

“Aunt” Kate Wright

“Aunt” Kate Wright was born in Lexington, Kentucky on October 19, 1860. She may have been born into slavery, but that is not clear at this time. She attended school as a child and was able to read and write, something not true for all African-Americans of her generation.

Little is known of Aunt Kate’s life prior to coming to Monrovia, although she appears in the United States Federal Census of 1880 in Lexington, working as a nurse. Sometime after 1880, she became a domestic servant of the household of the Rev. John S. Van Meter, a Presbyterian minister in Lexington. She was living with the family in 1900 in Clinton, Missouri, with her son, Marshall Wright. Due to his wife’s health, The Rev. John Van Meter left his pastorate in Clinton and came to Monrovia in 1901, where he served the First Presbyterian Church for one year. Aunt Kate and her son came with them. In 1902, John Van Meter and his wife moved to New York City, where their son was in medical school. Aunt Kate remained in Monrovia, and spent the rest of her life here. Her mother, Eliza Baker, also came to Monrovia after the death of her husband. She died here in 1918 at the age of ninety-five and is buried at Live Oak Cemetery.

After the Van Meter family left Monrovia, Aunt Kate supported herself by working for the family of the local superintendent of schools, Nathan F. Smith. She left a lasting impression on his daughter, Lorena Smith Holmes. Even after the Smith family moved from Monrovia, Aunt Kate would visit them in South Pasadena, taking the Pacific Electric Red Car and carrying with her a basket full of her famous beaten biscuits.

The earliest record of Aunt Kate’s residence in Monrovia is in the 1904 Tax Assessment Roll for the City where she is listed as living at 528 E. Cypress Avenue. She lived on Cypress for the remainder of her life.

About 1904, Aunt Kate had a religious conversion, and out of that experience came the conviction that she was to devote her life to the care of the sick and indigent. She asked for donations of lumber and labor to build small cottages on her property, where she tended for patients suffering from tuberculosis who had no family or resources to assist them. She also asked for donations of food and nursing supplies for her patients. Without financial resources herself, Aunt Kate believed that “the Lord would provide.” And time after time assistance would come from unexpected sources.

Aunt Kate carried out her mission for some thirty years, until her health failed under the burden of work she had undertaken and she was forced to retire from her ministry.

For many years, Monrovians donated to a special fund so that Aunt Kate could prepare baskets for the needy at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The local newspaper published an account of the donations to her fund as an encouragement for other to give as well.

Aunt Kate died October 13, 1937 after a brief illness and was buried in Live Oak Cemetery next to her mother. The editor of the local newspaper wrote the following in his column:

“News has just come of the passing of Aunt Kate Wright. I can well remember, in the early days of Monrovia, when local physicians gave free treatment and Aunt Kate free board and lodging to sufferers from tuberculosis who were unable to pay for care. I have seen a dozen or more lying in their little one-room cottages on Aunt Kate’s property, mostly whites, but with an occasional Negro or Japanese, and getting the best treatment she could give them. She served all alike, regardless of color, nationality or creed. Aunt Kate, of the Negro race, was a saintly character, and during the past score of years that she labored here she had hundreds of friends among Monrovia’s pioneers who realized and valued her worth. A few days ago when we were informed of her serious illness we found her reading her Bible, and cheerful as ever. The world, to her, was a good place to live in and a grand place to do the work of Her Master.”

Many years after her death, Lorena Smith Holmes wrote, “If ever there were a saint, it was she.”

By Steve Baker, City Historian
2016