Your Commander

by RANDY OLEYNIK  
Carleton, Michigan



THE NATIONAL MEET IN DEARBORN, Michigan was a huge success with over 200 Wheelmen attending. It is always wonderful to visit with all our friends, make new ones and play with old bikes for a few days. Thank you to all that helped me with the century ride, Bill Smith and Cathy Smith for coordinating the meet, and all that helped when they saw it was needed. We are looking forward to next year's meet in Cape May, New Jersey.

I was able to meet face to face with several of our volunteers that hold important roles in our club. Brian Birkner, the newsletter editor and I considered a couple of new ideas for the newsletter to freshen it up a bit and bring in new content. For instance, we would like any members who are willing to share their story as to how they became a Wheelmen. Everyone has come to our club in a different and unique way, and we would like you to write up your story and submit it. We would also hope to include a technical or "how-to" article in every issue, so if you have conquered a common problem or have a "fix"



JOHN GRACE (right) receiving the Commander's Award for Mentoring from Commander Randy Oleynik (left) at the 2023 Meet, Dearborn, Michigan.



Andrew F. Sanderson, Editor

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that you can share, please write it up and send it to Brian at [wheelmennewsletter@outlook.com](mailto:wheelmennewsletter@outlook.com) or to 3907 Trejo Lane, Chester, VA 23831-1865

In speaking with Andrew Sanderson, our magazine editor, we are still in constant need of articles for our magazine. If you have any ideas and are uncomfortable with writing an article, please contact Andrew and he can help you get the story written. The magazine is the pride of our organi-

zation and I know everyone appreciates all the effort that Andrew and prior editors have made to keep it at award quality. We will start to publicly recognize one of our authors next year with a club vote on the previous year's articles. You will see a ballot in our newsletter prior to the meet next year to cast your vote.

As always, if you have any ideas to add value to our club, please contact me and let's see what we can do. 🚴

# Major Taylor – The Early Years

by BUCK PEACOCK, Atlanta, Georgia

**A** NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I wrote an article for The Wheelmen Magazine about Stillman Whittaker, a prominent record breaking highwheel bicycle racer in the late 1880s (The Wheelmen Magazine, No. 52, May 1998, and No. 53, November 1998).

My source for most of the information I used came from his Grandson, Dana Whittaker, Sr. Grandad Stillman had passed down to his descendants a wonderful archive of periodicals, letters, news clippings, photographs, and other ephemera, contemporary to his racing career. Dana had a good bit of it. The photos were all wonderful glimpses into the life of a highwheel bicycle racer, but one in particular stood out. Dana had several cabinet card copies of this picture, along with two other different views of the same scene in tintype format.<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1)

The people in the picture were identified on the back as R.T. Van Horne, Percy Stone, Stillman Whittaker and L.D. (Birdie) Munger, with an unidentified black child in a wagon.

Research based on the Whittaker-family archives of Stillman's racing career helped to determine that the photo was taken on April 24 or 25, 1886, in Clarksville, Missouri, before a significant 50-mile highwheel bicycle race. The men in the picture



FIGURE 1. CABINET CARD OF FOUR BICYCLE RACERS AND AN UNKNOWN BLACK CHILD IN A WAGON; from left to right, R.T. Van Horne, Percy Stone, Stillman Whittaker, and L.D. (Birdie) Munger. This card was preserved by Stillman Whittaker (3rd from the left), along with two other slightly different poses in tintype format. From the collection of Buck Peacock.



FIGURE 2. THE FACE OF THE CHILD IN THE WAGON COMPARED with pictures of Major Taylor at the ages of approximately 20 and 30 years old.

From left to right: Stillman Whittaker Clarksville cabinet card; misc. 1901 newspaper article; Major Taylor autobiography frontispiece.

were among the best bicycle racers in the entire United States at that time. They were all champions, widely known and respected.

When I first saw the photo, and being aware of the relationship Birdie Munger had with Major Taylor (a prominent feature in Major's autobiography and consequently noted by later biographers as well), my immediate reaction was that the child in the wagon must have been a young Major Taylor.

At the time it was really just a gut feeling. But reasons behind this early opinion are obvious:

1. Birdie Munger, one of the subjects in the photo, was a continuing presence and profound influence all through Major Taylor's career. He was influential to the extent that Major had dedicated his autobiography to him.
2. Major Taylor was born November 26, 1878, and would have been about 7 1/2 years old at the time of the photo. The child in the wagon looks to be about that age.
3. The facial resemblance of the child to the adult Major Taylor is undeniable.<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2)

So, over the years since, I have tried to find a link to confirm my suspicion. My research led to this article:





## PREFACE

IN DOING SOME GENERAL RESEARCH into the early life of Major Taylor, the Black champion bicycle racer at the turn of the 20th century, I came across a few interesting bits of information which have eluded later biographers. This information helps to build a more accurate picture of his childhood.

