Texas Historical Commission Staff (CJB), 12/28/88, revised 1/17/89

18" x 28" Official Texas Historical Marker with post
Hays County (Job #10087)
Location: 213 Martin Luther King Street, San Marcos

ULYSSES CEPHAS*
(1884-1952)***

THE SON OF FORMER SLAVES JOE
AND ELIZABETH CEPHAS, ULYSSES
CEPHAS WAS BORN IN SAN MARCOS.
HE WAS TRAINED AT AN EARLY AGE
TO CARRY ON THE BLACKSMITHING
TRADE OF HIS FATHER, KNOWN AS
"BOOTS" TO HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY.
CEPHAS EVENTUALLY OWNED HIS
OWN BLACKSMITH SHOP AND WAS
KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY
FOR HIS SKILLS IN SHOEING HORSES
AND CREATING SUPERIOR WAGONS AND
FARMING IMPLEMENTS. A RESPECTED
COMMUNITY LEADER, HE WAS AN
ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE FIRST
MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH AND
ORGANIZER OF THE SAN MARCOS
INDEPENDENT BAND.**

(1989)***

*3/4 inch lettering
**1/2 inch lettering
***1/4 inch lettering
ULYSSES CEPHAS

Documentation by:

Hays County Historical Commission
ULYSSES CEPHAS

PERSONAL HISTORY

Ulysses Cephas (1884-1952) was born in San Marcos, Texas and lived there until his death.

Ulysses, the son of former slaves Elizabeth (1852-1932) and Joseph Cephas, was married to Cora Willie Brady (1889-1975) on November 13, 1907. Ulysses and Willie had five children; three children lived to be adults. Johnnie Lee Cephas Rutledge lives in Palestine, Texas. Naomi Cephas Wade and Willie Cephas are deceased.

As a young man Ulis, or "Boots", as he was called by his family and friends, worked and improved his skills as a blacksmith in San Marcos while in the employment of John E. Morris' blacksmith and woodworking shop.

Ulysses father Joe Cephas, was also a very skilled blacksmith in the early days of San Marcos. (1850-1890)

During the Republic of Texas era, Hays County was a part of Bastrop and Travis Counties. General Edward Burleson (1793-1851) was in the Texas Senate when he moved to San Marcos on property he had been accumulating since 1844. He built a house on the hill above the springs at the head of the San Marcos River, where he began a mill. His enterprises were cut short because of his untimely death in December 1851.

In 1848 General Burleson had petitioned the state Legislature to create a new county from parts of Bastrop and Travis counties. He named the new county for his friend, Colonel John Coffee Hays.

General Burleson owned several thousand acres of land and encouraged other settlers to move into the San Marcos River area.

Horse racing on the old stage coach road between San Marcos and
New Braunsfels was an active sport enjoyed by the early inhabitants of the area.

When Sarah Burleson, General Burleson's widow, learned in 1852 that William Thompson was going to New Orleans, she asked her neighbor to bring a blacksmith to San Marcos since a good one was needed for the new frontier town. Mrs. Burleson provided him with $800.00 for the purchase of a qualified slave. Thompson bought Joe Cephas at the slave market in New Orleans. Joe Cephas came to San Marcos, worked diligently, and became a respected member of the community.

My father, Claude Woods (1873-1935) was a cotton ginner in the San Marcos area in the 1890s and 1900s. He spoke of Joe Cephas with respect and admired his ability to weld and make parts for the cotton gin when it broke down. Joe Cephas saved the ginner time as the loaded cotton wagons were waiting in the gin yard. The farmers, horses, wagons and families of the men needed to be back at the farm for the next load of cotton as it was picked. It took a long time for the ginner to go to Austin by train or horseback to get parts. In the 1910s and 1920s, my father ginned cotton in Buda and Kyle. He scoffed that the blacksmiths around Buda and Kyle were not nearly as talented as Joe Cephas.

REAL ESTATE

An Article in the Freedman's Press stated: "A black man should own his own home... for freedom will dwell about the lowliest hut... a man standing in his own door can look upon the world with a feeling of manly pride." After the slavery period, Joe Cephas may have read this paper or that may have been his personal philosophy, whichever, he chose to buy property in the black community in San Marcos on
October 1, 1883. He built a home for his wife Elizabeth and son, Galilee... Ulysses was born a year later. Also in the same issue of the Freedman's Press, there was an article encouraging black men to learn a trade. Apparently Elizabeth and Joe Cephas succeeded in instilling these philosophies into their son, Ulysses.

