NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

**United States Department of the Interior**
**National Park Service**

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House

other name/site number N/A

## 2. Location

street 109 S. Main St. N/A not for publication

city or town Clarkton N/A vicinity

state Missouri code MO county Dunklin code 069 zip code 63837

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mark A Miles Sept. 14, 2009

Signature of certifying official/Title Mark A. Miles/Deputy SHPO Date

Missouri Department of Natural Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper by Barbara Wyatt Date of Action 10-30-09

☒ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other, (explain:) _____

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House
Name of Property

Dunklin County, MO
County and State

## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

**Category of Property**
(check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

**Number of Resources within Property**
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | | buildings |
| | | sites |
| | | structures |
| | | objects |
| 1 | | Total |

**Name of related multiple property listing**
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Function**
(Enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: Single Dwelling

**Current Function**
(Enter categories from instructions)

Vacant

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification**
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Gable and wing

**Materials**
(Enter categories from instructions)

**foundation** Concrete
**walls** Clapboard
**roof** Asphalt
**other**

**Narrative Description**
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

## 8. Description

### Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☒ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance
(enter categories from instructions)

Ethnic Heritage: Black

Social History

### Period of Significance
1872-1917

### Significant Dates
N/A

### Significant Persons
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
Birthright, Charles
Birthright, Bettie

### Cultural Affiliation
N/A

### Architect/Builder
Birthright, Charles

### Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

### Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

### Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other Name of repository:

Clarksville Historical Society

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House
Name of Property

Dunklin County, MO
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** less than 1 acre

**UTM References**
(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

| | Zone | Easting | Northing |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1/6 | 2/3/4/0/3/5 | 4/0/3/7/8/3/0 |
| 2 | / | / / / / / | / / / / / / |
| 3 | / | / / / / / | / / / / / / |
| 4 | / | / / / / / | / / / / / / |

**Verbal Boundary Description**
(Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Property Tax No.

**Boundary** Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 10

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Tiffany Patterson

organization Missouri State Historic Preservation Office date June 2009

street & number P.O. Box 176 telephone 573-751-7800

city or town Jefferson City state MO zip code 65102

## Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**
**Maps** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.
**Photographs:** Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.
**Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

## Property Owner

name/title Clarkton Historical Society

street & number P.O. Box 423 telephone

city or town Clarkton state MO zip code 63837

**Paperwork Reduction** Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet



**Summary:**

The Charles and Bettie Birthright House is located at 109 S. Main Street in Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri. Constructed by Charles in 1872 with several later additions completed during the Birthright's ownership, the house is a small 1 ½ story frame building with a brick and concrete foundation. The east-facing building began as a double pen, side gable home with full width porch, but a c. 1914 front addition added a prominent front gable wing and shortened the shed roof porch. The cross gable roof is covered in asphalt shingles, and the walls are clapboard siding. Though some of the rear additions may date to after the Birthright's tenure in the house, the front looks much as it did in 1917 when Bettie Birthright died. The house sits on a large, flat lot set back from Main Street, Clarkton's primary thoroughfare.

**Elaboration:**

*Setting:*

Clarkton, Missouri is a small community of just over 1300 inhabitants in Dunklin County, Missouri. The county is one of two that form the "boot heel" of the state. Historically the region was known for its vast swamps, most of which were drained in the early part of the 20th Century. Dunklin and surrounding counties are now known for their flat topography and rich farmlands. Clarkton's Main Street, where the Birthright House is located, has historically contained a mix of residential, commercial and institutional buildings and this remains true today. Buildings flanking the Birthright home consist of modern brick, pyramidal roof commercial building and a gable front commercial building that sit close to the sidewalk. Also nearby are older residential and commercial buildings and an early 20th Century church (across the street and to the south). The Birthright home sits well back from the street on a large, flat, lot. The lot contains some mature trees but little other vegetation.

*Birthright House*

When constructed in 1872, the Birthright House was a double pen, frame house with full width porches on front and back. The front (east) elevation was six bays wide with two front doors, each flanked by 2/2 wood windows. The porch had turned posts with decorative brackets. The original and earliest portions of the house are of box construction, rather than balloon frame. The walls are constructed of cypress planks nailed to a sill and connected to roof joists by wood trim pieces. The house sits on log joins held above ground by brick piers. Charles later filled in between the piers with stone and concrete blocks. Charles and Betty built additions to the rear of the house, filling in the porch and adding rooms. The building's current appearance dates to c. 1914. That year Charles Hubbard and wife Betty C. Pankey Hubbard moved in with Bettie and constructed a large gabled addition to the front of the house. This addition became Bettie's private suite of rooms. It is likely that the house underwent other changes at that time. For example, remaining wood windows in the house are 3/1 sash—a window type characteristic of 1910s and 1920s residences.

Though no photos have been found showing the house as it looked after the 1914 alterations, it is likely that the east elevation looks much as it did at the time. The façade is dominated by the large, off center, gable front addition. The addition has a steeply pitched roof, the gable end of which has been framed in

wide boards. The walls are sided in wood clapboards. A large window opening is centered on the first floor of the façade. The opening has been infilled to house a smaller window, but the original size of the opening is still evident. The south wall of the elevation has an entrance near the junction with the main part of the house. The north wall of the addition has a large 1/1 window that has been infilled to accommodate a shorter, though equally wide window.

Three bays of the front wall of the original portion are still exposed. To the north of the front addition, the original window has been converted into an entrance. To the south is one of the original front entrances and window openings. The door has a large window over a plain wood panel. The original window has been replaced with a c. 1914 3/1 sash window. This entrance and window are sheltered beneath a shed roof porch supported by 2 X 4 posts.

The south elevation includes the side gable of the original portion of the house. The gable roof is steeply pitched with more shallow pitched shed additions to the east (shed porch roof) and west (rear room additions. In the gable end are some remnants of the non-original Masonite siding that was removed to expose early or original clapboards. There is evidence on this wall that some of the clapboards were replaced or patched. In the gable end is a vent, and on the first floor are paired 3/1 wood windows (likely installed in the c. 1914 alterations to the house). To the west, in the rear addition, is a boarded over window. The south wall of the front gable addition has a secondary front entrance.

The north elevation has a vent centered in the gable end, below which is a window opening, slightly shortened to accommodate a shorter wood window. To the west, in the shed roof addition, is a short 3/1 window installed c. 1914. To the west are additional, poorly constructed, additions that appear to be infills of early porches. The wood siding on this addition has been patched together, and a secondary shed roof had been added over the existing roofline, likely to address leaks where earlier roofs were patched together.

The rear of the house has had several additions since its construction in the 1870s. The additions vary in quality of construction, but are all housed under a shed roof extending from the house's main roof. A partial width porch with 2 X 4 supports extends across the northern section of the elevation.

*Integrity*:

The Birthright house underwent several alterations—both during and after the tenure of the Birthrights in the house. The Birthrights lived together in the house for approximately 40 years, and Bettie continued living there six more years after Charles Birthright died. The earliest rear additions are associated with the married life of the Birthrights and the large front addition, though built after Charles died, was built especially for Bettie Birthright and it was from there that she managed the Birthright estate and spent the last three years of her life. When the Clarkton County Historical Society purchased the house in 2000, the building had been covered in Masonite siding and some of the historic windows had been replaced. Since that time, the non-historic siding has been removed, exposing original or early clapboard siding and the openings of the original windows. Additions constructed after the Birthright tenure in the house are confined to the rear of the building, and do not significantly impact public views of the house.

