

Romulus and Lillie Richmond by Dennis Wilson



In the 1880's America was in the process of withdrawing the freedoms won by the Union for the African American. The Union occupation forces that guaranteed the rights of the southern African Americans had been withdrawn and a campaign of terror, coupled with poll taxes and tests drove most black voters from the voting booth. The propaganda of the era was that Negroes could not handle the vote or high offices because they were allegedly too stupid or lazy.

With all this against African Americans, it is nothing short of amazing that any could receive a college education. Pleasant Ridge was a harbor of peace and relative tolerance, and to this community came Romulus Richmond, a cousin of the other Richmond's who had come earlier. Romulus married Lillie Greene, granddaughter of John and Lillie

Greene, who had left Missouri and slavery in 1863 carrying along baby Lillie. Romulus was reputed to have a college education.

He worked as a minister with Rev. David W. Smith, a circuit rider, to build a church for the community. It was called the Flora Fountain United Brethren in Christ Church. The log building was finished in 1883, and Romulus worked with Smith giving sermons in this and other area churches. He helped start a Sunday school at Boice Creek Church. It was quite novel for an African American minister to address white congregations anywhere, north or south, but it happened in Southwest Wisconsin. There was prejudice here as in all places, but there were also honest and fair neighbors who accepted these industrious African Americans. The sharing of work in the community made life easier for White and African American alike. Neighbors helped each other in haying and harvesting.

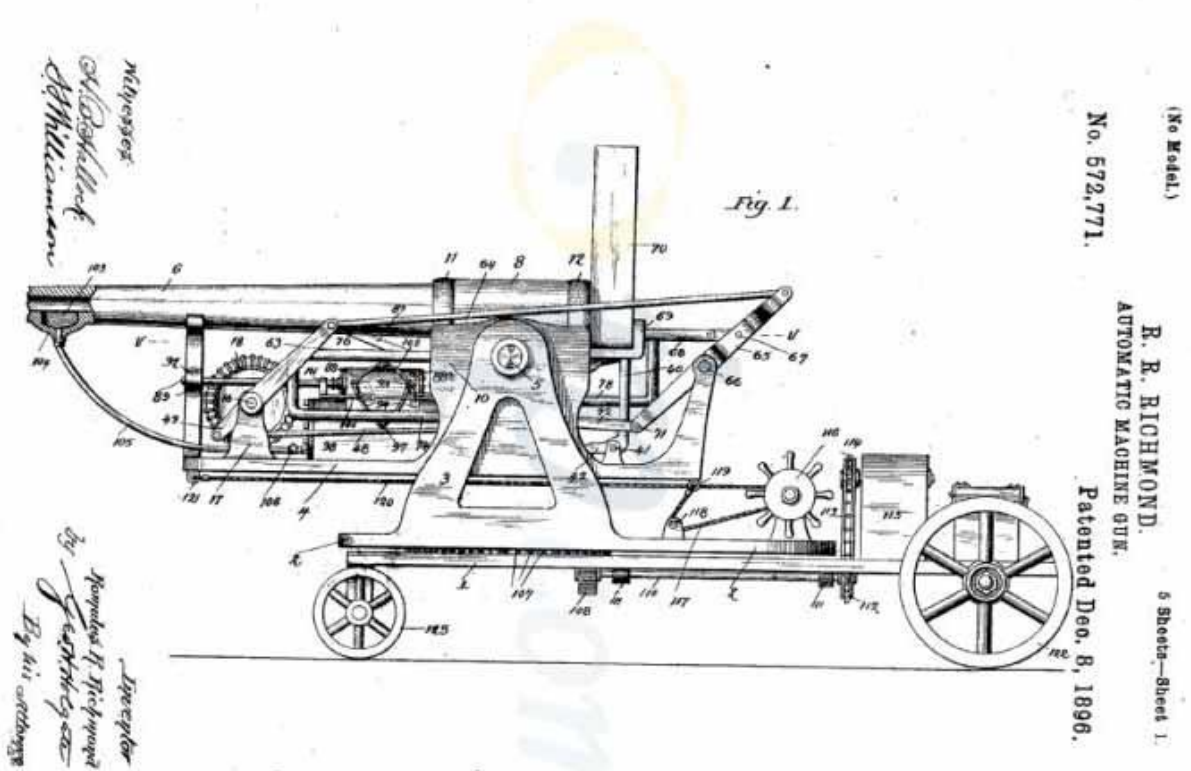
It wasn't only Romulus who preached to white parishioners; his cousin's wife, Minnie Richmond was an evangelist of considerable skill, doing her work in Grant and Crawford Counties. Romulus decided to give up farming and planned to make the ministry his career. On August 7, 1887 he preached his last sermon at Flora Fountain and moved with his family to Chariton Iowa, where The African Baptist Church awaited a new minister. Lillie, a devout Methodist, served as a lay preacher in the Chariton African Methodist Church. This arrangement seemed to suit the couple. Lillie and Romulus had 10 children.

Romulus was not only a minister of the gospel; he was also an inventor. He invented machines for lowering caskets, and separating the yellow colored earth from the black dirt, so the black dirt could be used on top of the grave. These devices were useful to him as he was the sexton of the Chariton Cemetery. He patented a machine gun which could fire 200 rounds a

minute. That would seem a strange thing for a minister to invent. He may also have made his own motion picture projector per Cara Caddoo, Instructor of American Studies, State University of New York, Old Westbury who wrote me and sent much useful information.