By 1900 Ulysses' mother was alone with her children and began buying more property in the black community at this time.

Ulysses and Galilee were working and slowly they were paying off the debts on their property.

In 1910 Ulysses was 25 years old. His occupation was listed as blacksmith and horseshoeing.

Elizabeth, Ulysses and his wife Willie, their daughter Johnnie Lee, were living at the home at 217 Comal Street in San Marcos. Willie had listed "Laundress (works at own account)" as her occupation. She was working very hard to help Ulysses get ahead, since their incomes were limited.

In 1921 Ulysses bought property in the black community and built two rent houses. He acquired another lot in 1923 and built more rent property. Eventually, Ulysses owned six of them. All the rental houses were a block or two from the "Dry Bed Creek". They were clean, tidy and equipped with plumbing facilities.

There were houses along the "dry bed creek" drain, where a number of black families lived. These houses had much to be desired in sanitation, comfort and beauty. During times of heavy rains, they flooded. Ulysses wanted rental property which would provide his friends with a proper place to live.

When World War II broke out, San Marcos was chosen as a site for the San Marcos Navigation School, which was later named Edward Gary
Navigation School. The school was named after Edward Gary, a young San Marcos man, who was killed on December 7, 1941 by a Japanese bomb while stationed at Clark Field in the Philippine Islands.

Many young black men were stationed at the San Marcos base, including Reverend Alphonso Washington. Ulysses had clean comfortable houses for these young men to rent at a low rate so they could bring their wives and children to San Marcos.

By the 1930s and 1940s Ulysses owned his home and six rent houses. He was also part owner in a blacksmith shop at 224 South Guadalupe Street in San Marcos.

BLACKSMITH

In the Freedman's Press was another article advising black men to learn a trade: "It should be a part of every man to learn a trade."

Certainly, in those early days of San Marcos when Joe Cephas was allowed to work for the townspeople as a free man, it was because he was a very good blacksmith.

Horse racing was an active sport in Hays County between 1890 until 1915, when O. G. Parke of the Kyle community raised and raced thoroughbred horses. He had an official race track near the Blanco River southwest of Kyle. The family also raised and trained Polo Ponies and enjoyed that sport.

Joe Cephas taught his son Ulysses the skills of his trade. Ulysses and Anthony Giles worked for John E. Morris at his blacksmith and woodshop on the corner of LBJ Street and Hutchison Street beginning around 1907.

Mr. Morris encouraged Ulysses to take a course in artistic horse-shoeing, which he did. He received his diploma on December 8, 1909. The course qualified Ulysses to shoe horses and treat diseases of the horses hoof.
When a horse was brought to the blacksmith shop with "Hoof Rot", (a bacterial infection of the hoof and leg, which made the tissue around the hoof tender and crippled the horse) a difficult disease to treat in the days before anti-biotics, Ulysses would debride the necrotic tissue, put a special blue liquid medication on the hoof, then a special shoe, and the horse would leave the blacksmith shop without limping. Ulysses also, had a special shoe to put on the horses hoof to make the horse prance and walk sideways.

Claude Woods, my father, would take his horses to the Morris blacksmith shop for Ulysses to shoe. For his farming, he bought unique plows from Ulysses, which he developed in the blacksmith shop in San Marcos. These plows had a special way of turning the earth, harrowing the soil, and planting the seed at the same time.

After Mr. Morris's death, Ulysses and Anthony Giles bought the blacksmith shop at 224 South Guadalupe Street from A. M. Ramsey on June 27, 1923. They became independent businessmen at the edge of the black community in San Marcos. This community consisted of a grocery store, filling station, cafe, blacksmith shop, churches, a school and a playground.

By 1935 there were more and more automobiles and tractors in Texas and fewer horses were used as a means of work and transportation, consequently, there was not as much need for blacksmiths. Ulysses bought out Giles' half interest in the blacksmith shop on March 3, 1935 and became the sole owner of the Ulysses Cephas Horseshoeing Shop, which included welding and forging.

When a part would break at the cotton gin, Ulysses could either repair the part at his forge or build a new part and temper the steel properly so it would be more durable the way his father
Joe Cephas had done during and after the slavery and reconstruction period in Texas history.