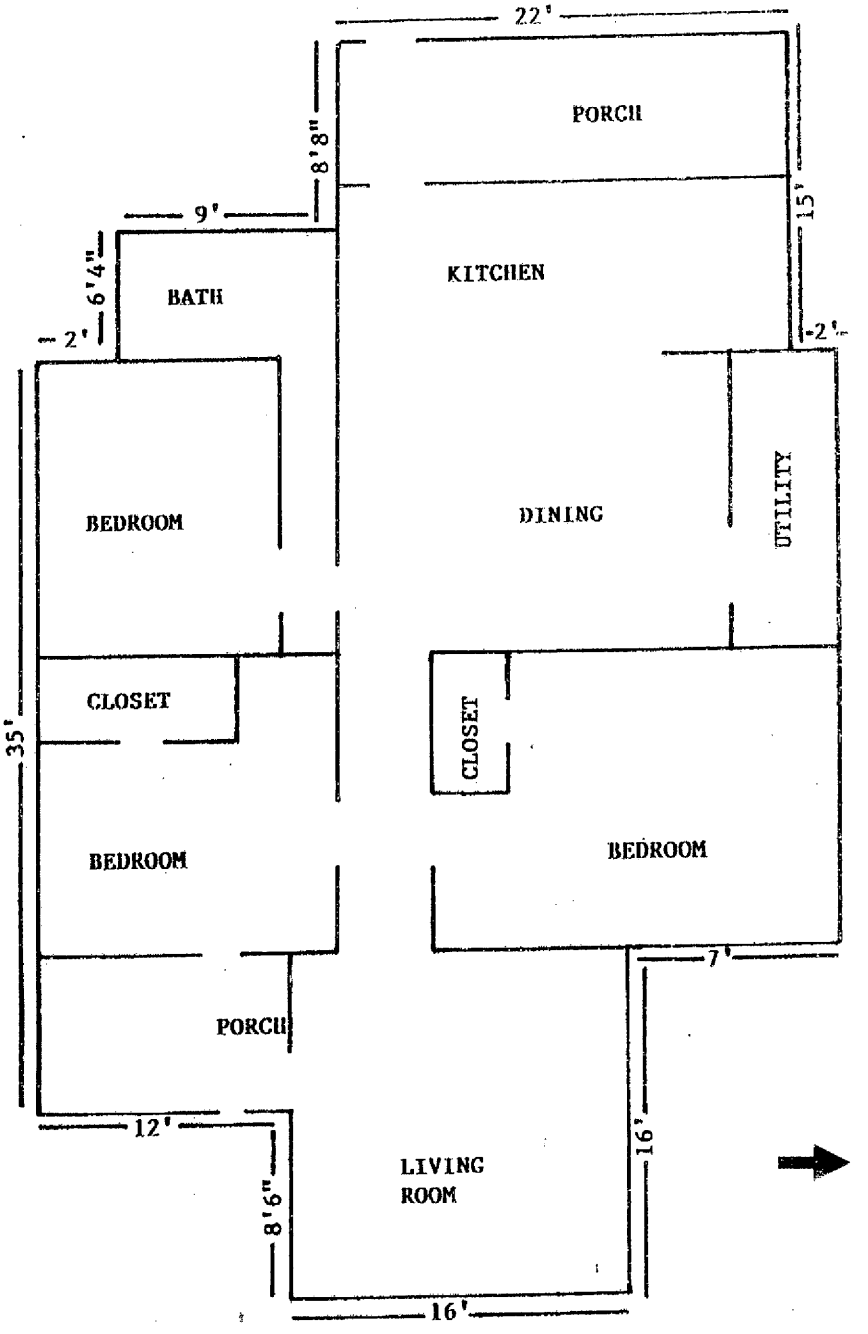
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

**Section number** 7 **Page** 3

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House
Dunklin County, Missouri

**Floor plan**



**Summary:**

The Charles and Bettie Birthright[1] House at 109 S. Main Street, Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places with local significance under Criteria A and B in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History. For more than 40 years the house was home to the Birthrights, former slaves who achieved economic independence and prosperity while building close ties with the families that had held them in slavery and the predominantly white citizenry of Clarkton and Dunklin County. From modest beginnings, this barber and seamstress amassed substantial wealth from highly successful commercial and farming operations. By 1901 Charles was among a group of men cited in the local press as contributing to "Dunklin County's greatness."[2] The couple used their growing wealth to benefit the community, investing in its economic development and donating funds to construct the 1884 and 1911 Clarkton school buildings. After their deaths, their estate went to Stillman Institute (now College) in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, constituting the single largest charitable contribution to the college until the 1980s. A building on campus, Birthright Auditorium, is named in their honor. Though not civil rights activists in the common definition of the phrase, the couple's economic and civic contributions to Clarkton and Dunklin County contradicted the popular image of blacks as indolent, undisciplined and unworthy of the full rights of American citizens. The Birthrights represent an aspect of history rarely studied in Missouri or the United States—African Americans who were well respected and accepted members of the larger white community during a period when racism was the social norm. The period of significance is 1872 -1917, the time span during which the Birthrights owned and lived in the house and made their greatest contributions to the local community.

**Elaboration:**

Like many people who have become significant icons in history—be it local or national—the Birthrights did not set out to "make history." They, like many, were hard working business owners and farmers who were committed to their family, friends, and community. Yet, over 90 years after their death, the Birthrights are still remembered locally for their contributions to Clarkton economically and socially. Additionally, their lives have been featured in news and magazine articles and historical journals. Their successes are even highlighted in Missouri *Then and Now*, the fourth grade Missouri history text, and the revised edition of *Missouri's Black Heritage*. In the words of historian Lawrence O. Christensen, the Birthrights "demonstrate the complexity of race relations in post-Civil War Missouri and the fact that a range of relationships between the races existed even in the poisoned atmosphere of racism that permeated late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America."[3]

The Birthrights likely represent a larger segment of American society than is accounted for the historical record. That their story is known and available to illustrate the range of race relations in the country in the

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[1]Birthright is spelled in several ways in historic documents, including Birthwright, Berthright, and Birthrite, to name a few. The Birthright spelling is the most common and, unless quoting from a historic source, will be used throughout the nomination.

[2] "CLARKTON! The New and the Old Now a Railroad Town." *Dunklin Democrat*, March 29, 1901.

