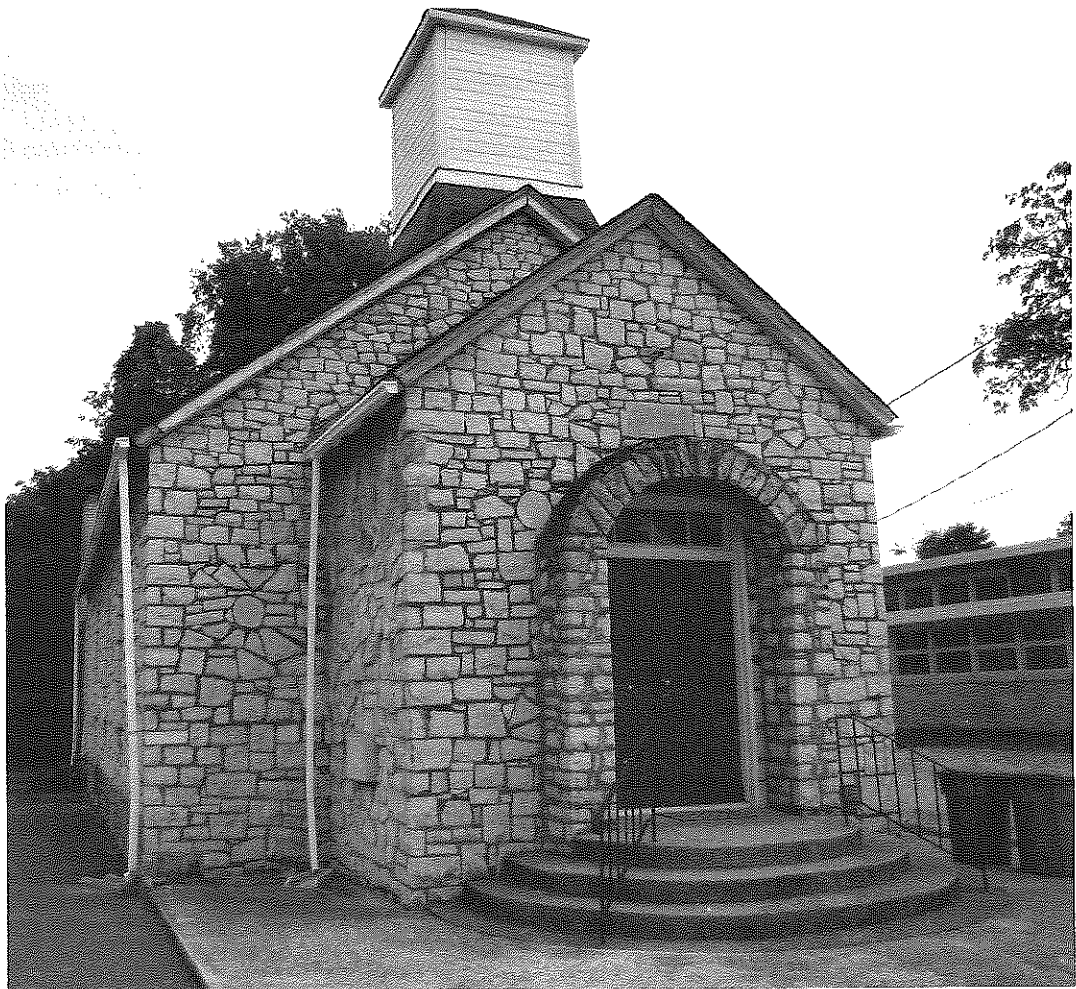


**Lyons View, Knox County, Tennessee:
a Study in African-American Community History**

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Recent interest in the history of a very old African-American church, cemetery, and school in what is now a very affluent residential neighborhood of the city of Knoxville points out yet again how so much of the story of the African-American population still exists in old records, hidden just out of view of most of the public. The Mount Pleasant Baptist Church and cemetery and the adjacent Lyons View School are the modern-day reminders of a community with deep roots in the past. William Looney, a freed slave who remained in the community throughout his life, provides a key to unearthing some long-forgotten history and bringing the past back to life.

----Steve Cotham, McClung Historical Collection



Rebuilt (1943) Mount Pleasant Church with Lyons View School in background

In 1875 William Looney provided a half acre of land to help form Mount Pleasant Church, an entity that would become the nucleus of Lyons View's small African-American community just west of the current Sequoyah Hills neighborhood in Knoxville, Tennessee. Looney was the only known African-American resident who provided a continuous presence in the area throughout the antebellum period, the Civil

War era, Reconstruction, the establishment of Eastern State Hospital for the Insane, and the beginning of construction of new mansions around Lyons View Pike at the turn of the century.