MEDICAL FRAME

On April 6, 1936, Miss Alma Ragsdale, a student at Southwest Texas Teachers College in San Marcos, was in an automobile and train accident. Alma's hips and pelvis were severely fractured; seven bones were broken. She was bound in a cast from waist to toe. The recuperation period for such a severe injury was usually six to eight weeks and quite painful. Her home was in Hico, Texas, 160 miles from San Marcos and over rough, graveled highways.

Dr. L.L. Edwards, her physician, knew the ride to Hico from San Marcos would be excruciating for the young student, if measures were not taken to immobilize the fractured bones further. Dr. Edwards called upon Ulysses Cephas to build a frame from the young lady's chest to her ankles. The legs had to be kept separated and immobilized.

Ulysses was a kind and gentle man, cheerful and patient. He hummed while he worked on the frame, which took three days to complete. The ambulance attendants could pick Alma up by the straps Mr. Cephas had built into the frame. They turned her sideways as though she was a suitcase and carried her with ease down the hospital steps to the ambulance. Miss Ragsdale made the trip to Hico with very little pain and discomfort. There she recuperated surrounded by family and friends. A rope with a pulley attached to the ceiling was used to lift Alma, cast and frame, to attend her needs and to change her bed linens.

Being a stoic, determined young woman, Alma was ready to enter school for the next spring semester, after having an open reduction on the fractured bones to relieve pressure from a pinched nerve. She received physiotherapy in Hot Springs, Arkansas and then in the swimming pool at Southwest Texas Teachers College. Before she could walk to
class she got permission for the boys on the football team to carry her up and down the stairs to classes so she could continue her education. At the time she had to have special permission to put her arms around the boys since that was not permitted on campus.

KU KLUX KLAN

By 1921 after being semi-active since the post Civil War period, the Ku Kluz Klan became active in Texas once more. Its purpose was to intimidate Blacks, Jews, Catholics and women—people whom the members of the Klan felt were not living up to their moral, civil and social standards.

The local Ku Klux Klan held meetings and initiations with a tall fiery cross, ranging in size from 10 to 30 feet in height with anywhere from 100 to 1,000 men in attendance.

They also made donations to Hays County sheriff George Allen so he could buy bloodhounds for police work; to P.J. Mays, a black minister, who had been ill; and to several churches in the county, to show their "good intent" to the community.

In the July issue of the San Marcos Record, a notice from the Ku Klux Klan read: "We believe in White Supremacy and we believe that white men should keep white men's places."

Because of his quiet leadership in the black community and since the Ku Klux Klan members were well acquainted with Ulysses since he had worked on their horses it is no doubt the members contacted Ulysses if they felt someone was doing something against their beliefs. Ulysses was a friend to all the people of San Marcos, consequently, he could talk to the black people to try to help keep peace in the community.
Katherine Ferguson formerly of Buda remembers going to a meeting and initiation of Ku Klux Klan members on Bunton Hill northeast of Kyle. There was a 20-foot high burning cross and the members sang "America". Mrs. Ferguson remembers her father, Claude Woods, was a member of the organization for a short period, but he soon realized some of the organization's activities bordered on mob hysteria.

There was a sundown curfew on all black people in Hays County during this period. No doubt Ulysses Cephas was permitted to come back into San Marcos after dark, after visiting the farm of Martha Lawshe, his wife's grandmother. The farm was several miles out on the Lime Kiln road northwest of San Marcos and driving a team and buggy or wagon was slow transportation. Ulysses was a friend to all the people and had special privileges.

Mrs. Ferguson remembers going to Ulysses Cephas' home in the 1920s to check on Martha Lawshe and her family to be sure they were all right. Martha (1829-1933) and Edward Lawshe had come from Georgia, as slaves, to Yallabusha County, Mississippi with Lewis Lawshe and his wife, Cherokee Hawkins Lawshe. Then they came to Texas in 1848 with Dr. P.C. Woods and his wife, Georgia Lawshe Woods. Martha Lawshe had been nursemaid for Pinckney Woods when he was a baby and she a young woman. Martha, her granddaughters Willie Cephas and Dora Brady attended the funeral of our mother, Mrs. Claude Woods in 1929.