[3]Lawrence O. Christensen "The Popular Image of Blacks vs. The Birthrights." *Missouri Historical Review*, October 1986, p. 52.

late 19th and early 20th Century is a result of where the lived, a wealth of saved correspondence and papers, and to the relationships that the couple built in the community. Clarkton is a small town in rual Southeast Missouri. Though Southeast Missouri has historically had a large African-American population, this was not the case for Clarkton and Dunklin County in the late 19th and early 20th Century. So, while the Birthrights may have stood out among the population because of their color they likely would not have been seen as competition for jobs. Both were small in stature and unpretentious in dress and the construction and management of their home which was modest in scale and decoration. Bettie is listed as a mulatto in the census and photographs indicate that she had a light complexion. It is difficult to evaluate how Bettie's mixed race affected the couple, but it may have made her more acceptable to the largely white population. Charles' work as a barber and Bettie's skill in cookery and sewing were valuable to the community and opened doors for the couple economically and socially. Though underplayed in this nomination, much may be due to the character of Charles and Bettie themselves. They were frugal, hard working, and charitable. Though much of their correspondence is unavailable to the public, the excerpts from what is available show them as savvy in business but also generous, kind, and affectionate to one another and their friends and family. After the deaths of Charles and Bettie their "white family" and friends cherished their possessions and passed along stories of this locally significant African American couple. The rich oral tradition combined with correspondence and other documentation provides us with an important case study that illustrates an ill-documented aspect of American cultural history and race relations.

*The Popular Image of Blacks in the late 19th and early 20th Century*

Prominent people of all races, many of whom *have* been studied and documented, have of course contributed to American history. However, most studies of race relations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focus on white society's predominant view of blacks as an inferior race. This is an attitude that grew on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line after the Civil War, but that had its roots in pre-war social and political rhetoric. The social and political debate over slavery prior to the Civil War rarely advocated social equality. Even the Republican Party, which led the charge against slavery before the war and for the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Constitutional Amendments afterward, walked a fine line. While they campaigned against "Slave Power" in the South, to survive the party needed the support of the white majority. Republicans "emphasized that the party was the defender of the interests of white men, not black."[4] President Lincoln summed up the general attitude of the party when he stated,

> I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of white and black races . . . There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race . . .[5]

[4]Larry Kincade, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Racial Attitudes during the Civil War and Reconstruction." p.45-70. Gary B. Nash and Richard Weiss, ed., *The Great Fear: Race in the Mind of America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1970, p. 50.
[5] Kincade, p. 50.

Though officially freed by the 13th Amendment, given citizenship by the 14th and the right to vote (for qualified males) by the 15th, African-Americans—especially those newly freed—emerged from the Civil War little better off socially than they were before the war. In commenting on the period author Larry Kincade noted a polarity in racial attitudes with great animosity toward blacks, yet political strides made by the passage of the above mentioned constitutional amendments.[6] Pre-war anti-Negro attitudes were compounded by pseudo-scientific theories on racial inequalities. Leading white thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries embraced "scientific racism" and Social Darwinism, both of which used scientific or pseudoscientific studies to support white supremacy.[7] For example, the head of Harvard's Lawrence Science School, Nathaniel Shaler, used Darwinian theories to "contrast hard-working, far sighted whites with undisciplined, indolent, savage blacks."[8] Historian Hubert Bancroft vehemently stated that the "negro . . . is too incompetent and unreliable for any use; as a citizen of the commonwealth he is an unmitigated nuisance."[9] As Christensen notes in his article on the Birthrights, these were not the "spewings of rabid race baiters," but of leaders in education and social science.

The severity of prejudice in the United States was by no means uniform. Prejudice was manifested in many ways and ranged in severity based on socioeconomic factors, region, and urban versus rural populations. However, even whites who took a more moderate view of the issue of racial equality were, as Lincoln said, "in favor of having the superior position." Radical Republican Albion Tourgee, a 19th Century lawyer and writer summed up the general attitude of the white majority in the United States. He wrote that Southerners generally had no ill will toward the Negro "in his place," but that whites would not be considered equal to or be ruled by blacks. Explaining the attitude of many northern whites he wrote, "What is claimed about their inferiority may be true . . . But true or false, they have the right to equality before the law."[10]

Whether zealous or moderate in one's thoughts on racial equality, historians agree that the late 19th and early 20th Century was a period when racism and prejudice against blacks was the social norm. Schools, churches, and the media taught that "black-skinned people were inherently dirty, immoral, ignorant, childlike, occasionally vicious, and fit only for menial occupations."[11] It was during this period, however, that the Birthrights—former slaves with little education—built a life. Their life of hard work, commitment to family, and of civic duty evidenced by their business investments and philanthropy, contrasted sharply with the popular image of blacks in the United States. While their lives have become a historical footnote that broadens the historian's view of race relations, the Birthrights have made a more significant impact on the Clarkton community where their businesses, generosity, and close ties to family and friends made a lasting impression.

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[6] Ibid., 47.
[7] Newby, I.A. *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought In America, 1900-1930.* Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1965, p. 20.
[8] Christensen, p. 38.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Kincaid, p. 56.
[11] Ibid., p. 47.

*The Birthrights of Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri*

Charles Birthright and Bettie Birthright nee Scott were born into slavery in Virginia. Little is known about Charles' early life. He was born in 1833 to Patram and Hunnie Birthwright and became the body servant of C.E. (a.k.a. Jack) Birthright.[12] Though census slave schedules do not include names of those held in slavery, the 1850 slave schedules show C.E. Birthright as having five slaves, one of which was an 18 year old male which could have been Charles.[13] At the time, the Birthrights were in District 7, Weakley County, Tennessee, where the family had been living since at least 1845.[14] The 1860 census shows C.E. Birthright as having 11 slaves, one a 25 year old man that was likely Charles.[15] As a manservant to C.E. Birthright, Charles developed a skill for barbering and learned to play the fiddle.

More is known of Bettie, who stayed in close contact with her parents and siblings throughout her life. She was the daughter of Claiborne and Ann Scott. At some point Claiborne purchased his freedom, though Ann remained a slave to the Betts family. Sallie Walton Betts hired Anne out to the Charles Cocke family who operated the Hollins Institute (now Hollins University), a girls school in Roanoke, Virginia. In the summers, Ann also worked at a former resort in Botetourt Springs owned by the institute and opened to paying guest in the summers.[16] Bettie was born on Huntington Plantation in Roanoke County, Virginia. Slave holders Elisha and Sallie Walton Betts gave Bettie as maid to their niece Sallie Jones. Bettie attended Sallie when she went away to school, and when Sallie married David Y. Pankey in 1853, the couple and their slaves moved to Madrid Bend in western Tennessee.[17]

It may have been in Tennessee that the Pankeys and Birthrights met. C.E. Birthright was living in Weakley County, Tennessee, in the northwestern corner of the state not too distant from the Madrid Bend area. However, by 1859, both the Birthrights and Pankeys were living near Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri. Clarkton, originally known as Beach or Beach Grove, was settled in the early 1850s. It soon became what one newspaper grandiosely called the "metropolis of Dunklin County from 1856 to . . . 1877."[18] Its early success was due, in part, to the Blanton plank or pole road that crossed the swamp to

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[12] A letter dated 1875 slaveholder Mrs. C.E. (Lou) Birthright to Charles and Bettie mentions the death of Charles' mother. Christensen, p. 47.

[13] "C. E. Birthright, Weakley [County], Tennessee." Ancestry.com. *1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls.

[14] "Weakley County Tax Book" 1842-1850, Transcribed by Walter Brooks, 2004. www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/ Accessed June 23, 2009.

[15] "C. E. Birthright, Dunklin [County], Missouri." Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653, 1,438 rolls. Accessed June 22, 2009.