Starting with Andrew Ritchie's 1988 biography, *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer*, it has become accepted that the names of his parents were Gilbert and Saphronia Taylor. So, to begin, I went back to see what I could find out about Gilbert and Saphronia.

## ENSLAVEMENT AND FREEDOM

Major Taylor had kept scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and other materials, as well as letters he had written to his wife Daisy. These materials were passed down through generations of his family, and now reside in the archives of the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis.

In a 1909 letter to his wife, Daisy, Taylor stated that his father's service in the U.S. Army during the Civil War was under the name Gilbert Wilhite.<sup>3</sup> This opens the door to records that reveal that Taylor's father at one time had been under the enslavement of a man named Benjamin Wilhoyte.<sup>4</sup> Wilhoyte lived in Oldham County, Kentucky, just northeast of Louisville (Jefferson County). Gilbert had previously been enslaved by Wilhoyte's father-in-law, Daniel Fields, and was passed to Wilhoyte upon Fields' death in September of 1863.<sup>5</sup>

Gilbert's early Civil War records indicate that he was drafted September 30, 1864, and was mustered into the U.S. Army's 122nd Colored Troops, Company A, four days later, October 3, in Louisville. His birthplace is listed on these documents as Hardin County, Kentucky, which is just southwest of Louisville. Facts regarding his movements between Hardin, Oldham, and Jefferson Counties are unknown.

Regardless, it appears that Gilbert was enslaved from a very early age, if not born into slavery, and did not have a surname other than that of his enslaver Wilhoyte. Thus, when he was drafted the Army used that for his surname, albeit with the modified spelling of Wilhite. His Army papers

indicate that he was 29 years old at the start of his military service. That indicates his birth year would have been 1835, although later information conflicts with this, indicating that he was probably more like about 23 when he joined the Army.<sup>6</sup>

Most importantly, when Gilbert was drafted, Benjamin Wilhoyte became eligible to receive \$300 compensation from the U.S. government for allowing his conscription into the U.S. Army. In the same document is Wilhoyte's agreement to give Gilbert his freedom, effective the date he was mustered in.<sup>7</sup>

A couple of side notes to consider: Wilhite's first name on several of his military documents was Charles instead of Gilbert. There was another Wilhite, first name Collins, who was mustered into the U.S. Colored Troops on the same date, same place, and in same regiment as Gilbert. His age was listed on his Army papers as 30, one year older than Gilbert's Army enlistment age. Per the 1860 US Census Slave Schedule, Benjamin Wilhoyte did have another male slave who would have been 28 years old at that time.<sup>8</sup> Given the gross misread of Gilbert's age, and the uncertainty of ages listed on slave census schedules, it is probable that Collins was also enslaved by Benjamin Wilhoyte. It is not known whether Collins was a brother of Gilbert, or just another of Wilhoyte's enslaved, or both. There is no evidence that Gilbert ever spoke of this man to his son, Major. Collins Wilhite died shortly before the end of the Civil War in the hospital at Portsmouth, Virginia, from bronchitis, on March 17, 1865.

After the end of the war, in the spring of 1865, the state of Texas was reluctant to abandon the cause and accept emancipation. Gilbert's regiment, the 122nd U.S. Colored Troops, Company A, was sent to Texas to restore order and ensure freedom for the enslaved there. Their arrival there in June,<sup>9</sup> is now commemorated on June 19th as a national holiday, Juneteenth, celebrating the benchmark end of slavery. Having fulfilled their military obligation, the members of the regiment were discharged on September 30, 1865, in Corpus Christi, Texas, well after the official end of the war. At that point Gilbert owed no obligation to Wilhoyte or the U.S. Army. He was a free man.<sup>10</sup> Gilbert's whereabouts between that time and the U.S. Census taken June 1, 1870, are unknown, but he apparently had

established a family prior to his service in the war.

The 1870 census<sup>11</sup> lists Gilbert Taylor in Louisville with his wife Sarah (later Saphronia) and three children: Lizzie, 2 years old, Alice, 7, and William, 9 months. That puts Lizzie's birth year in 1868 and William's in 1869, so Gilbert must have been back in the Louisville area by then. Alice would have been born in 1863, when Wilhoyte's father-in-law, Daniel Fields, was Gilbert's enslaver, and before Gilbert joined the Army.

Interestingly, Gilbert and Saphronia would not have been bound in a legal marriage then, as enslaved persons were not allowed to enter into legal contracts. They were considered chattel, or property. Typically, children of enslaved persons became enslaved themselves. So, the oldest child, Alice, was presumably born into slavery.

Although Kentucky had not joined the rebellion, it was really a pro-slavery state. And since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 called for freeing slaves only in the rebellion states, those enslaved in Kentucky remained enslaved.