Looney became the neighborhood's first African-American landowner when he purchased a twenty-five-acre tract from Drury P. Armstrong on March 22, 1847. While he might have been new to land ownership, William Looney was neither new to the community nor to the idea of freedom. As a twelve-year-old, William and the other slaves of Captain Moses Looney (including Elijah, Peter, Jack, Bill, Mary, Mars, Poll, Jacob, Sue, and all their children) were promised emancipation upon the death of Moses and his wife Sarah. (Captain and Mrs. Looney were childless.) When he died in 1824, Capt. Looney's will officially confirmed his promise, though official freedom was delayed until Sarah's death in 1838.

In his will, Moses Looney did more than just promise freedom; he provided them the means to survive. He left several slaves an inheritance equal to the amounts he bequeathed to the majority of his nieces and nephews—five dollars apiece. Elijah, Jack, and Poll were provided with farming implements; Peter was given a shoemaking set; Mary was to be supplied with kitchen items; and Mary's son was to be provided with a set of whatever tools might be necessary to conduct his chosen trade when he completed an education. In addition, Captain Looney reserved a tract of land beside the Looney family cemetery for his former slaves to live on and farm for a period of time no less than the remainder of his (former) slave Mary's natural life, Mary apparently being the youngest of the adult slaves mentioned.

Seemingly aware that some of his instructions might be unexpected or unusual, Moses Looney included a final clause stating his "will and desire that my executors or a majority of them should they not agree on any part whatever shall do all things in their power to carry this my last will into complete effect, having full confidence in the friendship and integrity of my nephews Absalom Looney, John Stephenson, and William Lyon, I do hereby constitute and appoint them my Executors." Captain Looney entrusted his nephew, Absalom Looney, Sr., with the ultimate responsibility of seeing that his will and its instructions were properly executed. The Captain and his wife had helped raise Abraham after Capt. Looney's brother was murdered during the same year as his son's birth. Thomas Hudiburgh, Jacob Lones, and Jesse Wells witnessed the will.

No specific laws governed the manner or circumstances under which a slave could gain freedom. An owner possessed the right to free slaves "at pleasure" and could do so via will, document, note, or even a simple oral declaration of intent with no court, governmental, or legal action required to affirm it. As a consequence, much of the freedom granted in Tennessee was done privately, with only a brief note or document in the possession of the freed person in order to prove it. Of course, if someone disputed that freedom and the matter came to court, a (former) slave might be hard pressed to prove oral declaration of intent unequivocally if the former owner was no longer alive or around to reaffirm the events. Moses Looney showed awareness of this potential quandary by instructing his executors to take "any necessary legal steps to prove the liberation" of his former slaves.

The state government did reserve the right to "control the social condition" and assigned county courts with the responsibility to consent to or deny manumissions if and when such a measure was deemed necessary. Like with bastardy bonds, this step seems to have been taken only in a small portion of cases, especially prior to 1831, and usually when someone made the effort to call the issue to the court's attention. Regardless of how little or how often the state's right was actually used, the bequests to his slaves and the reservation of land for their use so that they "may not become charitable on the county" indicate Moses Looney anticipated and intended to avoid this possibility as well.

Compared with law and practice in fellow slave states, Tennessee courts were particularly lenient. In the Tennessee Supreme Court case of *Elias v. Smith* (1845), the state's decision was written by Justice William B. Reese, a neighbor of the Looney, Lyons, and Lonas families, affirming that sometimes even prior "acts and conduct" of a master could result in freedom for slaves who technically had not been freed. In that case, the court determined that Elias, a free black who owned his wife and children, was not subject to having those slaves seized and sold for his debts. The circumstances in the case were that the late Phelps Read gave Elias the children of Read's union with one of his slaves. Elias later purchased from Read's estate Elias' common-law wife and remaining child for ten dollars. The court's reasoning was that the Read family's intent had been to provide the entire family with freedom, and, therefore, Elias' wife and children were free and had, in fact, been free since the time of Elias' "purchases." Reese went so far as to say that "the court would have prevented even Elias from selling his wife and child, if he, stifling the voice of nature, and severing the paternal tie had been such a barbarian and a monster as to have mediated the sale of them for his pecuniary advantage upon the strength of his mere legal title."