[16] Beth S. Harris, Fishburn Library [Hollins University], Archives and Special Collections, to Fran Cooper, May 18, 1996. Letter on file with Fran Cooper, with secondary copy at the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office.

[17] Mary F. Smyth-Davis. *History of Dunklin County, MO. 1845-1895.* St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Printing Co., 1896, p. 232-233. There is not a town of Madrid Bend, TN. This likely refers to an area now part of Kentucky that is separated from its state and from neighboring Missouri by an oxbow curve in the Mississippi River.

[18] Dunklin Democrat, March 29, 1901.

connect the town to settlements nearer the Mississippi River. In 1860, the town was renamed Clarkton for Henry Clark, one of the contractors who built the pole road.[19]

Both families seem to have prospered in the Clarkton area. For example, in Tennessee in 1850 C.E. Birthright and family had real estate valued at $500 and five slaves.[20] By 1860, Birthright is living near Clarkton with real estate valued at $10,400 and personal property valued at $6,955.[21] The personal property included the value of the 11 slaves owned by the Birthrights. The Pankey's were also doing well in Southeast Missouri with real estate valued at $2,800 and over $7400 in personal property.[22] Like the Birthrights, much of this personal property may have been tied to the value of the six slaves held by the Pankeys in 1860.[23]

If the Birthrights and Pankeys had not met in Tennessee, they certainly became acquainted quickly in Clarkton, as did their household servants Charles and Bettie. By March 1860, Charles had proposed to Bettie and she had written her parents in Virginia for advice. Claiborne and Ann were hesitant to allow their daughter to marry. They were saving to purchase Bettie and reunite the family. Even Bettie's younger sister, Sallie, pledged that she was not "going to buy any more candy but would give all her money to her pa to help buy you." Though too young to assist in raising money, the Scotts worked with their son Benny, making him say "'Bettie' very often so you see I am not going to let him forget he has a sister Bettie."[24] The Scotts were concerned that marriage would scratch their plans for reuniting the family, but eventually gave their blessing for the wedding. The Pankeys and Birthrights also agreed to the match and Bettie and Charles were married in the Presbyterian Church at Clarkton on September 29, 1860.

Starting a new marriage on the brink of the Civil War was not easy for Charles and Bettie. The couple was often separated, living with their slaveholders on farms approximately 20 miles apart. They apparently were able to meet on weekends, and once Charles urged Bettie in a letter to come to West Prairie "without fail." In 1861, Bettie traveled back to Tennessee with Sallie Pankey to attend Pankey's

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[19]Robert Sidney Douglass. *History of Southeast Missouri.* New York & Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1912. Republished Ramfre Press, Cape Girardeau, MO, 1961, p. 286.

[20] "Weakly County, Tennessee, District 7 Census, 1850," Transcribed by Linda Green, www.rootseb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/ Accessed June 23, 2009. Tax roles show C.E. Birthright as owning 94 acres valued at $284, and 3 slaves valued at $1500.00.
"C. E. Birthright, Weakley [County], Tennessee." Ancestry.com. Accessed June 2009.

[21] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. Heritage Quest Online. http://0-www.heritagequestonline.com.catalog.mrrl.org/hqoweb/library/do/index. Accessed June 2009.

[22] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. Heritage Quest Online. http://0-www.heritagequestonline.com.catalog.mrrl.org/hqoweb/library/do/index. Accessed June 2009.

[23] "D Y Pankey." Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653, 1,438 rolls.

[24] Quoted in Cristensen, p. 40.

ailing father.[25] In an intimate letter to her husband, Bettie wrote, "I can stand it very well all the week, but when Saturday night and Sunday comes, then I have the blues and feel like I would give anything on earth to be with you. And I do hope, my dear husband, it won't be long before we will see each other again."[26] The couple was again separated when C.E. Birthright took Charles on a business trip to Arkansas in December 1862 in preparation for a move to that state. This separation was especially bitter because Bettie had given birth to a son, ironically named Sterling Price (called Price) for the Confederate Major General, on September 9, 1862. Corresponding from Arkansas, Charles said "I am well and very anxious to see you and my babe . . . You have no idea how anxious I am to see you. I don't think I will be of any account if I am separated from you."[27] Charles went on to urge Bettie to talk with "Miss Sallie and Marse Davie" Pankey about purchasing him or selling her to the Birthrights. Charles had apparently been speaking with the Birthrights about the possibility of purchasing Bettie or selling himself for he said in the same letter that, "Marse Jack and Miss Lou says they will never part us if they can help it, but he is not willing to give me up for a trifle."[28]

Despite these urgings, Charles and Bettie spent the years of the Civil War with their respective slaveholders. Charles even followed C.E. Birthright into the military, serving as a valet in camp. C. E. Birthright was a major in the 7th Missouri Regimental Cavalry, CSA. Charles was apparently known for his resourcefulness in camp, and may have had opportunity to hone his skill as a barber while following the troops. Bettie's slaveholder David Y. Pankey also served as a captain for the Missouri State Guard and later the Confederate Army.[29] Continued service to the Birthrights and Pankey's separated Charles and Bettie for much of the war, but more tragic than their separation was the death of their son on January 26, 1863. Price was the only child born to Charles and Bettie.

Following the war, the couple settled in Clarkton, likely because of Bettie's close connection to the Pankey family. Though Sallie Pankey died in a tragic accident soon after the Civil War (c. 1866), Bettie kept in close contact with the Sallie Pankey's children and grandchildren for the rest of her life. Little can be found in the historic record relating to the life of Charles and Bettie in the late 1860s. It is traditionally thought that the couple lived with the Pankeys for at least a time. The 1870 census includes a listing for David Panky [sic] and his second wife, Tennessee, but does not include any of Sallie Pankey's children or Charles and Bettie as part of the household. In fact, the 1870 census for Missouri does not include a listing for the Birthrights in any modification of the spelling.[30]

Despite their exclusion from the census, it is likely that Charles and Bettie were well-established in the

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[25] Another sources says brother. Mrs. Paul Baldwin. "The Story of Charles Birthright," Dunklin County Historical Society. *Dunklin County Historical Society*, Vol 2. Thrower Printing Company, Kennett, MO, n.d, p. 371.

[26] "Birthright Letters Form one of Museum's Best Collections." *The Daily Dunklin Democrat*, September 8, 1978, p. 5; Christensen, p. 41.

[27] Mrs. Hugh Ballard Pankey and Mrs. Paul Baldwin. "Stillman's Birthrights," *Presbyterian Survey*, LXXXI (February, 1960), 26-27.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Dunklin County Historical Society. *Dunklin County Historical Society*, vol 1. Thrower Printing Company, Kennett, MO, 1952, p. 286.

[30] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1870. http://0-ww.heritagequestonline.com.catalog.mrrl.org/hqoweb/library/do/index. Accessed June 2009.

Clarkton community by 1870. Charles would have used his skill as a barber to earn money, and throughout her life Bettie was esteemed as a skilled cook, tailor and seamstress. The couple had, by 1872, raised sufficient funds to purchase a city lot from Thomas and Melissa Stokes for $101.[31] The Birthrights apparently had some trouble over the land transfer[32] and in September of that year the lot was transferred to family friend and lawyer T.E. Baldwin who held it for them.[33] Despite these troubles, Charles completed the home in which the couple would live for the rest of their lives in 1872.

