

Businessman Jacob Price rose to prominence in Covington

When Northern Kentuckians hear the name "Jacob Price," they think of a housing project on Greenup Street in Covington. But the man deserves to be remembered in his own right.

Information about Price is sketchy, but he clearly left his mark as a minister, businessman and educator in an era when blacks were often relegated to menial jobs and obscurity.

According to information Price gave to a census worker in 1900 he was born in Kentucky, possibly Woodford County, in April 1839. There is no record of the identity of Price's parents. One of the earliest mentions of Price is in the 1860 census, which listed him as a 22-year-old freedman living in Covington. Price may have been among the few free blacks living in Kentucky at a time when slavery was legal. That same 1860 census also indicated that Price could read and write - skills not often taught to blacks.

Price was listed as a laborer who lived in the household of Joseph Johnson, a 35-year-old free black man, identified as a painter and his wife, Eliza Johnson, 40, as a nurse. Also living in the Johnson household were three other free blacks, Susan Robinson, 25, and Matilda Hawkins, 24, both listed as washwomen, and a 3-year-old boy, John Robinson.

Sometime during the 10 years after the census, Price married and began working as a minister.

His wife, Mary Singer Price, also was born in Kentucky. Records from 1870 indicate that the Prices had two children, Charles W. Price, 1 year, and Anna E. Price, 1 month. The Prices later had a third child, John.

In their early years as a family, the Prices lived at 61 Bremen St., which was renamed Pershing Avenue. The Prices later moved to 154 E. 10th St. and then, in 1881, to 245 E. 10th St. Price lived at the last address until he died.

Throughout much of his life Price was a businessman. He owned and operated a lumberyard. An advertisement in the Daily Commonwealth newspaper in 1882 listed the business at 412 Madison Ave. in Covington. A later map placed the business at 426-428 Madison Ave.

The advertisement said, "Headquarters for lumber. Jacob Price, dealer in all kinds of rough and dressed lumber, shingles, lath, locust and cedar posts."

An account several years later said Price's business complex included an office, yards and sheds. The sheds occupied an area 60 feet by 90 feet and had a storage capacity of half a million feet of lumber. He employed several yardmen and his sons. He also had two delivery teams. He apparently continued to operate the business until 1914. In his later years, Price listed his occupation as carpenter. Price was a major figure in the development of black churches on Covington.

According to the history of the First (Black) Baptist Church of Covington, the first church house was on Bremen Street. Price was the church's first pastor. At the close of the Civil War, Kentucky had no provisions for public education for blacks. That barrier fell in the 1870s when William Grant, a white man who supported education for blacks, worked out a deal with several influential black leaders in Covington, including Price.

Grant promised to help amend Covington's city charter to provide for public schools for blacks in exchange for support from the black community in his bid for state legislator and support for John Stevenson for the U.S. Senate. Stevenson was a former governor from Covington.

Price died on March 1, 1923, a month short of his 84th birthday. A front next, day in The Kentucky Post called Price one of Covington's oldest and most respected citizens.

Price's wife, Mary, died a year later on March 10, 1924.

According to her death certificate, she died after accidentally drinking carbolic acid. She was buried next to her husband at Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate.

The housing complex that bears Price's name dates to 1938, the year the city received a \$1.4 million federal grant.

Coming in the waning days of the Great Depression, the grant was a part of a national effort to provide adequate housing for low-income families and jobs for the unemployed. *This column is excerpted from retired Post staff writer Jim Reis's book, "Pieces of the Past."*