

# Lucy Jacobs Stewart: Midwife extraordinaire of Liberty, Missouri

Lucy Jacobs Stewart (1850s – 1939) is part of a long tradition of midwifery in Missouri and among many guiding hands in the tapestry of life in Liberty. Neighbors sent for Granny Stewart, as she was called, to assist laboring women. We do not know how many babies she caught, but she was a trusted member of the community and was consulted on a variety of family issues, at a time when 50% of births in the United States occurred at home, assisted by a midwife.



painting by Brianna Lewis

Lucy was part of the first generation of Black Missourians to start a family outside the bonds of slavery. The oldest of six children of Albert and Sarah Jacobs, she raised her family with her husband John S. Stewart on Main Street in Liberty, Missouri. They put their children through school, even though they had not been to school. Two of their six children were still living in 1900: Taylor, a day laborer like his father, and Daisy, a domestic worker.

Lucy and John moved to South Street and later to South Missouri Street. Their wages allowed them to own their home, mortgage-free, at each location. Unlike their white neighbors on South Missouri Street, they continued to work into their senior years. Throughout their lives, the children of the neighborhood were attracted to their loving home.

Lucy outlived her husband by 12 years. Her younger sister, Mary McShears was with her when she died on a cold February morning in 1939, at the age of at least 85. Generational wisdom was passed down through Lucy and elders like her.

## Lucy Jacobs Stewart

(long bio)

Lucy Jacobs Stewart (1852, 1853 or 1854<sup>1</sup> – 23 February 1939<sup>2</sup>) is part of a long tradition of midwifery in Missouri and among many guiding hands in the tapestry of life in Liberty. Neighbors sent for Granny Stewart, as she was called, to assist laboring women.<sup>3</sup>

She would be there, for hours or sometimes days. Imagine Lucy assisting with childbirth, supporting women during pregnancy and with newborn care, and advocating for attention from a physician when need be. We do not know how many babies she caught, but she was a trusted member of the community and was consulted on a variety of family issues.

In the 1900s, about 50% of births in the United States occurred at home, assisted by a midwife.<sup>4</sup> Lay midwives would have someone fill out the birth certificate and take it to a doctor for signature.<sup>5</sup> Even when Lucy died in 1939, about 44% of births in the country still took place at home.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1970 that the proportion of homebirths in the country

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<sup>1</sup> The 1900 census shows July 1852 as Lucy's birthtime; the 1870 census shows 1853 as her birth year; and her death certificate mentions 1854. See the links in subsequent footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> See death certificate for Lucy Jacobs Stewart:

[www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1939/1939\\_00006246.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1939/1939_00006246.PDF)

<sup>3</sup> Archivist Evelyn Louise Petty (born in 1924 in Liberty to Irwin Marshall and Bert Louise Munkirs Petty, died in 2005 in Liberty, and buried in Fairview Cemetery in Liberty, Missouri; she studied history at William Jewell College, also in Liberty) kept a file at the Clay County Archives and Historical Society in Liberty, listing the names and occupations of African Americans in the area. The file of Evelyn Louise Petty includes Lucy Stewart and indicates her profession as a midwife. Lucy Stewart features among others on the back of the Freedom Fountain, erected in 2000 on Courthouse Square in Liberty by Clay County African American Legacy Inc. to honor African Americans who made contributions to the growth and development of Clay County.

<sup>4</sup> "Home Births in the United States, 1990–2009," National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief no. 84, January 2012, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm)

<sup>5</sup> See, *Listen to me good: The story of an Alabama midwife*, by Margaret Charles Smith and Linda Janet Holmes, 1996, Ohio State University Press.

<sup>6</sup> "Home Births in the United States, 1990–2009," National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief No. 84, January 2012, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm)

fell to about 1%<sup>7</sup>, at about the same time a resurgence of interest in midwifery was beginning in Missouri<sup>8</sup>.

Born in Liberty, Missouri, Lucy was the oldest of six children of Albert and Sarah Jacobs (from Kentucky and Virginia respectively).<sup>9</sup> At the age of about 16, not even a decade after the Emancipation Proclamation<sup>10</sup>, she was working for a white couple in their early 40s, James and Mildred Dale, who had a 15-yr-old son; James Dale worked as a grocer.<sup>11</sup>

Lucy went on to raise her family, with her husband John S. Stewart<sup>12</sup>, on Main Street in Liberty, not too far from Garrison School<sup>13</sup>, in a bustling historically black neighborhood of the city of about 2,400 inhabitants<sup>14</sup>. She was part of the first generation of Black Missourians to start a family outside the bonds of slavery.