It was from this modest, double pen, frame home that the Birthrights built their businesses. From oral and written accounts of the couple, there was very little that they could not or did not do. Charles operated the town's only barbershop from a small building located next to their home. Behind the house was a summer kitchen (no longer extant) where Bettie cooked for the family and built a catering business. As a caterer, she was famous locally for her 40-egg wedding cakes.[34] By 1880, the agricultural census lists the Birthrights as substantial property owners. They owned approximately 75 acres in Dunklin county valued (with farm buildings) at $1500. Additionally, they had farm machinery and implements worth $100 and some $400 worth of livestock including: 2 horses, 2 mules, 2 oxen, 13 "other cattle," 20 swine, and 36 "adult poultry" (probably chickens). In the previous year, the farm had produced 52 dozen eggs, 15 lbs of butter, 1000 bushels of corn, 3 bales of cotton (approximately 480 pounds each), and 20 bushels of apples. This farm produce had been valued at $388. The Birthrights had one farmhand assisting in the care of the farm, paid $10 in wages.[35] A brief comparison of the Birthright (Birthwright in the 1880 census) farm to 38 other farm properties in Freeborn Township reveals that the Birthrights owned a substantial and valuable property. In the comparison set, the value of farmland ranged from $75 to $3,000, with only 5 farms being valued over $1,000.

The fire that destroyed the 1890 census records, and changes to how agricultural data was gathered in 1900 and later, leave a 30 year gap in records of the Birthright's farming ventures. Tax receipts for the 1870s and 1884 show the Birthrights acquiring acreage in 1879 (30 acres) and 1884 (180 acres). They had a total of 395 acres in 1889 and purchased more the next year (total acreage 426.8 acres). By 1909, they owned over 520 acres in Dunklin and New Madrid Counties.[36] Land purchases, however, do not give a complete picture of their farming endeavors. Probate inventories compiled after Charles' death,

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[31] "Elizabeth Berthright [sic] Warranty Deed." Clarkton, March 1872. Clarkton Historical Society, "Birthright Collection." http://www.clarktonschools.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=1595&. Accessed June 24, 2009

[32] Some speculate that the trouble arose because the Birthrights were black. Though there may have been some local custom prohibiting African-Americans from purchasing land, the laws of the State of Missouri put no such restriction on land ownership. The couple did not seem to have any problems purchasing land in the later part of the 19th Century.

[33] Warranty Deed, Clarkton, September 1872. Clarkton Historical Society, "Birthright Collection." http://www.clarktonschools.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=1595&. Accessed June 24, 2009

[34] Mrs. Hugh Ballard Pankey and Mrs. Paul Baldwin. "Stillman's Birthrights," *Presbyterian Survey,* LXXXI (February, 1960), 26-27.

[35] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880 Agricultural Census.* Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880. On Microfilm at the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

[36] Christensen, 43.

however, show that the Birthrights continued to work their farm well into the early 20th Century. The 1912 inventory included a list of agricultural products, livestock and other goods owned by the Birthrights at the time of Charles' death. These included 4 bales of cotton, 400 bushels of corn, 100 bales timothy hay, and 8 wagon loads of loose hay. Their farm machinery included a saddle, hay rack, mower, drill and stalk cutter, two wagons, three plows, one harrow, and a buggy and harness. Livestock seemed to be a significant part of their farming business and included 2 mules, 2 cows and calves, 21 head of cattle (aged one and two years), 13 cows, 1 bull, ½ interest in 10 hogs, 1 sow and 3 pigs, and 12 sows and 2 boars in pen. They owned approximately 500 acres of farm land in Dunklin and New Madrid Counties, and full or partial interest in several lots within Clarkton. Their Clarkton holdings included a lot of household and kitchen furniture, a "barber shop out fit," and 500 concrete "clocks" (this is probably a typographical error in the probate inventory, and likely referred to concrete blocks).[37]

As evidenced by the increase in farm acreage from 75 acres in 1880 to 500 in 1912, the Birthrights worked hard, lived frugally and used their growing wealth to buy additional property and invest in their community. According to local lore, some of their land purchases may have been semi-charitable. Locals say that Charles and Bettie would purchase land from settlers who had purchased farms sight-unseen only to find "Swampeast"[38] Missouri less than hospitable. The Birthrights bought land from settlers wanting to leave the county for the price of sending them home. The Birthrights farmed some of their holdings and rented out the rest. The two largest blocks of land owned by the Birthrights were approximately 167 acres just northeast of Clarkton (a portion of Section 14, T21N, R10E). The couple used this as a dairy farm, supplying milk and butter to much of Clarkton and vicinity. The roughly 240 acres in Holcomb Township, Dunklin County (portions of Sections 20 and 29, T20N, R10E) may have been rental property, due to its distance from the Birthright home in Clarkton. The couple's home sat on four city lots in the Pierce Addition to Clarkton. Charles and Bettie also owned a 450' x 250' lot on Washington Street in Clarkton on which they cultivated a large garden (see Figure 1). This garden supplied the couple and much of the town with fresh vegetables.

The basis of the Birthright's prosperity apparently was their farming enterprises, but the couple also invested in people, businesses and economic development. The Birthrights were stockholders in the Bank of Clarkton (2 shares) and in the Clarkton Real Estate and Improvement Company (4 shares). The Birthrights also made personal loans to area businessmen and farmers. Probate records list over $13,000 in notes held by the Birthrights. These include small loans for the purchase of livestock ($25 for a cow, $100 for a mule, and $150 for a horse) and lumber ($28.85). The couple also gave large loans, likely for the purchase of farms or businesses. For example, the records include a loan to B. F. Jarman and R. G. Hubbard for $10,170 and one to T.E. Page for $3030.[39] It is unknown how the local bank, in which the Birthright's owned two shares, viewed the couple's lending practices. Some of the smaller loans may have been to local African-American families or tenants on their farm properties who may not have been viewed as good risks by the banks. However, the list of notes held included loans to some of the most prominent white families in and around Clarkton. The bank may have not had the capital to support these

[37] "Executor's or Administrator's Inventory, Certificate and Affidavit." Probate Court Records Records, Inventories and Appraisements, Vol 7, p. 223-224. On Microfilm at the Missouri State Archives, role C 26007.
[38] Nick-name given to the Missouri Bootheel in reference to the more than 4 million acres of swampland that once covered the area.
[39] "Executor's or Administrator's Inventory, Certificate and Affidavit."

larger loans.