Even when the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, banning all slavery, was passed on December 6, 1865, the Kentucky General Assembly rejected it and continued to recognize slavery (The 13th Amendment was not ratified in Kentucky until 1976). However, by that time Gilbert was a free man through his military service, and regardless of Kentucky's stand on the Emancipation, he was somehow able to establish freedom for his wife and children. In contrast, Indiana was one of the first 18 states to ratify the 13th Amendment. The attitude toward slavery in Kentucky may have contributed to the decision for Gilbert to move his family from Louisville to Indianapolis.

It is not surprising to find that there is no information available to indicate where Gilbert and Saphronia first met. But it is easy to presume that Saphronia was enslaved also. Her surname is listed on her daughter Gertrude's death certificate as Kelter. Kelter is an uncommon name in Kentucky, and I could find only a few in the state. Andrew Ritchie, in footnotes to his Taylor biography, states that Saphronia's parents were Robert and Sarah Kelter. Unfortunately, Ritchie did not provide his source for the parents' names. Even expanding it to Ket-



ner or Coulter, I could find no Robert and Sarah Kelter/ Ketner/Coulter anywhere in Kentucky, or even in the surrounding states. The only possibly significant Kelter I could find was a Black woman, Margaret Kelter, who was listed in the 1873 Louisville City Directory at 160 Jefferson Street, about a block from the Taylors' residence listed in the 1870 City Directory (the Taylors were not listed in the 1873 directory).

Setting aside the Kelter name for the moment, there is a more likely scenario regarding Gilbert and Saphronia's relationship. In the Federal Slave Census for 1850, Daniel Fields, enumerating his 14 slaves, listed a 9-year-old male and a 6-year-old female. In the 1860 Slave Census, Fields listed an 18-year-old male and a 16-year-old female. These were probably the same two. Fields likely was Gilbert's enslaver in 1860 (definitely in 1863),<sup>12</sup> so the 18-year-old male was most likely Gilbert, and a good guess is that the 16-year-old female could have been Saphronia, as these ages match up closely to their ages listed 10 years later in the 1870 U.S. Census in Louisville. In that census, Gilbert is listed as 29 years old, and Sarah (Saphronia) was 26. As mentioned above, their first child was born when Gilbert was enslaved by Fields. So, it is likely that at that time, Saphronia was living in the same household with Gilbert as a family. If that was the case, when Gilbert passed to Wilhoyte upon Fields' death in 1863, it is possible that Saphronia and the children went to Wilhoyte along with Gilbert, or to others of Fields' heirs, or was even sold off to a third party (Kelter?), thus temporarily splitting up the future Taylor family.

Gilbert's willingness to join the U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War takes on added significance considering the promise of freedom from slavery that accompanied military service, and on top of that he would be fighting for the freedom of his wife and children. This surely gave hope to Gilbert that they would later be able to reunite. The fact that he did achieve this is a testimony to his commitment to family.

Some of Major Taylor's biographers describe Gilbert as a farmer, with a mostly rural background. The rural background idea fits well with his life under slavery, but his home was listed in the 1870 Louisville city directory as 149 W. Green Street, in the 5th Ward, and his occupation as laborer.

Green Street was within the city limits, and very urban. It was a well populated mixed-race neighborhood, although mostly Black. As was typical in the days before zoning, residences stood alongside businesses. The neighborhood included barbers, a band, a black restaurant, a brewery, blacksmiths and so on.

It should be noted here that city directories for a given year contained information obtained toward the end of the preceding year. This means the Taylors probably lived at that address in 1869 as well as 1870. Gilbert also was listed as laborer on his Civil War papers, and later in Indianapolis city directories and censuses he was listed always with the occupation of laborer (other than once in Indianapolis as a whitewasher), and never as farmer. Saphronia was listed in the 1870 census as "domestic servant."

Where did he come up with the surname Taylor? For one thing, it was a very common name. In 1870, there were approximately 8,079 people in Kentucky by that name.<sup>13</sup> In Louisville, where Gilbert's family lived, there were 138 white people and 349 Black people with the surname Taylor.<sup>14</sup> If you wanted to just fit in, "Taylor" would make you part of one big family. And perhaps very significantly, given that the adult Major Taylor was a staunch Christian, a trait he is said to have received from his mother, there is another link to that name.

At that time there was a prominent Black minister and teacher in Louisville who preached at churches within blocks of Gilbert and Saphronia's home on Green Street. This man was a Methodist Episcopal minister by the name of Marshall W. Taylor.<sup>15</sup> (Figure 3)

Rev. Taylor, at the age of 15, in 1861, had been one of three men who were influential in forming a fraternal group for Black men, the United Brothers of Friendship (UBF).<sup>16</sup> A history of the organization states that it began as:

[A] group of young men, free and slave, being desirous of improving their condition. They had hardly been organized two years before the Negro was called to take up arms in defense of his country by the immortal Abraham Lincoln. ... many of its members responded to the call.<sup>17</sup>

The UBF was a benevolent association,

dedicated to the care, welfare, and advancement of Negro men. By 1878 there were 4,000 members, and by 1892, there were 100,000 members in 19 states and two U.S. territories. The organization grew exponentially into the 20th century, with thousands of members and chapters established from coast to coast.