She had six children. Sarah and Albert, born when she was in her early 20s and named after her parents, were 7 and 3 years old, respectively, at

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<sup>7</sup> “Home Births in the United States, 1990–2009,” National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief No. 84, January 2012, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db84.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Diana S. Perry, “The early midwives of Missouri,” *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery*, 28 (November/December 1983), pp. 15-22.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1016/0091-2182%2883%2990028-9>

<sup>9</sup> We are assuming that Lucy’s parents, Albert and Sarah, changed their last name to Jacobs from Lincoln (slaveholders in Liberty) after the 1870 United States federal census. In the 1870 census, Lucy is shown as being born in about 1853. [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4951079:7163](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4951079:7163)

<sup>10</sup> For more about the legal instruments meant to put an end to the institution of slavery in the United States, see excerpts from *African American history walking tour of Liberty* at the end of the References section of this document.

<sup>11</sup> See 1870 census: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4950502:7163](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4950502:7163)

<sup>12</sup> Lucy and John did not officialize their marriage until about 1882 according to their marriage record: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/511100459:1171](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/511100459:1171)

<sup>13</sup> “Prior to 1865 it was against the law to teach a slave to read or write.” In 1877, African American residents of Liberty established Garrison School, at a time when schools were still segregated, for the education of Black children. See [https://ccaal-garrisonschool.org/garrison\\_school](https://ccaal-garrisonschool.org/garrison_school). A grandson (Clarence Edward Gantt, 1903-1968) of Lucy’s sister Mary Jacobs McShears became a principal at Garrison, part of the Liberty Public School system. See [www.findagrave.com/memorial/34718225/clarence-edward-gantt](http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/34718225/clarence-edward-gantt)

<sup>14</sup> See <https://mcdc.missouri.edu/population-estimates/historical/cities1900-1990.pdf>. Over 120 years, the population of Liberty grew from 2,400 inhabitants to 32,610 inhabitants (in 2020); see <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/liberty-mo-population>

the time of the 1880 census, and Taylor was 2, and Daisy an infant.<sup>15</sup> Lucy and Stewart put their children through school, even though they had not been to school. At the time of the 1900 census, Taylor (22 years old) was a day laborer like his father and Daisy (19 years old) a domestic worker.<sup>16</sup>

Lucy and John moved to South Street<sup>17</sup> and later to South Missouri Street<sup>18</sup> – both in another historically black neighborhood of Liberty. Lucy’s wages and those of her husband as a plastering specialist allowed them to own their home, mortgage-free, at each location. Unlike their white neighbors on South Missouri Street, they continued to work into their senior years.

Throughout their lives, the Stewarts opened their house to those who needed a home. In 1880, infant Emmet Payken lived with Lucy and her husband and children. In 1900, Lucy’s 13-year-old nephew, Jesse Jacobs, lived at the house.<sup>19</sup> In 1920, a 9-year-old student, Clinton Williams, lived with Lucy and her husband. These and the neighborhood children were all their kids, whether kin or not.

Lucy’s husband died on January 30, 1927, at the age of 79.<sup>20</sup> Lucy outlived him by 12 years, dying at the age of at least 85. Her younger sister,

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<sup>15</sup> See 1880 census: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/24970388:6742](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/24970388:6742)

<sup>16</sup> The 1900 census states that two of Lucy’s six children, Taylor and Daisy, were still living at the time. Her older children, Sarah and Albert, are buried at Fairview cemetery in Liberty: <https://www.libertylegacymemorial.org/confirmed-persons>. We do not know the names of her other two children. Nor do we know the trajectory of Taylor and Daisy after 1900.