From: Annual report of the Commissioner of Patents 1896

Richmond, Romulus R., Chariton, Iowa. Automatic machine-gun 572,771 | Dec. 8 1897 | 572 771 | 77 1527



UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

ROMULUS RUFUS RICHMOND, OF CHARITON, IOWA.

BURIAL DEVICE.

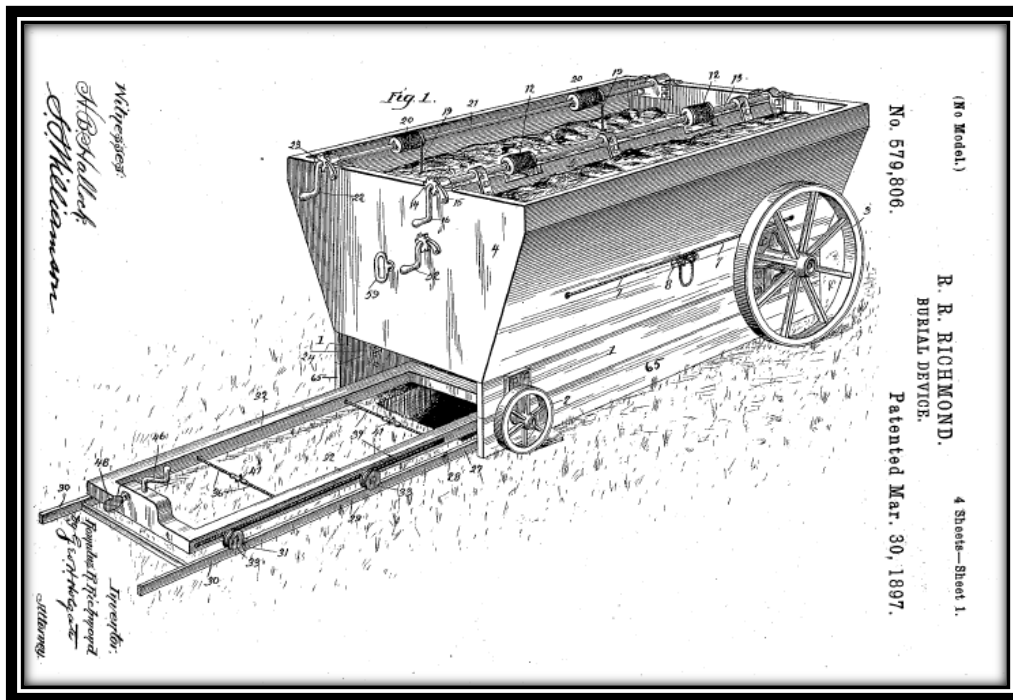
SPECIFICATION forming part of Letters Patent No. 579,806, dated March 30, 1897.

Application filed September 1, 1896. Serial No. 604,819. (No model.)

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, ROMULUS RUFUS RICHMOND, a citizen of the United States, residing at Chariton, in the county of Lucas and State of Iowa, have invented a certain new and useful Improvement in Burial Devices, of which the following is a specification.

to fill a grave after the casket and box have been placed therein. The hopper is divided into two compartments by a partition 5, which is hinged at 6 and adapted to be operated by the cables 7, which pass through holes in one side of the hopper and may be attached to the cleat 8, secured upon said side. The bot-



His church closed about 10 years after Romulus came to Chariton. Apparently he did not get rich from his inventions, as he had to take work in an iron foundry to make ends meet. Lillie worked at the Burlington Depot Hotel and the Railroad Café in Chariton for many years making up to 40 pies a day. It is believed that Romulus died in Missouri sometime after 1910. No one is sure of his resting place. The last census in which he appears shows him living in the Peoples City Mission Home, a shelter for homeless men which is still operating today. Why he was there at that time is unknown.

Lillie was very proud when one of her sons, Booker T. Richmond placed first in the Iowa Bar Exam in 1930. Booker was also a high school football and basketball player and was a member of the undefeated debate team at the University of Iowa. He practiced law in Mason City and Des Moines. Of Romulus and Lillie's children, one served in World War One and three in World War Two.

IOWA NEGRO HIGHEST IN BAR EXAMS

Des Moines, Oct. 9—(INS)—Fifteen new lawyers today were declared to be qualified to practice their profession in Iowa. That number passed the Iowa Bar examination and were sworn in. Twenty-eight took the examination which was held in the senate chamber of the capitol building.

Booker T. Richmond, negro, from Chariton, and a former student at the University of Iowa, passed the test with the highest honors of all those attempting to qualify.

Charles City Press (Iowa) October 9, 1930

As she did every summer, Lillie returned to Grant County in 1947 to see the old home place and visit the cemeteries. She was interviewed by Mrs. Crichton, who documented so many of Grant County's interesting people for the newspapers. Lillie said of slavery; "All I know about slavery is what my folks told me. It's kinda like something out of a story book." She was too young to recall her trip to freedom. In a way, through all the struggles of life, The Richmond's and the other citizens of Pleasant Ridge had what many slaves would have considered a wonderful life. They took hold of freedom and labored to lead their families to a place where they found respect, good work, and a fine education. We can thank Romulus Richmond for impressing on the community the value of education. Many children of these African American pioneers, who chose rural life to the uncertainty of the great and troubled cities, rose to prominence in the generations that followed; and why not. They were planted in good soil.