Rev. Taylor was born of former slaves who were set free just before his birth in 1846. He went on to be a very influential black man in the Methodist Episcopal Church, a church which included Blacks as well as whites almost from its begin-

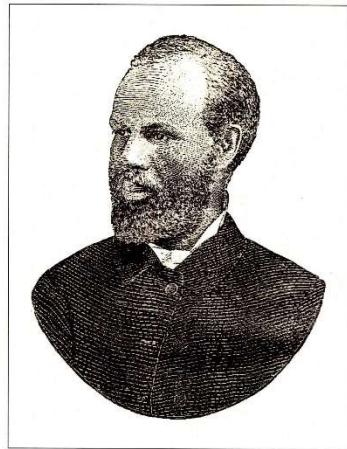


FIGURE 3. REVEREND MARSHALL W. TAYLOR, frontispiece from his book *Plantation Melodies*.

nings. He later authored one of the first books of African American spirituals, *Plantation Melodies*.<sup>18</sup>

Gilbert, a Black man who lived in the same city and area and who was one of the men suffering the very hardships addressed by Rev. Taylor, and who had also answered President Lincoln's call, must have been influenced by Rev. Taylor.

Rev. Taylor lived in Louisville in 1874 at 192 Breckenridge St., near Jackson Street, and was the pastor at Coke Chapel, located on Breckenridge between Preston and Jackson streets.<sup>19</sup> That church still exists today at that same location in Louisville, as Coke Memorial United Methodist. That is about six blocks from where the Taylors lived on Green Street, making it an easy walk to church services. Rev. Taylor also preached



at Hancock Street Methodist Episcopal Church, on Hancock Street near Walnut Street, also a few blocks from that Green Street home. It would not be a stretch to think that Gilbert was influenced by Rev. Taylor for his family's surname.

Gilbert moved his family from Louisville to Indianapolis sometime between 1870, when they were enumerated in the federal census, and 1875, when a small notice in the Indianapolis News provided a mention of Gilbert there. In 1875 Rev. Taylor also relocated to Indianapolis, where he established a branch of the Coke Chapel on Sixth Street.<sup>20</sup>

It is tempting to think that Gilbert and Rev. Taylor made the move at about the same time, if not actually together, then each at least aware of the other's move. In the 1875 newspaper clipping, Gilbert Taylor was listed as one of the trustees elected to the Coke Chapel Conference.<sup>21</sup>

The president of that organization was Rev. Marshall W. Taylor. So, they knew each other well and interacted in the work at Coke Chapel.

The earliest residence in Indianapolis documented for Gilbert's family was in the 1878 Indianapolis City Directory (1877 residence) at 40 Cora St., about six blocks from the Coke Chapel address.<sup>22</sup> Major Taylor, whose full name was Marshall W. Taylor ("Walter" for the "W" was not used until later in his adult life), was born in 1878, probably at that Cora Street house. It seems obvious that his namesake was the Rev. Marshall W. Taylor. The Taylor family maintained a link to Coke Chapel for a long time. It was later moved from Sixth Street to the corner of Howard and Second Streets, and was rebranded as Simpson Chapel.<sup>23</sup> In 1900, Major's sister Gertrude's burial services were held at Simpson Chapel.<sup>24</sup> When Rev. Marshall W. Taylor died in 1887, a memorial service was held for him at Simpson Chapel.<sup>25</sup>

#### HOW MAJOR WAS INFLUENCED BY HIS FATHER

Imagine the transitions Gilbert navigated during a whirlwind three-year period from slavery to Civil War military service to freedom with his family reunited. In this newfound freedom, he was faced with the responsibility of making a life to support his family, with few skills, not even reading or

writing,<sup>26</sup> while being thrown into a world aggressively hostile to his skin color.

The determination that Gilbert displayed in re-establishing his family after the war and relocating to Indianapolis was remarkable. His bike racing son had that same fire and determination within him, enabling him to weave his way through a hostile world as well.

A distinct manifestation of Taylor's Christian faith, one that he himself as well as his biographers have pointed out, was his refusal to race on Sundays. Much has been made of the religious influence coming from his mother, but his father's early connection to Rev. Marshall W. Taylor, culminating with naming a son after the minister, must have been a powerful influence on young Marshall as well.

It is not clear if Gilbert had any direct involvement with the United Brothers of Friendship, but there were UBF lodges in Indianapolis: one with 40 members, established on Nov. 16, 1876, and a second one with 41 members, on April 28, 1877. Rev. Taylor embodied the principles of the UBF, so it is likely that Gilbert, even if not directly involved in the UBF, was at least well aware of the society and its principles.

#### EARLY LIFE IN INDIANAPOLIS

The Taylor family did not live on a farm, and we know that Gilbert was not a farmer. They lived at six or eight different addresses over the years in northwest Indianapolis, generally the roughest section of Indianapolis, more specifically an area known as "Sleigho Under the Hill". This gives lie to the story espoused by most of his later biographers, that he grew up on a bucolic rural farm. Sleigho was just about the exact opposite of that. It was a very tough section of Indianapolis, surrounded by other notorious slums with names such as Bucktown and Long Branch.<sup>27</sup> The name Sleigho came from "a liquor joint frequented by toughs, stood near the canal at 8th Street."<sup>28</sup>

That is about four and a half blocks from the Cora Street address of the Taylor family. The neighborhood was infamous for saloons (legal and illegal), prostitution, gambling, party houses, petty crime and occasional violence. Rent was cheap. A house two doors down from the Taylors rented for \$4.00 a month.<sup>29</sup> When Sleigho made news,

it was usually the police blotter.<sup>30</sup>

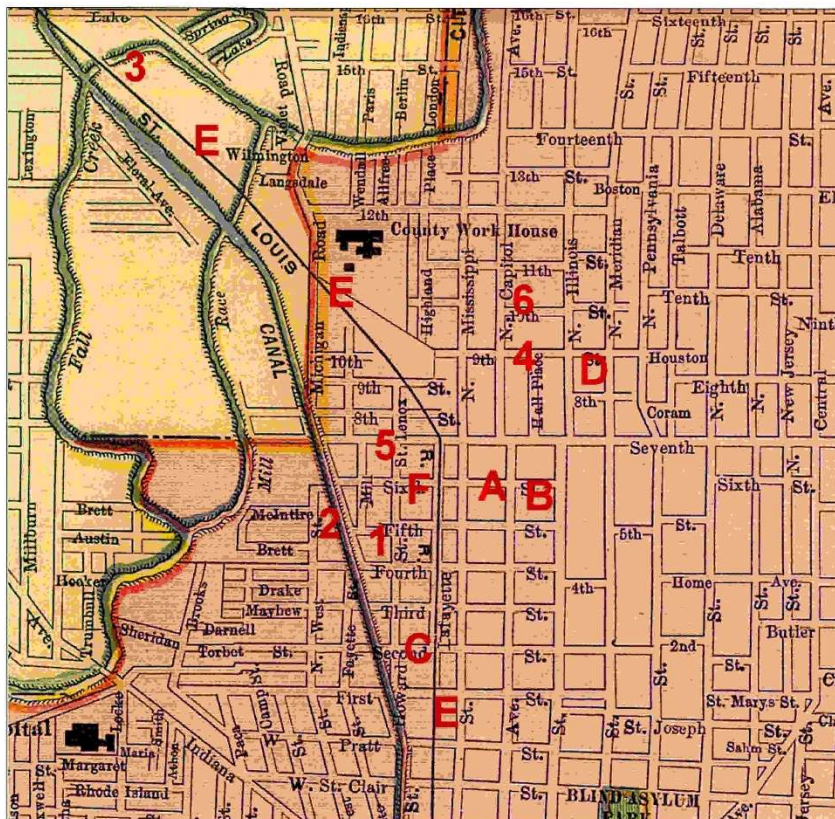
Most of the Taylor family's addresses were within a one-mile circle. Other than 40 Cora Street, they resided at 746 N. West Street, 677 Michigan Road, 272 West 9th Street, 20 Sumner Street, and several other locations up the Michigan Road near Fall Creek.<sup>31</sup> (Figure 4) The tracks for the Indianapolis, Cincinnati, St. Louis & Chicago Railroad ran right down Missouri Avenue, the center of the neighborhood, about a block and a half from the Cora Street house. It cannot be emphasized enough: it was not a farming area. Interestingly, the widow of Rev. Marshall W. Taylor, Catherine, AKA Kate, also lived in the Sleigho neighborhood, on 6th Street, minutes away from Gilbert's family.

The Taylors must have lived in poverty. Frequent moving indicates instability, an inability to stay current on rent, and a paucity of household goods. A laborer might only gain income from odd jobs on an infrequent basis. Gilbert's job in Indianapolis as coachman for the Southard family, which came later, must have been a godsend for his family, especially young Marshall, but even that employment did not last very long.

As Gilbert grew older, he suffered from various age-related disabilities. When he needed medical care, he applied to the government for veterans benefits under his military surname, Wilhite. In the 1910 U.S. Census, he was enumerated on May 12 as living in the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Marion, Indiana, at age 68. He died November 10, 1910, and was buried in Crown Hill National Cemetery in Indianapolis as a Civil War veteran. His tombstone reads "Corpl. Gilbert Wilhite, U.S.C.T.," providing the rank for his Army service with the United States Colored Troops.<sup>32</sup> (Figure 5)

Thus, Major Taylor's father, despite going by his chosen surname of Taylor for himself and his family for most of his life, a name that his son had made famous throughout the world, in his final days had to revert to his enslaver's name. A sad ending, for sure. If Major Taylor had never referenced the Wilhite name in the letter to his wife in 1909, it would perhaps never have been known that the burial plot for Gilbert Wilhite in Crown Hill National Cemetery was the resting place of the father of the great cyclist Major Taylor.