Once promised their freedom in 1823, Moses Looney's slaves would have had every reason to be confident that it would eventually be given since Tennessee courts also recognized a slave's right to gain freedom at the moment he or she had been promised it. Upon that promise, the slave was no longer considered a slave, but a "person bound to service for a term of years who has a general right to freedom." In Tennessee, any child born to a servant who had been promised freedom was also considered free. As long as she and the slaves remained in Tennessee, Looney's widow would not have been able to revoke the promise made in Moses Looney's will or sell the slaves or their children even if she wanted to do so, though circumventing her husband's wish never seems to have been her intent.

In fact, eventual freedom for her servants seems to have been Sarah Looney's desire as well. A free colored woman shared the household with Sarah and six of her slaves in 1830, and may have been the common-law wife of one of the slaves. The fact that only six slaves remained in the household during 1830, while at least ten slaves (not counting implied children born both before and after) had been mentioned in Moses Looney's will, indicates that several of the Looney slaves may have begun living as free persons even prior to Sarah's death. Peter Griffin, a free colored man enumerated with his family as a neighbor of Sarah in 1830, seems extremely likely to have been the slave named Peter in Moses' will.

Several other free colored households also appeared in the surrounding census pages in 1830. (Households headed by women also seem to be well represented.) The Kingston Pike/Lyons View area may have had serious problems with squatters and tenant farmers during its early period. James Park was actually shot twice while attempting "to evict squatters from his Kingston Pike property."

So much remote and unattended land may have been very tempting to free colored households and other relatively poor families. Though one such household is known to have been the family of a man who was born free, another seems to be the family of a white man and a free colored woman. None of the households definitively could be connected to the Looney family, but it is still probable that several of the other free colored families enumerated there in 1830 were linked to the Looneys in some way. Following the instructions of his mother's will, Sarah's nephew Absalom Looney, Sr., had also freed Mary Johnson Looney's slaves upon her death earlier that year. Also, there were the missing slaves-turned-bound-servants who may have already been allowed to leave Sarah's household in order to build families and establish residences in independent positions on the Looney property.

As a result of Nat Turner's Rebellion (October 1831), the state of Tennessee's attitude toward manumission changed rather dramatically. Slaves could still be freed "at will," but they were required to leave the state

immediately upon being granted their freedom. However, former slaves who had been freed prior to 1833 (like the slaves of Moses Looney) were exempted and could remain within the state if they wished. In 1843 legislation would allow newly freed slaves who had lived in Tennessee prior to 1836 to remain within the state as well—provided they obtained permission. Still, as a result of the tightening legal restrictions of the 1830s, manumission was granted less often, and a number of people who might otherwise have been freed instead lived in a de facto state of freedom while remaining someone else's official property. The decision William Reese wrote for the Elias case in 1843 appears to illustrate widespread recognition of this fact. Regarded in an entirely different legal position than persons who had once been slaves, free colored persons who were born free continued to remain in Tennessee unmolested—at least in legal theory.

Sarah Holston Looney died on October 10, 1838. Absalom Looney, Sr., her nephew, next-door neighbor, and the executor of her late husband's estate, granted Moses Looney's slaves their freedom accordingly. At the time of the 1840 Census, Absalom remained living on Moses Looney's property. Though he possessed no slaves, Absalom's household had expanded to include nine free colored persons:

One free colored female aged 55-100	(b. 1740-1785)
One free colored male aged 36-55	(b. 1785-1804)
One free colored female 36-55	(b. 1785-1804)
Two free colored males aged 24-35	(b. 1804-1816)
One free colored female aged 24-36	(b. 1804-1816)
One free colored female aged 10-24	(b. 1816-1830)
One free colored male under age ten	(b. 1831-1840)
One free colored female under age ten	(b. 1831-1840)

There was also a marked reduction in the free colored households enumerated in the vicinity during 1840, though it is not known if this depicts the local cultural landscape accurately or if free colored persons were regarding the census more warily during that time.

In light of the legal changes which had occurred between 1830 and 1840, it seems likely that the free colored persons attached to Absalom Sr.'s household were former Looney slaves who may have deemed it more prudent to keep themselves and/or their families connected to the white Looneys rather than declaring themselves as individual free households. Despite the fact that none of these free colored people were identified by name or specific age, it seems quite probable that this number included William Looney (b. ca. 1810), his common-law wife Mary "Polly" Joiner (b. ca. 1810), and at least two of their children (Abram J. Joiner, b. ca. 1836, and Rebecca J. Joiner, b. ca. 1839).