During the Birthright's time in Clarkton, the fortunes of the town rose and fell several times. The construction of the pole road drew settlers to the town in the 1850s. Though the pole road was destroyed during the Civil War, the town revived after the war having a population of approximately 500 in c. 1870, several stores, a flouring mill, grist mills and cotton gins. Clarkton was known as having "the best schoolhouse in the county," two fine churches and many "neat residences."[40] The town's progress was "checked" in c. 1877 by the construction of the St. Louis, Arkansas, and Texas Railroad that bypassed Clarkton to terminate at Malden to the northwest.[41] Lack of a railroad connection slowed development in Clarkton, but it continued to thrive and in 1888 was described as one of the "most pleasantly situated villages in Southeast Missouri. It has a good school building, three churches, six stores and a gristmill."[42] "The town never died, it dropped into a sweet, quite siesta; but it was easily awakened."[43] Charles and Bettie helped sustain the community through its "siesta" and were important investors in its reawakening. The couple's investment in Louis Houck's railroad helped bring the railroad through Clarkton. Houck was a prosperous businessman and railroad developer from Cape Girardeau who built lines throughout Southeast Missouri. Houck's line reached Clarkton in c. 1901 and the Dunklin County Democrat announced the arrival of the first train (a construction train) on March 26, 1901.[44]

Though Charles is most often cited in the historic record of the business life of the community, Bettie played an important, if behind-the-scenes, role in the family businesses. Bettie, as already noted, was well known as a caterer in Clarkton and was also a seamstress and tailor known for her fancy work. She even taught sewing classes at the Clarkton Presbyterian Church where the handiwork of many of her students is still on display. Charles had no formal education and Bettie stepped into this void. Though he and Bettie corresponded during their separation in the early 1860s, individuals who have seen the documents note that letters from Charles came in a variety of handwriting and were likely dictated by Charles. An old arithmetic primer with Charles' name on the front bears testimony to his interest in education, but notes in the 1900 and 1910 census reveal that he was unable to read or write.[45] Bettie, on the other hand, was taught to read and write as a child or teenager by Sallie Pankey and carried on correspondence in her own hand to friends, family and business associates. Her correspondence to family friend and estate executor David B. Pankey shows that Bettie knew the business well. In a letter to Pankey in 1913, she wrote of continuing to rent land to a local farmer, and a reminder to get a Mr. Miller to pay his rent stating "don't forget he owes rent on ten acres not included in the note."[46] Bettie's involvement in the family business holdings is also mentioned in Charles' obituary. The article states, "His wife was as good as he, and, in fact, many say that it was her judgment that acted as the balance wheel of the firm."[47]

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[40] Smyth-Davis, p. 106.
[41] Douglass, p. 286.
[42] Goodspeed Publishing Company. *History of Southeast Missouri.* Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1888. Reprint BNL Library Service, Independence, MO, 1978.
[43] Dunklin Democrat, March 29, 1901.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Donald B. and Claire Smith. "A Pilgrimage to Clarkton, Missouri: Home of Dunklin County's Celebrated Black Couple." March 1980, p. 3. Manuscript of file at the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office. Heritage Quest.
[46] Quoted in Christensen, p. 45.
[47] "Charles Birthwright Dead." *Dunklin Democrat*, January 5, 1912, p. 1.

Charles and Bettie's commercial and agricultural ventures were bedrocks of Clarkton's economic life, but the couple also played a significant role in the social and cultural affairs of Clarkton and Dunklin County. Part of that social connection came through their business enterprises. As the only barber in Clarkton for many years, Charles would have been in close contact with the men of Clarkton and the surrounding farms. Visiting his shop for the first time was a rite of passage for many young men of the community, and "Charles . . . could tell with great pleasure, of boys slipping in to have their first imaginary whiskers shaved."[48]

Charles was also a locally renowned musician, invited to play at gatherings and celebrations. His obituary praised Charles as "a natural musician and for half a century, nearly, played his fiddle at social functions, public entertainments, and at home."[49] David Birthright, son of slaveholder C.E. "Jack" Birthright, wrote fondly of Charles's music. In 1881 he invited Charles and Bettie to Texas saying that "I want to hear you play some [of] the old tunes I used to Dance." In 1911 David once again wrote of Charles' fiddle playing to which he "cut a caper and tore the paper" as a young man.[50] Charles used his love of music for more than entertaining friends and family. Birthright committed himself to the youth and education, and used his musical talents to promote both. Charles founded the Clarkton School music program and was its first director. An account of the reunion of the John P. Taylor Camp No. 792, United Confederate Veterans on August 20, 1907 gives us a glimpse at Charles the musician and educator. The account lists Charles as "one of the old soldiers with regard to the army" and tells of his contribution to the program.

> A pleasant feature of the program was the singing of "Dixie" many times by a class of little girls, from Clarkton, trained with great care by that old and popular musician Charles Birthright. He was as proud of the class as was the old soldiers who could not get enough of their singing. The little Misses were: Geraldine Waltrip, Carrie Luckman, Agnes James, Trixie Davidson, Lucie Luckman, Ruth Walton, and Catherine Page.[51]

Charles was considered to be "especially the friend of young people." In addition to working with young musicians, Charles and Bettie donated generously to their church and to the Clarkton school system. In 1905, Charles and Bettie with T.E. Page (school principal) and Z. B. Penney, secured a $1500 bond for the construction of a new school building (completed 1911).[52] The school bond document shows Charles' "X" mark with Bettie signing as a witness.

Philanthropy and generosity were hallmarks of the lives of Charles and Bettie and continued after their deaths. In 1893 Charles and Bettie consulted with their lawyer, T. E. Baldwin, about the disposition of

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Quoted in Christensen, p. 50-51.
[51] *Dunklin Democrat*, [August], 1907. Retyped June 4, 2008 from microfilm copy by Barbara Hostetler. Copy on file at the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office.
[52] "School Fund Bond." http://www.clarktonschools.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=1595&. Accessed June 24, 2009

their estate. The childless couple first thought to give their estate to the children and grandchildren of David and Sallie Pankey, with whom the couple were quite close. Baldwin, who was the Pankey's son-in-law, suggested that instead the couple leave their land and holdings to the Stillman Institute (now College) in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a Presbyterian school originally dedicated to preparing black men for the ministry. The Birthrights were Presbyterian and this gift would continue their long term commitment to the church and to education.

Charles Birthright died in his home on December 30, 1911 after a few months of "failing health . . . serious for several weeks."[53] Charles named Bettie and David B. Pankey as executors of the estate, which would be held and managed by Bettie until her death on January 17, 1917. Upon Bettie's death, the Birthright farm property was given to Stillman Institute. Stillman operated the farm until 1967 when it sold the property. The sale amounted to $211,295. Until the 1980s, the college had not "received a gift of greater value from a donor's bequest."[54] Their bequest to Stillman also continued to benefit the local school system. After Bettie's death, Stillman gave part of the estate to the Clarkton School District. Clarkton later built a new school complex on the land. The school grounds include a marker honoring the Birthrights and their contributions to the school system.

*Clarkton and the Birthrights*

The work and lives of the Birthrights only tell a part of their significance. The historical record shows that this frugal and hard working couple had success in business and used their prosperity to help the community. Their contributions to the commercial life of the town helped sustain it through periods of economic decline. Their generosity and philanthropy made possible the construction of two school buildings in Clarkton and the growth of a historically black college in Alabama. While their significance can be clearly illustrated by the facts of their land ownership and donations, it can also be viewed through the eyes of their contemporaries and later citizens of Clarkton and Dunklin County.