#### Taylor Family Addresses in Indianapolis

1. 1877.....40 Cora St (Major Taylor birthplace)
2. 1882.....746 N. West St.
3. 1884.....North Indianapolis
3. 1885.....677 Michigan Rd.
4. 1886.....272 W. 9th St.
5. 1887-1888.....20 Sumner St.
3. 1889-1891.....Michigan Rd. (North Indianapolis)
3. 1892.....Corner Michigan Rd. & 14th St.
3. 1893-1894.....Michigan Rd. 1 north of Fall Creek
6. 1895.....202 W. 10th St.

#### Other Notable Addresses

- A.....6th St. M. E. Church. Coke Chapel (Rev. Marshall W. Taylor's Church)  
 B.....756 N. Tennessee St (Rev. Marshall W. Taylor's residence, 1875)  
 C.....Simpson Chapel...Corner of Howard and 2nd St. (Coke Chapel relocation)  
 D.....827 Meridian St. (A. B. Southard family residence 1883-1886)  
 E.....Cincinnati, Indianapolis & St. Louis Railroad Line. (A. B. Southard's employer)  
 F.....257 W. 6th St.... Residence of Catherine (Kate) Taylor, widow of Rev Marshall W. Taylor

FIGURE 4.  
 MAP SHOWING THE  
 PROXIMITY OF THE TAYLOR  
 FAMILY RESIDENCES *during*  
 Major Taylor's youth.  
 This area was broadly  
 referred to as North  
 Indianapolis, and more  
 specifically as the "Sleigho"  
 neighborhood.

Addresses were taken from  
 period Indianapolis City  
 Directories. The Taylors'  
 addresses were not captured  
 every year. Hence the gaps.  
 The other addresses are  
 areas important to Major  
 Taylor's upbringing.

Note: This map is from  
 1903. Some street names  
 were changed in the  
 interim, but the locations  
 on the map are accurate to  
 Major's childhood era.

[https://indianamemory.  
 contentdm.oclc.org/digital/  
 collection/HIM/id/125/  
 rec/24](https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/HIM/id/125/rec/24)

Major Taylor's mother, Saphronia, had been buried in an unmarked grave in the civil section of Crown Hill Cemetery after her death on June 11, 1897. Oddly, the name Alice Taylor is assigned to her burial.<sup>33</sup> (Figure 6) There is a lot of room for speculation about that. Saphronia's daughter Alice was there for the burial.<sup>34</sup> She may have signed a document at the cemetery, and somehow her name ended up being listed in the burial records as the interred. Bottom line, Taylor's mother and father are both buried in Crown Hill Cemetery, neither with the name that accompanied them up until their death.

Incidentally, although Wilhite was not a common name in Indianapolis, there were a few others scattered about, both Black and white, starting in the late 1880s. Perhaps significantly, two black Wilhites are found there in an 1888 city directory, living at 19 Cora St., James (a teamster) and William (a farmer). As noted above, one of Major's brothers was named William. It is doubtful that this was the brother. But the name and address are significant. Cora was a very



FIGURE 5. THE HEADSTONE OF MAJOR TAYLOR'S FATHER GILBERT TAYLOR in the Crown Hill National Cemetery, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/132596357/gilbert-wilhite>

short street, about a block and a half long, little more than an alley. 19 Cora Street is but a few houses away from the 1877 Taylor residence at 40 Cora Street. At the time of this 1888 reference, Gilbert Taylor's family was living at 20 Summer Street, about two blocks from Cora Street. These Wilhites and the Taylors must have crossed paths. Incidentally, Cora Street still exists in Indianapolis today as an alley in an industrial area.<sup>35</sup> (Figure 7)



FIGURE 8. DANIEL SOUTHARD, playing baseball, University of Chicago, 1888

#### MAJOR TAYLOR AND THE SOUTHARDS

Until Taylor wrote his autobiography in 1928, there was nothing in the myriad newspaper articles and cycling periodicals during his lifetime that mentioned his childhood association with the Southards, a wealthy white family who resided in Indianapolis, near his boyhood home.

But since Taylor wrote about it in his autobiography, it has become a linchpin in

the telling of his early development. Albert, the Southard father, was a prominent railroad executive in a city that was a major Midwestern railroad hub. Taylor wrote that his father, Gilbert, worked as a coachman for the Southard family.

