

A Tale of Two Families

Exploring Black History through Genealogy and Photography

Two of the largest photograph collections documenting African American families at the Filson Historical Society are the Lusby Family Photograph Collection and the Samuel M. Plato Photograph Collection. Both collections offer fascinating insights into the rise of two middle-class black families in early twentieth-century Louisville, Kentucky. Thaddeus Stevens Lusby Sr. (1856–1941) was born and raised in Owenton, Kentucky. Lusby moved his family to Louisville at the turn of the century and gained success as a builder and contractor. Samuel M. Plato (1882–1957) was a prominent architect at a time when his profession had few black members, and the Plato Photograph Collection documents his architectural style. These families became connected through marriage when one of Lusby’s daughters, Nettie, married Samuel Plato. The photograph collections bring to life the stories of these two families for the historian and genealogical researcher alike.

Little is known about Thaddeus Stephens Lusby Sr.’s early life. We can glean from early records that he was born around 1856 in Owenton, Owen County, Kentucky to Green Lusby and Lettie Bladshaw. Thaddeus Sr. married Emma Parish (1855–1927) in 1876. According to the 1880 United States Census, the couple resided in Owenton, where Thaddeus Sr. worked in a tobacco factory, Emma was a housekeeper, and they had two daughters, Stella and Sunetta (Nettie). In the 1900 federal census, the Lusby family still resided in Owenton, and Thaddeus Sr.’s profession was a carpenter. The number of Lusby children had grown considerably with the addition of Clarence, Martha, Thaddeus Jr., and Mary. The Lusby’s eldest daughter, Stella, was employed as a teacher, and son Clarence worked as a carpenter, like his father. The other children were all in school.¹

The Lusby family moved to Louisville between 1900 and 1902 when African Americans constituted 19% of its population. At the time, Louisville had the seventh largest urban black population in the nation. In the 1910 federal census, Thaddeus Sr., Emma, Mattie, and Mary lived in the same household. Thaddeus Sr. was a house contractor and his daughter Mattie a seamstress at home. Louisville city directories list Thaddeus Sr. as early as 1902, and by 1912 he is listed as a contractor living at the home he built at 3534 Grand Avenue in the present-day Chickasaw Neighborhood.²

The Lusby Family Photograph Collection contains 259 images and three photograph albums that document Thaddeus Sr. and Emma’s children; specifically, their daughter Mary Stiar Lusby (1894–1987) and her family. The

collection dates from the mid-1870s to the mid-1950s, with the bulk of the collection dating from approximately 1900 to the 1930s. According to the 1914 Louisville city directory, Mary, age 20, was living in her father's home at 3534 Grand Avenue and teaching at the Tenth Ward Colored School located at 13th and Green (now Liberty) Streets. The Lusby family photographs indicate that Mary grew up around prominent members of the black community, including neighbor and friend William H. Craighead Jr. (c.1898–1948) whose father, Rev. William Craighead of Zion Baptist Church, was an influential leader in the late nineteenth century. Mary's early teaching career can be traced through city directories. She taught at the Tenth Ward Colored School from 1914 to 1917, and between 1918 and 1922 she taught at the Taylor S. Coleridge Colored School and probably remained at Coleridge until 1928. While at Coleridge, Mary worked under Joseph Seamon Cotter Sr. (1861–1949), a noted poet, playwright, educator, and advocate for black education in Louisville who served as principal of Coleridge from 1911 to 1942. Throughout the early part of Mary's teaching career she continued to live with her family on Grand Avenue.³



Mary Stiar Lusby Reed, c. 1915-1920.
LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION



Mary Stiar Lusby Reed, William H. Craighead Jr., and Rose Pallard
on front stoop of Craighead Jr.'s family home, c. 1915-1920.

LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

On December 24, 1927, Mary married Ernest Ellsworth Reed in Lake County, Indiana. According to the 1930 federal census, the couple was living in Winchester, Kentucky, outside of Lexington. Ernest was employed as a public school teacher, and Mary was at home with their ten-month-old daughter, Anne. Thaddeus Lusby Reed,



Studio portrait of Ernest Ellsworth Reed,
c. 1910-1930.

LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

their son, was born that fall. The family soon moved to North Carolina, where Ernest became a faculty member at Winston-Salem Teachers College and Mary enrolled in school. In 1932, Anne died from acute tonsillitis. Mary received her Bachelor of Science degree from the college in 1936 and the couple moved back to Kentucky. Ernest died in Lexington in 1939, leaving behind Mary and Thaddeus. According to the 1940 federal census, Mary and her son lived in Morganfield, Kentucky, where she taught. Mary remained a teacher there for the next 25 years. Thaddeus eventually moved back to Grand Avenue in Louisville while he attended the University of Louisville in the early 1950s and earned a Bachelor of Music in piano. After college, Thaddeus served for two years in the army and by 1958 he was once again living on Grand Avenue. Mary died in 1987 and her service was held at the Fifth Street Baptist Church in Louisville. Thaddeus died in 2002 and he is buried in the Lebanon National Cemetery, Lebanon, Kentucky.⁴



Thaddeus's sister Anne Ellsworth Reed (1929-1932) and Thaddeus Lusby Reed (1930-2002), c. 1931-1932.

LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION



Thaddeus Lusby Reed in his Army Uniform, c. 1954-1956.

LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

The Samuel M. Plato Photograph Collection contains 684 images that document Plato's first wife, Nettie Lusby Plato (1879–1924), his second wife, Elnora Davis Plato (1891–1975), other family members, and friends. The collection also contains images of many of the houses, buildings, post offices and churches that Plato built. The collection dates from the mid-1880s to the 1960s, with the bulk of the collection dating between the 1910s and 1950s.

Plato was born to James and Katie Plato in Montgomery County, Alabama in 1882. His father was a farmer and carpenter. In 1898, Plato enrolled at University Normal School in Louisville (later known as Simmons College of Kentucky, a historically black university in Louisville). Plato took courses in teaching and liberal arts with a plan to study law. At the same time, he took correspondence courses in architecture and carpentry from the International Correspondence School. After graduation, Plato moved to Marion, Indiana and married Sunetta Lusby on November 12, 1903 in Louisville. Known as "Nettie," Sunetta Lusby is the link between the Lusby and Plato families. The daughter of Thaddeus Stephens Lusby Sr., Sunetta,



Samuel M. Plato standing by car, undated.

SAMUEL M. PLATO PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

was born in 1879 in Owenton, Kentucky and lived with her family in Louisville. It is possible that Samuel and Nettie met through her father who was in the contracting business. In Marion, it took Plato some time to find work, as many contractors turned him down because of his race.



Studio portrait real photo postcard of Nettie Lusby Plato, c. 1900-1910.

LUSBY FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

According to the 1907 and 1908 city directories, Samuel and Nettie lived at 1327 Euclid Avenue in Marion and Samuel was employed as a carpenter and contractor. In the 1910 federal census, the couple was still living on Euclid Avenue, amongst a block of white neighbors. The census indicates that the Platos owned their house and had a mortgage. The fact that Plato was able to obtain a mortgage in what appears to be a white neighborhood is remarkable. By this time Plato's career picked up. He built, owned, ran, and maintained the Platonian Apartments located at 15th and Adams Streets in Marion, and in 1912 he received a contract to build the J. Wood Wilson house, today known as the Wilson-Vaughan Hostess House. This beautiful historic mansion was commissioned by local banker J. Wood Wilson as a wedding gift to his bride Peggy Pampel. Plato is credited as being the architect and builder although pri-

mary source documents are lacking to confirm this. One image of the property is in the Samuel M. Plato Photograph Collection. Plato also completed other projects in Indiana during this time, including the Second Baptist Church in Bloomington, completed in 1913. That same year an article in the *Indianapolis Freeman* noted, "There is no more successful contractor in Grant county, yes, I dare say Indiana, than Mr. Plato."⁵

Samuel and Nettie remained in Marion until the early 1920s. He partnered with Jasper Burden, an African American contractor for more than a decade and completed several other projects in Marion, including schools, churches, factory buildings, and homes. Plato was not only a very skilled craftsman and architect, but he also had a drive and passion that helped him find support within the Marion community at a time when the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. In the early 1920s, Samuel and Nettie moved back to Louisville where Samuel practiced building and design both independently and with William L. Evans Sr. A native of Louisville and graduate of Fisk University, Evans studied engineering and architecture at Columbia University. Between 1923 and 1927, the Plato

and Evans Architectural Firm designed churches, lodges, and schools throughout Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio. An image of an architectural rendering of the Odd Fellows Hall Mississinewa Lodge of Marion, Indiana, listing Plato and Evans as the architects, is found in the Plato photograph collection. In 1924, Nettie died of tuberculous peritonitis that escalated after a bad fall. Her death certificate listed her as being employed as a housekeeper at the time of her death, but additional genealogical research needs to be conducted.⁶



Architectural rendering of the Odd fellows Hall, Mississinewa Lodge,
Marion, IN by Plato & Evans Architects, c. 1924.

SAMUEL M. PLATO PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

According to the 1930 federal census, Samuel and his second wife, Elnora Davis Lucas, were living in Ohio. Elnora had built her own successful dressmaking business prior to their marriage. Elnora became Plato's travel companion, business manager, and helped him pursue his dreams through the end of his career. In the 1930s Plato became the first African American to be awarded a contract to build a U. S. Post Office. Throughout the 1930s he traveled and constructed 39 post offices in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and West Virginia. Images in his collection document the detail and craftsmanship of Plato's buildings. The Platos

relocated to Louisville in 1941 and Samuel started his first large government housing contract for the Fincastle Heights Defense Housing Project off Poplar Level Road. In the summer of 1941, he was awarded contracts to build housing for African American defense workers in Washington, D.C. Plato oversaw the multi-million-dollar project for the construction of Wake and Midway Halls. This project marked the height of his career.⁷



Front view of the post office in Medina, New York, c. 1932.

SAMUEL M. PLATO PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION



Samuel Plato (far left) and his wife, Elnora (far right) seated with group while in Washington D. C., 1943.

SAMUEL M. PLATO PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION