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THE SO-CALLED "MOORS" C

By. Hon. George P. Fisher.

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THE SO-CALLED "MOORS" OF DELAWARE.

BY HON. GEORGE P. FISHER.

7. B. M. 1911-9-22

When I was a boy and young man, the general impression prevailing in the several parts of this State where this race of people had settled was that they had sprung from some Spanish Moors who, by chance, had drifted from the southern coast of Spain, prior to the Revolutionary War, and settled at various points on the Atlantic Coast of the British colonies; but exactly where or when, nobody could tell. This story of their genesis seemed to have originated with, or at any rate, was adopted by the late Chief Justice Thomas Clayton, whose great learning and research gave semblance of authority to it, and, like almost everybody else, I accepted it as the true one for many years, although my father, who was born and reared in that portion of Sussex county where these people were more numerous than in any other part of the State, always insisted that they were an admixture of Indian, negro and white man, and gave his reason therefor--that he had always so understood from Noke Norwood, whom I knew when I was a small boy. Noke lived, away back in the 20's, in a small shanty, long since removed, situated near what has been known for more than a century as Sand Tavern Lane, on the west side of the public road and nearly in front of the farmhouse now owned by Hon. Jonathan S. Willis, our able and popular Representative in Congress. I well remember with what awe I contemplated his gigantic form when I first beheld him. My father had known him as a boy, and I never passed his cabin without stopping. He was a dark, copper-colored man, about six feet and a half in height, of splendid proportions, perfectly straight, coal black hair (though at least 75 years old), black eyes and high cheek bones.

When I became Attorney General of the State it fell to my lot to investigate the pedigree of

this strange people, among whom was Norwood. At that day Norwood was held in great reverence as being one of the oldest of his race. This I learned from my father, who knew him for many years, when they both lived in the neighborhood of Lewes, in Sussex county. I have spoken of this race as a strange people, because I have known some families among them all of whose children possessed the features, hair and eyes of the pure Caucasian, while in other families the children would all be exceedingly swarthy in complexion but with perfectly straight black hair, and occasionally a family whose children ranged thro' nearly the entire racial gamut, from the perfect blonde to at least a quadroon mulatto, and quite a number who possessed all the appearance of a red-haired, freckle-faced Hibernian. My investigation of their geneology came about in the trial of a Levin Sockum, one of the race, upon an indictment found by the grand jury of Sussex county against him for selling ammunition to Isaiah Harmon, one of the same race, who was alleged in the indictment to be a free mulatto. The indictment was framed under the 9th Section of Chapter 52, of the Revised Statutes of the State of Delaware, Edition of 1852, page 145, which reads in this wise:

"If any person shall sell or loan any firearms to any negro or mulatto, he shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be fined twenty dollars".

The proof of the sale of a quarter of a pound of powder and a pound of shot to Harmon was given by Harmon himself; and, in fact, admitted by Sockum's attorney. So that the only fact I had to establish, in order to convict Sockum, was to identify Harmon as being a mulatto, and to do this I had to establish by proof, by a member of his family, Harmon's pedigree. To do this, Lydia Clark, who swore that she was of blood kin to Harmon, was permitted to testify as to the traditions of the family in respect to their origin. Harmon was a young man, apparently about five and twenty years of age, of perfect

Caucasian features, dark chestnut brown hair, rosy cheeks and hazel eyes; and in making comparison of his complexion with others, I concluded that of all the men concerned in the trial he was the most perfect type of the pure Caucasian, and by odds the handsomest man in the courtroom, and yet he was alleged to be a mulatto. The witness, Lydia Clark, his kinswoman, then 87 years old, though only a half-breed, was almost as perfect a type of the Indian as I ever saw. She was as spry as a young girl in her movements, and of intelligence as bright as a new dollae; and this was substantially the geneological tradition she gave of her family and that of Harmon:

About fifteen or twenty years before the Revolutionary War, which she said broke out when she was a little girl some five or six years old, there was a lady of Irish birth living on a farm in Indian River Hundred, a few miles distant from Lewes, which she owned and carried on herself. Nobody appeared to know anything of her history or her antecedents. Her name she gave as Regua, and she was childless, but whether a maid or widow, or a wife astray, she never disclosed to anyone. She was much above the average woman of that day in stature, beauty and intelligence. The tradition described her as having a magnificent complexion, or, as Lydia termed it, a rose and lily complexion, large and dark blue eyes and luxuriant hair of the most beautiful shade, usually called light auburn. After she had been living in Angola Neck quite a number of years, a slaver was driven into Lewes Creek, then a tolerably fair harbor, and was there, weather-bound for several days. It was lawful then, for these were colonial times, to import slaves from Africa. Queen Elizabeth, to gratify her friend and favorite, Sir John Hawkins, had so made it lawful more than a century prior to this time. Miss or Mrs Regua, having heard of the presence of the slaver in the harbor, and having lost one of her men slaves, went to Lewes, and to replace him, purchased another from the slave ship. She se-

lected a very tall, shapely and muscular young fellow of dark ginger-bread color, who claimed to be a prince or chief of one of the tribes on the Congo River which had been overpowered in a war with a neighboring tribe and nearly all slain or made prisoners and sold into perpetual slavery. This young man had been living with his mistress but a few months when they were duly married and, as Lydia told the court and jury, they reared quite a large family of children, who as they grew up were not permitted to associate and intermarry with their neighbors of pure Caucasian blood, nor were they disposed to seek associations or alliance with the negro race; so that they were or necessity compelled to associate and intermarry with the remnant of the Nanticoke tribe of Indians who still lingered in their old habitations for many years after the great body of the tribe had been removed farther towards the setting sun. This race of people were for the first two or three generations confined principally to the southeastern portion of Sussex county and more particularly in the neighborhood of Lewes, Millsboro, Georgetown and Milton, but during the last sixty or seventy years they have increased the area of their settlement very materially and now are to be found in almost every hundred in ~~the county~~ each county in the State, but mostly in Sussex and Kent. From their first origin to the present time they have continued to segregate themselves from the American citizens of African descent", having their own churches and schools as much as practicable.

With very rare exceptions these people make good citizens. They are almost entirely given up to agricultural pursuits, but they have managed to pick up sufficient knowledge of carpentry and masonry to enable them to build their own houses. They are industrious, frugal, thrifty, law-abiding and respectful. During my long practice at the bar I have never known but two instances in which one of their race has been brought into court for a violation of the law. One of these

was the case of Sockum, tried in Sussex in 1857, and the other was that of Cornelius Hansor, of Milford Hundred, tried at Dover in 1888 or 1889. Sockum's case originated in the private spite of envious Caucasian neighbors, and Hansor in the envy and malice of one of his neighbors who charged him with an attempt to commit murder by shooting his accuser. I defended Hansor against the charge and it was shown by the testimony of several of the most respectable men in the vicinage that Hansor was a man of exemplary character for peace and good order, a truthful and estimable Christian, and that instead of being the aggressor/his accuser was shown to have attempted to shoot Hansor. Such was the opinion of the jurors who tried the case. I suggested to Hansor that he had better go before the grand jury at the next term of court and make complaint against his persecutor. But he replied: "With thanks to you for your advice and my acquittal, I most respectfully decline, as the Good Book teaches us to pray for those who despitefully use and persecute us; and I shall leave Mr. Loper to God and his conscience, praying myself that he may become a more peaceable man and Christian."

Some years ago I received a note from a lady in Philadelphia stating that she had heard of the trial of Levin Sockum, and that it had developed the origin of the yellow people, the so-called Moors of Delaware, and requesting me to give an account of it, which I did. In her letter thanking me for it she gave me the following story:

"Mrs....., whom you mentioned a New Jersey lady, was an English woman by birth, highly connected, of refined associations and superbly educated. As a young girl she fled from her friends whom she was visiting in this city with whose acquaintance she made at a dancing school, and who was represented to her as being a Spaniard of wealth and good family. Fair as a lily and as pure, she did not discover until after the marriage either the occupation or real condition of her husband as a man tabooed by his fellow men for supposed taint of African

blood. She believed him to be of Moorish descent and one of the best and noblest of human kind; his ostracism and her own (she was even denied a pew in the Episcopal church in which she was educated and confirmed) surely though slowly killed her. 'Desdemona', as her friends who knew her well called her, died suddenly of heart disease brought on by mental suffering, leaving three or four children, all golden-haired, blue-eyed, flower-like little ones to be educated in France, where their origin even if known would never affect their standing socially. They remained until the Franco-Prussian war broke out and were, I think, sent to England. Mr....., with great self-denial, voluntarily accepted for himself a life of loneliness in a country where his pecuniary interests compelled him to remain. He is highly esteemed, but still socially ostracised."

The father of this gentleman I knew very well many years ago. He was a resident of Kent county. The gentleman himself I knew by sight only. He seemed to me to be quite a shade fairer in complexion than myself. He has, since the letter I quoted was written, filled a very high and responsible position under the Federal Government with great credit to himself and satisfaction to the Government.

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