Though Polly Joiner was born free and William Looney was promised his freedom well before the cut-off dates in that time period's legislation, such concerns might have been warranted. Racial tensions were at a historic peak and continued to grow during the 1840s, culminating in the repeal of all exceptions allowing freed blacks to remain in the state of Tennessee (1849) and a new requirement that all slaves freed in Tennessee be transported to western Africa (1854). It is difficult to determine if these new laws were enforced zealously. Regardless, ducking census takers or attaching themselves to white households could have seemed very wise options to Tennessee's remaining free colored families.

While Absalom Looney, Sr., had continued to live on his late uncle's farm, he did not own it. Though he reserved the right for Absalom Sr. to remain there as long as he wished, Moses Looney acknowledged his nephew's tendency toward financial difficulties and actually bequeathed the land to Absalom Looney, Jr. (1818-1896), the youngest son of Absalom Sr.'s first marriage. He also bequeathed Absalom, Jr., and

Samuel Looney the debts their father had owed him. By the 1840s, Absalom Sr.'s duties as executor and caretaker of the Moses and Sarah Looney estate were over, and he decided to move himself, his second wife, and their younger children from Tennessee to Bienville Parish, Louisiana.

At about the same time, smaller tracts of property were being made available for purchase in the vicinity of Lyons View. In 1846 Drury P. Armstrong purchased the former James Park tract on the south side of Lyons View Pike, intending to make the tract a gift for his son Robert Houston Armstrong. Once in possession, however, Drury Armstrong was not averse to selling a few pieces of the land. Intending to remain in the area, John Looney (1810-1870), Absalom Looney, Sr.'s oldest son, bought a relatively modest tract in order to make a home for his wife and children. Still a young man, Absalom Looney, Jr., chose to live on the John Looney farm with his brother's family and would do so until his first marriage in 1853.

As noted earlier, William Looney became the first recognized black landowner in the community in 1847. Why William Looney chose to purchase land at that time is unknown. Perhaps he was anticipating the inevitable death of the free colored woman named Mary whose continued existence potentially determined his ability to remain living on the former Moses Looney property. Perhaps, like his white counterpart John Looney, William had decided, for reasons of his own, that he intended to stay in Lyons View permanently. While William Looney's parents and other potential lineal relatives remain unknown, it was generally much more likely that a freed colored man—unless he was relatively old or infirm when freedom came his way—would head west or north where life would be easier, especially in light of how the situation for free colored people in Tennessee began to change during the early years of William Looney's freedom. For a younger man like William to have chosen to stay, it seems he would have needed to feel some kind of connection to, and possibly protection within, his community. While his attachment to the white Looneys seems to have been relatively close—he took and kept their name, even if his children did not, and he chose to remain in very close proximity to John Looney during John's lifetime—William's association with Polly Joiner may have served as the main tie that kept him in the Lyons View community during his younger years. At the very least, it did give him a position within a relatively traceable family.

William Joiner's free colored household appeared in the 1830 Knox County census and consisted of one male aged 36-55 (b. ca. 1775-94), one female aged 36-24 (b. ca. 1794-1806), two free colored females aged 10-24 (b. ca. 1806-20), and two free colored males under age 10 (b. ca. 1821-30). William Joiner did not appear in the 1840 census, but a Phoebe Joiner was enumerated in Knox County with a free colored household consisting of one female aged 36-24 (b. ca. 1804-16), two males under age ten (b. ca. 1831-40), and one free colored female under age ten (b. ca. 1831-40). She may have been one of William Joiner's daughters. Several other free colored Joiners living in Knox County may also have been his children: Polly Joiner (ca. 1810-ca. 1851/79, aka Polly Looney), Betsey Joiner (ca. 1818-post 1880, aka Betsey Love), Peggie Joiner (ca. 1820-post 1900), and Armstrong Joiner (b. ca. 1825). In addition, Benjamin Joiner, a mulatto gold miner and Tennessee native (b. ca. 1822) who first appeared in the 1860 Calaveras County, California, census, may also have been connected to the William Joiner family.