While the Birthrights seemed to have been respected members of the Clarkton community, the town's view of the couple was by no means completely color blind. Though Christensen wrote that the relationship between Charles and Bettie and their former slave holders seemed stronger than the "'paternalism' upper-class whites felt for their exslaves," correspondence and county histories show that a sense of "paternalism" may have existed.[55] For example, the 1912 *History of Southeast Missouri* contained a biography of David Y. Pankey that included the following:

> at the end of [the war] . . . He set his slaves free, but they never lost the feeling of affection and devotion towards him, but would have cheerfully laid down their lives for him at any time. One of them, Charles Birthwright, with his wife Bettie, live in Missouri and are leaders among the colored people of Clarkton.[56]

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[53] *Dunklin Democrat*, January 5, 1912
[54] David B. Smith, "Your Affectionate Lover Until Death." *Presbyterian Survey*, July 1976, p. 57-58. Found online at www.clarktonschools.org. Accessed June 24, 2009.
[55] Christensen, 47.
[56] Douglass, p. 836

The sense of former slaveholders as benefactors to exslaves can also be seen in a letter between Lou Birthright (C.E. Birthright's wife) and Bettie and Charles in 1875:

> When we moved from Arkansas I gave all my things to our Black folks except our beds and clothing . . . I made your Mothers Burial cloths [sic] before I left her. She told me she would not have long after I left her and sure enough she didn't=I made and gave each one 2 suits of Winter clothing=I have no remorse of conscience in the way of mistreating them at all. They all said they didn't want to be separated from us and I believe it was so.[57]

Lou went on to write "I have wished a thousand times that we were all together again = not that I desire Slavery again=but being used to them I didn't think I could live without them."

Historical references to the couple are also often tempered by a reference to their color. In his remembrances of early Clarkton, W. P. Chatham mentioned several "characters I remember best." Chatham listed store owners, the doctor/pharmacist and mentions "Charles Birthright the colored barber" twice.[58] Rev. L.W. Lemonds does not mention the color of the couple but seems to include them as an afterthought when he wrote:

> Clarkton is one of the oldest towns in the county, if not the oldest. Its citizens were some of the best people on earth . . . The town was filled with such men as Dr. Van Harrison and Dr. Wilkins, . . . And their good wives. They were devoted to the Lord and the church. All these that we have named are sleeping. . . They still live in the memories of many who are here. I forgot to name Charles Birthright and wife.[59]

Charles' obituary rated a full column on the front page of the county-wide newspaper, yet the opening line "The always popular old colored man, of Clarkton," set him apart.

Even today, the significance of the Birthrights is viewed through the context of race. The couple clearly made significant contributions to the town and Clarkton's school. However, their business success and generosity seems even more astounding considering the time and society in which they lived. Prejudice was not only prevalent, but accepted as the social norm in the United States in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Their way early on almost certainly was eased by their connection with the prominent Pankey family. Also, the African-American population of Dunklin County during the period was not large. Between 1860 and 1910 black population varied, but even at its reported peak in 1900 the census only counted 206 blacks—less than one percent of the county population (21,706).[60] So, the competition between blacks and whites for jobs, housing and land (oft cited reasons for racial conflict) would not have been significant in Dunklin County as in other regions. This by no means explains or justifies their

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[57] Quoted in Christensen, pp. 47-48.
[58] W.P. Chatham, "Historical Incidents in and about Clarkton." August 27, 1943. Dunklin County Historical Society. *Dunklin County Historical Society*, Vol 1. Thrower Printing Company, Kennett, MO, 1952.
[59] Rev. L.W. Lemonds. "Historical Notes and Reminiscences." Dunklin County Historical Society. *Dunklin County Historical Society*, Vol 1. Thrower Printing Company, Kennett, MO, 1952.
[60] Historical Census Browser-University of Virginia Library.
http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/states/histcensus. Accessed June 17, 2009.

success. Dunklin County may have been feeling the pressure of surrounding counties. New Madrid County, just northeast of Dunklin, historically had a large black population. In 1860, the total population of New Madrid County was 5,654 of which 1,777 were slaves, and 14 were free blacks.[61] The black population grew throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, though the total percentage of population decreased. Racial tensions were apparent in the way news was reported in the *Dunklin Democrat* however. Ironically, next to the long obituary of the "popular old colored man" of Clarkton was an article titled "One Negro's Reward." Where Birthright's obituary lauded "the respectful and respected negro man, broad, charitable, willing to help anyone," the neighboring column described a gruesome murder in Muldrow, Oklahoma that resulted in "Sam Turner, a negro, . . . being lynched by a mob."[62]

Clearly, race was an issue in Dunklin County during the lives of the Birthrights as it was across the country. It may even have occasionally raised its head in the small town of Clarkton where the Birthrights seemed to have been embraced as important members of the community. In November 1903, Charles swore out a complaint against W. R. Shannon for disturbing the peace, an act that was followed up by the Mayor of Clarkton signing a warrant for Shannon.[63] Whether this incident was racially motivated or not is unknown, but it illustrates that the Birthright's lives were not entirely peaceful.

It is difficult to know why the Birthrights were embraced by the Clarkton community, and why their memory lingers so long after their deaths. In his article "The Popular Image of Blacks vs. The Birthrights," Christensen notes that the Birthright's hard work, business savvy, dedication to family (a dedication that included both their black and white families), and generosity contrasted with how American society depicted blacks. Though these factors were certainly grounds for respect, it may have been the personality and generosity of the couple that endeared them to the town. Certainly the younger generations of the Pankey family embraced the couple, not as exslaves but with sincere affection as members of the extended family. Hugh Pankey, who became co-executor of Charles's estate after the death of his father, addressed Bettie as "aunt." He and his family visited the Birthrights and often had Bettie to their house for long visits after Charles' death. In a letter from 1913, Hugh ended saying "Well Clyde [Hugh's wife] and Cary [his daughter] both join me in sending much love to Aunt Bettie . . . Lovingly, Hugh Pankey." Cary Pankey honored Bettie and was responsible for maintaining the collection of Bettie's correspondence and records for many years. As Bettie's health began to fail in the 1910s, Robert and Betty (Pankey) Hubbard moved into the Birthright house to take care of Bettie and her home.

This affection went beyond the "family" and included much of the Clarkton community. When Donald and Claire Smith from Stillman College visited Clarkton in 1979, they found a community ready and able to tell the story of the Birthrights. Their account from 1980 illustrates the long reach of the Birthrights and how well-loved they were by many. On arrival in Clarkton, the couple ran into S.H. James at the gas station:

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[61] Ibid.

[62] *Dunklin Democrat*, January 5, 1912, p. 1.

[63] "Complainant's Affidavit," and "Warrant." Clarkton Historical Society, "Birthright Collection." http://www.clarktonschools.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=1595&. Accessed June 24, 2009

> Mr. James does not appear old enough to have memory of Bettie Birthright who died in 1917, much less of her husband . . . But ask him if he has heard of the Birthrights and he may respond, "Of course I have, my mother was with Bettie Birthright when she died."

The Smith's story also tells of Mrs. M.M. McMahon who took them on a tour of Birthright sites, and introduced them to citizens who knew or knew of the Birthrights and who cherished Birthright artifacts such as Bettie's wedding ring and Charles' pocket watch. Today, the Clarkton Historical Society is restoring the home of Charles and Bettie Birthright to interpret their lives and contributions to Clarkton and Dunklin County.