He recounted that the relationship brought him into a close friendship with the Southard's young son Dan (Figure 8), leading to a time when he lived in the Southard household and was treated as one of the family. He wrote that he was pro-



FIGURE 6. THE UNMARKED BURIAL OF MAJOR TAYLOR'S MOTHER SAPHRONIA in the pauper's area of the Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis, Indiana. The name "Alice" is incorrect.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/46030866/alice-taylor>

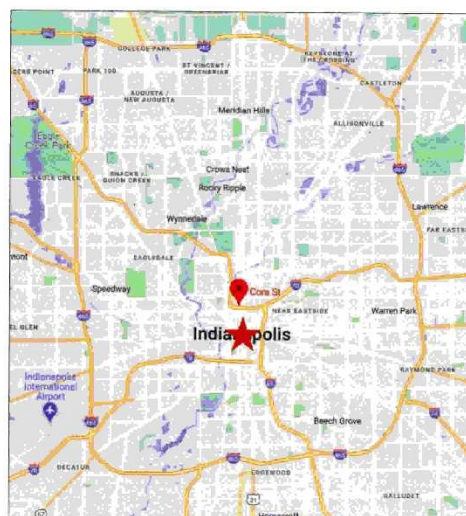


FIGURE 7. MODERN MAP OF INDIANAPOLIS, IN, showing the approximate location of Cora Street.



vided with the same advantages of a white upper-class upbringing as Dan, including home schooling from a tutor. Taylor wrote of this adventure with the Southards as a time of a cultural and educational advantage that would not have been accessible to him in his family's Black community.

Although there is no reason to doubt any of the basic features of the Taylor-Southard relationship, there is good reason to doubt exactly when this relationship took place. Taylor wrote that he encountered the Southards when he was about 8 years old. He turned 8 on November 26, 1886. Biographers have estimated that the friendship lasted about four years, which would have been until 1890. Age 8 and up is an important, formative time in a child's education. That is when children begin to learn the "three R's" and develop the ability to grasp abstract concepts. Research shows, however, that the Taylor-Southard relationship was a bit earlier.

Albert had left his job of several years as General Freight Agent with the Louisville, New Albany & Chicago Railroad to take a similar position with the Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Saint Louis & Chicago Railroad. Along with the change in jobs, in early April 1883,<sup>36</sup> the Southard family moved from Louisville to Indianapolis and a new home there at 827 North Meridian Street.

Given the time it would have taken for them to move in, get their affairs and house in order, and then hire a coachman, and later to accept the coachman's son into their life, it could have been late summer before Marshall Taylor's association with the Southards began. It is entirely possible it could have been later than that.

The actual whereabouts of Albert himself is actually a little unclear at that time. In May it was reported that his office had been removed from Jackson to East Saginaw, Michigan.<sup>37</sup> The Southards had taken a two-week pleasure trip at the end of June.<sup>38</sup> Later that year, on September 24, the *Indianapolis Journal* reported that:

A.B. Southard, who looks after the lumber traffic of the C., I., St. L., & C. in Michigan, and is doing good work for the road, spent the Sabbath in the city with his family.

So, it appears that for a pretty good while after the house on Meridian was purchased, the family was there, but Albert was

THE SPRINGFIELD WHEELMAN'S GAZETTE.

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FIGURE 9. 1886 Ad for the G&J Boys Bicycle, similar to Major Taylor's first bike. (1886, February) *Springfield Gazette*

working in East Saginaw, Michigan. And importantly, contrary to the supposition that Major's relationship with the Southards began when he was 8 years old, he was actually about 4½, going on 5.

Then, as time passed for Albert, although he had been very successful in the railroad business when the family first moved to Indianapolis, that position was destined to change. The railroads were going through major restructuring: new lines, buyouts by Eastern industrialists, mergers, consolidations, and attempted monopolies. Albert spent quite a bit of time traveling for his work and dealing with more job changes. Early in 1884, he changed jobs again to go back to his previous employer, the Louisville, New Albany & Chicago Railroad. This brought on a year of constant travel, with little time at his home in Indianapolis. After a bout with some health issues,<sup>39</sup> the stress eventually did him in, culminating in his resignation in July, followed by a two-month vacation.<sup>40</sup> As 1884 came to a close, he was yet on a quest for another job.

Three more different positions, and by the end of 1885, he was once again out of work, fed up with the changes, and trying to decide on a new career path. A report in the March 21 *Indianapolis Journal* stated that:

A. B. Southard, late traffic manager of the L., N.A., & C RR, is arranging to engage in commercial pursuits. Railroad positions are becoming entirely too uncertain for men of ordinary abilities, if once out of the service, to re-engage in it.

He finally decided to go into real estate in Chicago, which prompted the family to leave Indianapolis on May 11, 1886.<sup>41</sup> As when they had moved in, preparations would have taken time, which would have put Taylor's separation from the Southard family around March or April 1886, four or five months after his 7th birthday.

To sum up Taylor's relationship with the Southard family, instead of being between the ages of 8 and 12 years old, from 1886 to 1890, it was in fact from the ages of 4½ to 7½, mid-1883 to mid-1886.

## THE BICYCLE

One extremely significant aspect of the Southard relationship concerns Taylor's introduction to the bicycle. Per his autobiography, Dan Southard "saw to it" that Marshall had a bicycle to ride just like the ones that Dan and his white friends had.