The old Zion Baptist Church on Fredericksburg Street was burned when the Ku Klux Klan was looking for a black man whom they had accused of committing a crime.

There is no doubt the men came to Ulysses Cephas' home to inquire of events and happenings in the black community, since he was a friend
to all the people. Even with their hoods on, Ulysses knew who the members were by their horses, which they rode in the parades. He could recognize them by their hooves since he had made horseshoes for the horses. The blacksmith at that time was qualified to treat horses hoofs and was asked by veterinarians for their advise.

Mrs. Miriam A. (Ma) Ferguson, as a candidate for governor of Texas in 1924, declared she would "fire all Klansmen in state political offices", if she was elected. She credited her anti-Ku Klux Klan policy with getting her into office.

After Mrs. M.A. Ferguson became governor of Texas in 1924, her efforts and attitude toward the organization helped to disband the Ku Klux Klan.

CIVIC LEADER

Ulysses Cephas was a leader in the black community of San Marcos throughout his adult life. Charley Williams remembers stopping by Ulysses Cephas' blacksmith shop each morning on his way to school. Ulysses would let him turn the crank to puff the billows to make the fire burn red hot. Charley and other young black men and boys would go to Ulysses' shop on Saturday afternoons and evenings when the work was finished for the week. Ulysses would counsel them to have faith in themselves, a positive and happy outlook on life, to get an education and use common judgment in dealing with everyday problems.

When a black person in the community died and his family was not financially able to pay his funeral expenses, Ulysses would make the arrangements and pay the expenses.
FIRST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

Ulysses Cephas was active in the First Missionary Baptist Church in San Marcos. He was a trustee of the church in 1924, as were Robert Franklin and Anthony Giles. The lovely large church had a basement for dinners and recreation activities. There was a large balcony and a beautiful sanctuary with a seating capacity of 300. Earlier the baptisms were held in the cold water of the San Marcos River. Then in 1952 a heated baptistry was improved behind the pulpit by Reverend Alphonso Washington. In November 1952 a building fund committee of eleven members was selected to renovate the building. Willie Cephas was on this committee.

Ulysses Cephas was musically inclined and had a beautiful voice. For years he was president of the church choir and held choir practice and conducted the choir during his adult lifetime.

Joe Cephas, Ulysses' father had been a trustee of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1870s. Joe Cephas, along with Bartee Johnson, Root Thomas, John Jackson and Presley Thomas, acquired land on April 7, 1875 in farm Lot 5 from the trustees of the Freedman's School. They had the assistance and consent of Edward Burleson, Jr. and they built a church at 224 S. Fredericksburg Street. The congregation has been active at the same location since that time.

BAND

Ulysses Cephas could play all musical instruments by ear except the piano and he taught other young men in the community to play by ear also; no sheet music was used. The band had 45 members and marched in parades in Seguin, Luling, New Braunfels, Waelder and Austin. They also played at baseball games.

Their uniforms consisted of white caps, white shirts, white
trousers with a blue stripe down the leg and a black bow tie. They were called the San Marcos Independent Band.

Some of the early band members had children who later became members of the band themselves.

The band would march in parades in other towns, but on June 19, Texas Emancipation Day, they always marched in the Emancipation Day Parade in San Marcos. Then they would play at the ball games and during the celebration.

After the Ku Klux Klan was disbanded and the black citizens felt easier in their lifestyle, the Emancipation Day celebration was held on June 19, 20 and 21st, 1926 at the Hays County Fair Ground. Ulysses Cephas was on the grounds and meat committee and Mrs. Ulysses (Willie) Cephas was on the decorations committee. There was a free barbeque and basket dinner, with foot races, high jumping, swimming, croquet, horse racing, baseball games and goat and steer roping. The celebration ended with a parade in downtown San Marcos on June 21, 1926.

CONCLUSION

Ulysses Cephas, the son of a slave, worked hard, lived comfortably, and had a daughter, Johnnie Lee Cephas Rutledge, who received a bachelor of science degree in Home Economics from Prairie View A & M college in 1931, also another daughter, Naomi Cephas Wade who graduated from the same school and taught school until her death. Willie, (1914-1962), became an accomplished welder and worked with his father in the blacksmith shop until his death.

Ulysses Cephas lived a wholesome, happy, Christian life. He helped make the lives of those around him better and easier in those troubled times following the slavery period, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II.
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