The Birthright's modest home on Main Street in Clarkton was the headquarters of the Birthright family and business. The home was also a center of the community. In his obituary, Charles was honored as a friend to the community who never "turned a deaf ear" to the troubles of those who came to him. "His home was as popular as if its master had been of purest Caucasian blood."[64] That the Birthrights lived and both died in the home is a testament to its importance in their lives and of the unique relationship between the black Birthrights and their largely white community which turned upside down the common stereotypes of black inferiority that prevailed in the decades following the Civil War.

[64] *Dunklin Democrat*, January 5, 1912, p. 1.

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet



**Verbal Boundary Description:**

Lot 1, Block 4, Pierce Addition to the City of Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundary includes the city lot on which the house sits that constitutes the land historically associated with the building.

**Photo Log:**

The following is true for all photographs:
Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House
Clarkton, Dunklin County, Missouri
Photographer: Scott Harrison
Date of Photos: August 2008
Type: Digital photographs.

1. East and south elevations, looking northwest.
2. South elevation, looking north northwest.
3. Detail of area under front porch roof, looking northwest.
4. North elevation of addition, looking south.
5. North elevation, looking south.
6. Rear elevation, showing rear porch, looking southeast.
7. Rear elevation, looking northeast.

**List of Figures:**

**Figure 1:** Plat of Pierce Addition, dated 1903. House and garden lots owned by the Birthrights outlined in black.

**Figure 2:** **Birthright House,** historic photo, date unknown.

**Figure 3:** **Bank of Clarkton**, Charles pictured on far left.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

**Section number** Figures **Page** 23 Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House
Dunklin County, Missouri

**Figure 1:** Plat of Pierce Addition, dated 1903. House and garden lots owned by the Birthrights outlined in black.

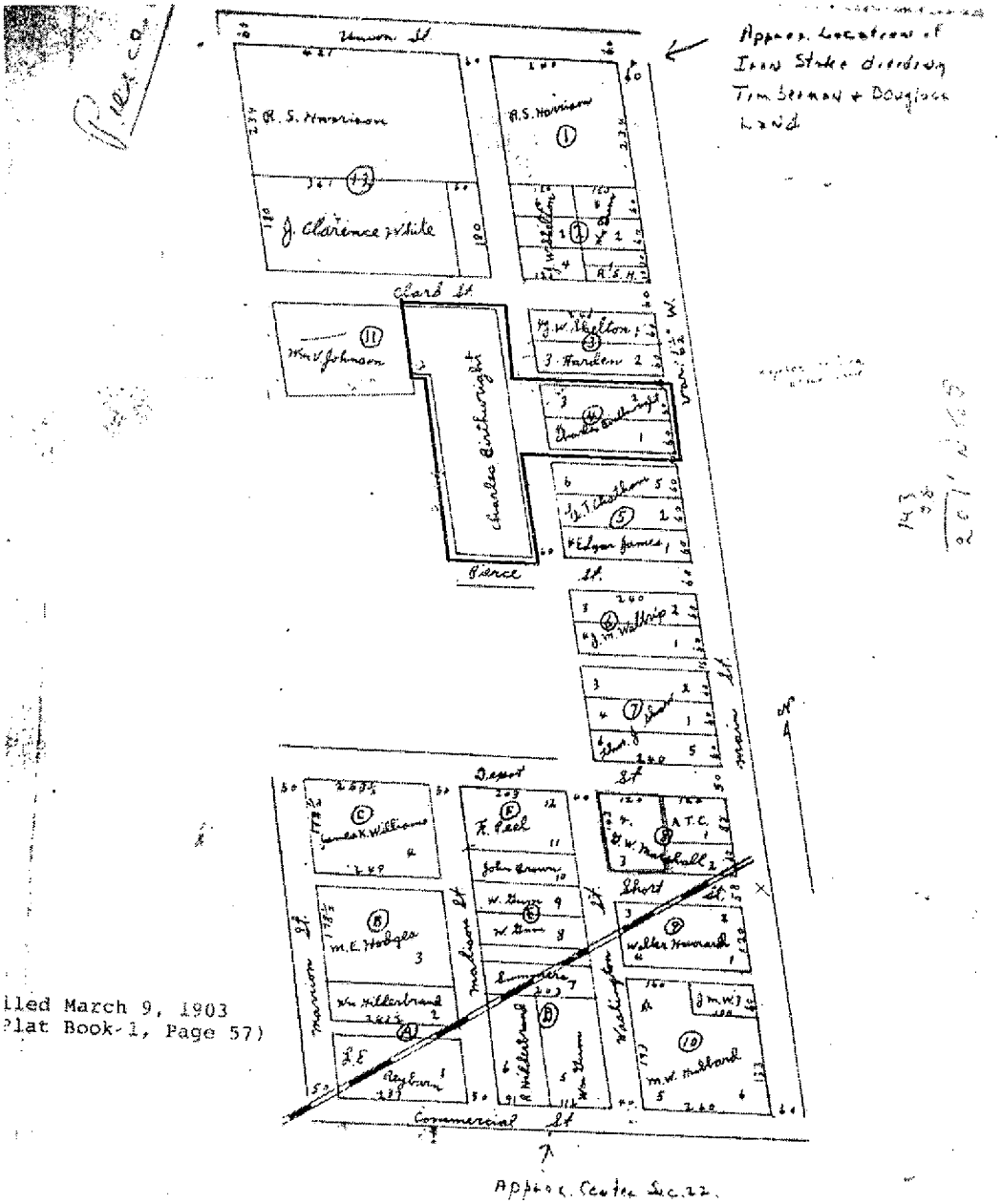

**Figure 2: Birthright House,** historic photo, date unknown

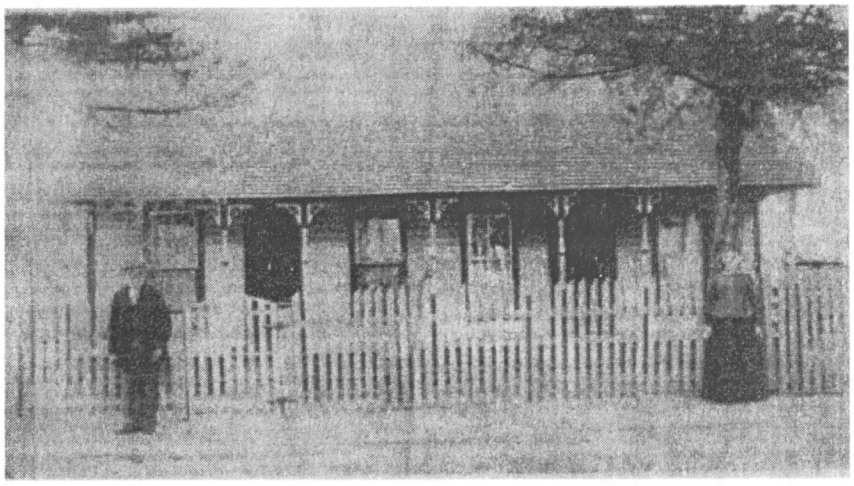

**Figure 3: Bank of Clarkton**, Charles pictured on far left.

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 1

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 2

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 3

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 4

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 5

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 6

Birthright, Charles and Bettie, House, Dunklin County, Missouri Photo 7