

Hiram Young

Wagonmaker and Businessman
1812-1882

By David Conrads

Born into slavery, Hiram Young later earned his freedom and went on to become not only a successful businessman but one of the wealthiest individuals in Jackson County, Missouri.

Little is known about Young's early years. He was born in Tennessee around 1812. He moved to Greene County, in southern Missouri, as a slave and bought his freedom from his owner, George Young, in 1847. Legend has it that Young earned his freedom and that of his wife, Matilda, by whittling and selling ox yokes. Young and his wife moved to Liberty, Missouri, sometime between 1847 and 1850, where he worked as a carpenter. Their daughter and only child, Amanda, was born in 1849 or 1850.

The turning point in Young's career came in 1850 when he and his family moved to Jackson County, Missouri. A lucrative overland trade had developed since the 1820s along the 800-mile Santa Fe Trail which ran between western Missouri and Mexico. Independence, the seat of Jackson County, was at the center of the booming Santa Fe trade, as well as trade along the Oregon and California trails. Much of the town's economic activity centered on supplying the many emigrants and freight haulers who converged on Independence and used it as a jumping off point.

Wagon manufacturing was in high demand, and Young took full advantage of the opportunity that afforded. By 1851 he was manufacturing wagons and ox yokes, primarily for freighters hauling government mail and other goods. Until 1855, Young had a free, black partner, Dan Smith, and the two did business as Young and Smith. When threats were made to run both partners out of town, Smith quit, and the firm was known thereafter as Hiram Young and Company. Young was illiterate and engaged William McCoy, the first mayor of Independence, to act as his business manager.

Young faced both stiff business competition and racial prejudice. Nevertheless, he achieved tremendous success. He employed some 20 men, both black and white, including slaves and Irish

immigrants. In 1860 alone, his company produced three hundred wagons and six thousand yokes. Young proudly branded his wagons with "Hiram Young and Company" and the initials of the purchaser. His wagons were readily identified and widely known as "Hiram Young wagons." By 1860, Young's wagon factory was by far the largest industry in Independence and one of the largest in Jackson County, and Young was a wealthy and respected figure in the Mexican trade.

According to calculations made by scholar James W. Gilbert, Young was 56 times more wealthy than the average citizen of the county. Young and his family became founding members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Independence. Daughter Amanda entered Oberlin College in Ohio in 1871.

Jackson County was a hotbed of secessionism prior to the Civil War. In 1861, fearing for his life, Young and his family moved to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, about 50 miles northwest of Independence. There he continued his business as a wagon manufacturer. After the war, he returned to Independence to find that his wagons, cattle, and other property had been confiscated or destroyed by Union troops. He filed a suit for damages against the federal government.

Young's prosperity faded after the war. With the advent of the railroad, demand for freight wagons declined, and Young went into the lumber business. He died without a will in 1882, leaving large business debts. Matilda Young died in 1886. Young's suit against the federal government dragged on until it was dismissed in 1907. Young's daughter, Amanda Jane Young Brown, died in Kansas City in 1913.

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