<sup>17</sup> See 1900 census: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/29227120:7602](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/29227120:7602)

<sup>18</sup> See 1920 census: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/65744846:6061](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/65744846:6061)

<sup>19</sup> By 1910, Jesse or Jessie Jacobs was about 22 years old and living with Lucy’s younger sister, Mary McShears, who was living at that time with her husband and three children in Jackson County, Missouri. Jesse was working as a porter at a drugstore. See Mary McShears in the 1910 census: [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/183119014:7884](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/183119014:7884). Unfortunately, Jessie, the son of Henry Jacobs (brother of Lucy and Mary) died of influenza in 1913 at the age of 25. He is buried at Fairview Cemetery. See his death certificate:

[www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1913/1913\\_00008720.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1913/1913_00008720.PDF)

<sup>20</sup> See death certificate for John Stewart:

[www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1927/1927\\_00000531.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1927/1927_00000531.PDF)

Mary McShears, who lived only a couple of miles away<sup>21</sup>, was with Lucy during her last days until she died on the morning of February 23, 1939.<sup>22</sup> Her burial took place two days later at segregated Fairview Cemetery in Liberty, Missouri. Her body is buried in an unmarked grave<sup>23</sup>.

Generational wisdom was passed down through Lucy and elders like her. We do not know who might have apprenticed with her, though childbirth was being professionalized, and hospitals became a common setting for birth as she grew older. Perhaps future researchers will turn up more information. It is important to uncover and uplift the stories of midwives and families with which they worked. Lucy's life with filled with struggle and with labors of love.

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*This **citizen research** is part of the **Liberty African American Legacy Memorial**, [www.libertylegacymemorial.org/read-the-stories](http://www.libertylegacymemorial.org/read-the-stories), community initiative to honor African Americans buried in the Black section of segregated Fairview and New Hope cemeteries in Liberty, Missouri, United States of America (USA). Some of the work is inspired by [Witness Stones](#): communities committed to learning their history, dismantling inequities, and building a just future. Through research, education, and civic engagement, communities work to restore the history and honor the humanity of the enslaved families that helped build communities across the USA.*

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<sup>21</sup> The 1930 census, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/6437874:6224](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/6437874:6224), showed that Mary McShears (abt 1861-1957) [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/94149349:60525](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/94149349:60525), who lived to about 96 years old) lived with her daughter (one of two) and son-in-law on South Prairie Street in Liberty.

<sup>22</sup> Mary McShears is mentioned as the informant on the death certificate for Lucy Jacobs Stewart, [www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1939/1939\\_00006246.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1939/1939_00006246.PDF)

<sup>23</sup> [www.findagrave.com/memorial/52431078/lucy-stewart](http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/52431078/lucy-stewart)

## References, in addition those in the footnotes

“Early voices of midwives,” In *A history of midwifery in the United States: The midwife said fear not*, by Helen Varney and Joyce Beebe Thompson, 2015, Springer. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/book/978-0-8261-2538-5/part/part01/chapter/ch01>

“*If de babies cried*”: *Slave motherhood in antebellum Missouri*, by Lucy Phelps Hamilton, PhD thesis, Pittsburg State University, 2015. <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/etd/27>

*African American history walking tour of Liberty* (with map), by Cecelia Robinson for Clay County African American Legacy Inc. <https://libertymissouri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/19496/African-AmericanTour-PDF>

For more historical context about the life and times of Lucy Jacobs Steward, the following is adapted from the above document:

African Americans first came to Liberty, Missouri in 1817 with southern slave owners from Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia; these enslaved persons and their descendants became the pioneers who founded the Black community that has been an integral part of Clay County. In 1850, the population of Clay County was 9,426 people, of which approximately 27% were enslaved. In the city of Liberty, the African American population at this time comprised just over 20% of the total population of 827. There were only 14 free Black people in the entire county.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln, who did not receive a single Clay County vote when he ran for president, issued the **Emancipation Proclamation**, freeing all enslaved persons in the country. Before the ratification in December 1865 of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States, the Missouri legislature passed, on January 11, 1865, known as Manumission Day, the slave emancipation act, legally ending slavery across the state.

Lucy Jacobs Stewart was about 10 or 12 years when slavery was abolished in the USA. She was most likely born to parents who were enslaved and denied the right to learn to read and write, which right she was able to ensure for her children. **Lucy participated in the joys of freedom and supported so many families in their struggles to live a good life over her years.**

The life and legacy of Lucy Jacobs Stewart is to be celebrated at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri on Sunday, March 27, 2022: [www.eventbrite.com/e/midwives-and-maternal-health-in-the-african-american-community-then-now-tickets-278840177477](http://www.eventbrite.com/e/midwives-and-maternal-health-in-the-african-american-community-then-now-tickets-278840177477). See flyer with list of speakers and event sponsors: [www.kathryntoure.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Midwives\\_Flyer.pdf](http://www.kathryntoure.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Midwives_Flyer.pdf)