This was the era of high-wheel bicycles. A child-sized high-wheel bike cost around \$42 in 1884, or about \$1,400 in



2023 dollars.<sup>42</sup> (Figure 9) The Southards were wealthy, but that would have been an expensive and generous gift for the son of their coachman. Shortly after the Southards settled in Indianapolis, a want ad for “A good rubber-tired bicycle. 36 or 42 inches. Must be cheap.” ran in the *Indianapolis News* for three days only, May 15, 16 and 17. Perhaps that was a search for a bicycle for Taylor. Whatever the case, Taylor learned to ride, and perform tricks on it as well. After the Southards moved to Chicago, he wrote, he had the bike “all to myself.”


It is obvious that Taylor felt that his time with the Southards was a determining factor in his development.

However, the new understanding of the timeline, perhaps three years at the most, ending in 1886, not 1890, leads to a reassessment of the impact on Major’s education. What could he have absorbed from the Southards and Dan’s tutor in the way of academics during those early childhood years? An observant child undoubtedly could pick up the household’s culture easily – how these white people spoke, dressed, and interacted with others – but reading, writing and arithmetic would have been a challenge at ages 5 to 7.

Major may have gotten an introduction to the basics, but anything more would be a reach for such a young child. I don’t think there is any dispute by anyone who has delved into research about Major Taylor that besides being an exceptional athlete, he was also a very bright and intelligent man. The level of education displayed in his autobiography far exceeds anything he could have received at the feet of the Southard’s tutor.

An equally important fact to be explored is that by ending the Southard relationship by early 1886, we are left with an undocumented gap from 1886 until 1891, when, per his autobiography, he experienced his “first bicycle race”. Going forward, those shifted dates do impact what can be known with certainty about other periods of Taylor’s life.

As I continued my research, some extremely interesting episodes from later in Major’s life have been uncovered. There are more hints to suggest a strong possi-

bility that the Black child in the Clarksville cabinet card is in fact Major Taylor. I will address that in an upcoming follow up especially concerning the relationship with his friend and mentor, Louis De Franklin “Birdie” Munger. 

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ENDNOTES

1. See Figure 1.
2. See Figure 2.
3. Undated letter (probably 1909) from Major to his wife Daisy. Major Taylor Archives Indianapolis, Indiana.
4. Gilbert Taylor Civil War records from the U.S. military records at <https://www.fold3.com/>.
5. Ibid. “Claim of Benjamin Wilhoyte for Compensation for Slave Named Gilbert Wilhoyte”.
6. Ages listed in the 1870 Louisville, Kentucky Census and later Indianapolis Census indicate Gilbert’s year of birth around 1841.
7. Ibid: Endnote 3.
8. 1860 U.S. Federal Census–Slave Schedules. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).
9. <https://www.nps.gov/civil-war/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=UUS0122R100C>
10. Ibid: Endnote 3.
11. 1870 United States Federal Census. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).
12. Ibid: Endnote 5.
13. [Familysearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org). Result from 1870 U.S. Census search.
14. Ibid.
15. See Figure 3.
16. *History of the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten*. W.H. Gibson, author. Copyright 1897, Louisville, Kentucky. Printed by the Bradley and Gilbert Company.
17. Ibid.
18. *Plantation Melodies*. Cincinnati: Taylor, Marshall W., D.D., author. Marshall W. Taylor and W.C. Echols, Publishers. 1882.
19. 1874 Louisville City Directory. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).
20. 1876 Indianapolis City Directory.
21. *The Indianapolis Evening News*, August 20, 1875.
22. 1878 Indianapolis City Directory.
23. *Indianapolis Leader*, July 24, 1880. *The Indianapolis News*, December 6, 1894.
24. *Indianapolis Journal*, April 20, 1900.
25. *Indianapolis Journal*, September 23, 1887.
26. 1870 Louisville U.S. Census indicated that Sarah (Saphronia) could neither read nor write. Gilbert was checked as “Cannot Write”, but not for “Cannot Read”. However, in the 1900 and 1910 census, he was a “no” for read or write.
27. *Indianapolis Journal*, December 5, 1886.
28. “Old-Time Slums of Indianapolis.” George S. Cottman, author. *Indianapolis Journal*, January 12, 1902.
29. *The Indianapolis News*, April 26, 1878.
30. *Indianapolis News*, April 1, 1873. *Indianapolis Evening News*, November 17, 1873.
31. See Figure 4.
32. See Figure 5.
33. See Figure 6.
34. *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, June 19, 1897.
35. See Figure 7.
36. *Indianapolis Journal*, March 31, 1883.
37. *Indianapolis Journal*, May 25, 1883.
38. *Indianapolis Journal*, August 6, 1883.
39. *Indianapolis Journal*, March 26, 1884.
40. *Indianapolis Journal*, July 18, 1884.
41. *Indianapolis Journal*, May 11, 1886.
42. See Figure 9.