All of the above mentioned Joiners who also made appearances on censuses conducted in 1880 or later agree that their parents were born in Virginia. Paul Heinegg records a Billy Joiner who was born free in Petersburg, Virginia, in October 1785 and remained there, working as a blacksmith, until at least June 22, 1807. Heinegg identifies that William Joiner as a likely son of Amy Joiner, a colored woman who was born free in Chesterfield County, Virginia, around 1758. This was possibly the same William Joiner who later appeared in Knox County, Tennessee. Regardless, William Looney's children seemed to prefer using the Joiner surname, as did many of the other identifiable children of the other Joiner women. Perhaps they associated this surname with a branch of their family that had a longer history of being free.

If Phoebe, Polly, Betsey, and Peggie Joiner were indeed sisters, then William Looney was the only identifiable adult black male who remained associated with them and their children. That position alone could have provided a very strong connection to the area and a rather awesome set of potential responsibilities.

Though the 1849 legal changes concerning the residency rights of free blacks had to be rather terrifying, several colored households were enumerated around Lyons View on the 1850 Knox County census. William Looney, Polly Joiner, and their children (Abram, Rebecca, and Sarah) were among them, as well as the families of Jacob Neal (b. ca 1810 in VA), who may have been the slave Jacob mentioned in Moses Looney's will, and Thomas Scott (b. ca. 1820 in NC or TN). Thomas Scott's wife Peggie appears to be a very good candidate to have been Polly Joiner Looney's sister, Peggie Joiner (ca. 1820-post 1900). On the 1900 census, Peggie reported that she had given birth to a total of nine children, the identities of only two of whom are known: Josephine Joiner Sinks (b. ca. 1850) and Jennie Houston (b. ca. 1865). Two households away from William Looney's family in 1850, sixteen-year-old William Nelson Joiner, Polly Joiner Looney's nephew and the son of Betsy Joiner (aka Betsy Love), lived with and worked for a white family named Boyd. The family of William Adkins, a thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher described as mulatto on the census, was also enumerated within the neighborhood.

Several miles away in the heart of the city of Knoxville, census takers enumerated the free colored families of Elijah Looney (b. ca. 1790 in VA), almost certainly the slave Elijah freed by Moses Looney's will, and John L. C. P. Thomas (b. ca 1803 in NY), who could have been the slave Jack freed by the same document. In 1850 John L. Thomas was living with his second wife, Rebecca, who might have been the slave, Beck, mentioned by Moses Looney. Despite the fact that doing so was illegal—and ministers who performed such ceremonies and clerks who recorded them could be fined for participating—John L. Thomas married twice in Knox County prior to the Civil War (Susan Snapp, December 6, 1831; Rebecca Smith, January 8, 1850).

Reuben Emmett was a free colored baker who had lived between the Lyons and Looney families in the west end of the county in the 1830 census and who lived next door to the Knoxville city home where Dr. Washington Lyon and attorney Thomas Lyon boarded in the 1850 census. Emmett's son and daughters also married extralegally in Knox County during the 1850s, and a pair of his in-laws, free colored Susan Carter and her slave husband Joseph (whom she owned), would move to Lyons View from Monroe County around the time of the Civil War.

Both Michael Davis and Preston Skaggs were neighbors of Absalom Looney's family in the 1840 census. In the 1850 Knox County census, Michael Davis appears as a sixty-two-year-old white farmer (b. ca. 1788 in VA) who lived with his seventy-three-year old wife Nancy and twenty-nine-year-old son Leftridge on a farm that seemed to have been located a bit west of the city as its boundaries stood at that time. The Davises were enumerated two households away from the family headed by forty-eight-year-old Mary Lonas Yost Howell (m. Peter Yost, April 15, 1819; m. Duke Howell, October 16, 1828). Duke and William Howell, both of whom were deceased by 1850, had been prominent names in the rather shadowy history of horse racing in Knoxville and East Tennessee. Horse racing was an industry which tended to have many opportunities in riding and training for black men, both slave and free. Duke Howell's widow was also from the Lonas family who owned property in the Lyons View-Kingston Pike area.

David Skaggs was a free colored barber. In his youth he had been a successful jockey from Cocke and Grainger counties and had raced at many of the best-known tracks in the country. Three of his elder

children chose to use their mother's surname (Chavis) throughout most of their documented history; three more appear to have used Skaggs and Chavis interchangeably. Presumably Skaggs was either born free or had been able to obtain his freedom in connection with his career in horse racing. Once settled into racing retirement and the barbering business in Knoxville, David Skaggs became prominent in the local black community, serving as one of the founding members of Knoxville's first official colored congregation (Shiloh Presbyterian Church). He also married extralegally in Knoxville prior to the Civil War (Sally Howell, February 14, 1849; Mary J. Davis, June 11, 1859).

Samuel Patton also appeared in the 1850 Knox County census, enumerated as a fifty-three-year-old editor and minister living with his wife and children. Another free colored Thomas family (Lawson, 44, and his wife Malinda, 45) lived two houses away from the Pattons.

"Henry Stull" seems most likely to have been Henry Steel, who was listed in Knoxville in the 1850 census, as a twenty-four-year-old (b. ca. 1826 in SC) cook living in the family of silversmith (and Sut Lovingood author) George Washington Harris.

Also enumerated within the city were twenty-four-year-old Armstrong Joiner, a black male with no occupation listed, and Betsey Joiner, a black washer and ironer, who headed a household of four children: William N. (b. ca. 1836 in TN, and apparently double enumerated); Mary E. (b. ca. 1838 in TN); James A. (b. ca. 1842 in TN); and Margaret (b. ca. 1857 in TN). Betsey was described as black; all the children were described as mulatto.

In 1860 neither John nor William Looney's households were enumerated, though all other evidence suggests both men were living in Knox County at that time. The household of Absalom Looney, Jr., was enumerated in the Lyons View community and included his wife, children, niece Nancy (daughter of John Looney), niece Sarah (daughter of John Looney), her husband Joseph James Mullins (who was employed as a farm hand), and an additional farm hand named James Johnson. Located a bit farther away were the households of Mary P. Lyon with her three sons and eleven slaves, and Joseph Glace, a forty-five-year-old "vine dresser" from Baden, Germany.

Betsey Joiner remained in Knoxville, but the dynamics of her household seem to have become considerably more complicated. Three Joiners lived there: thirty-nine-year-old Betsey (a washer and ironer), twenty-one-year-old Sam (a fiddler), and nineteen-year-old Charles. Interspersed among them with no obvious rhyme or reason were five free colored persons bearing the surname Love: Milly (71), Alfred (12), John (5), Casper (3), and Harriet (1). Betsey's son James lived with and worked for a white brick mason named Householder. None of the other children who had appeared in her household in 1850 seem to be there or anywhere else in 1860.

However, evidence suggests that most of them still would have been alive and living somewhere in the vicinity. Margaret married Civil War veteran Stephen Blackwell in Knox County on December 9, 1867. William Nelson Joiner married in Knox County twice after the Civil War (Caroline Fountain, April 8, 1866; Susan Gillem, January 28, 1880). Despite time spent with Fountain brothers-in-law helping to build a railroad line through Mississippi during the early 1870s, by the time of his death in the 1880s, Joiner was remembered by local newspapers as one of Knoxville's better known and respected colored citizens. His first wife, Caroline Fountain, had been a sister-in-law of Drury Armstrong Payne, a machinist, engineer, and early leader in Knoxville's post-Civil War African-American community. Joiner's widow, Susan Gillem, also worked diligently to help further the interests of Knoxville's black community and helped found at least one of the area's collaborative cemeteries for African-Americans.

William Looney appeared again in the 1870 Knox County census, still living around Lyons View. By this time, most of his connections to the community had melted away from him. Only twenty-five-year-old Sarah Joiner remained in William's household. He and Polly Joiner may have had other children after 1850, but, if so, they were gone from his household and unable to be identified with him by 1870, though, for example, a young colored lady named Emeline Joiner/Looney did marry a Joseph Thomas in Knox County in 1866. John Looney and his wife Isabella (Zebella) Coleman Looney had died, as had Polly Joiner. Abram Joiner had disappeared from the official record, while Rebecca Joiner had married Sgt. Michael Sterling, an African American Civil War veteran. She would move to Alabama, then on to Ohio. Approaching his sixties, William had hired a young man named Robert Lillard to perform his farm's heavier labor.

In 1875 William sold a portion of his land for the new African-American church, and the church elders, in turn, gave part of their new property to Knox County in order to provide a space for a new school for colored children. From that point on, William's connection with the founding of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church and Lyons View School (rather than his ties with the Looneys, the Joiners, or any other part of his family) seems to have become the identity associated with him within the community.

Sarah Joiner had left William's household by 1880. She may have died, moved, or married. Regardless, William Looney had employed a middle-aged African-American couple to act as his housekeeper and farm hand in her absence. William and Mary Brown were probably unrelated to him since William Looney's census record clearly identifies them as "boarders" and "servants."

William Looney died between 1891 and 1900. He is most likely buried in an unmarked grave in either the Looney family or Mount Pleasant cemetery.

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