

From the Wisconsin Historical Society:

## HISTORICAL ESSAY

# Benjamin Butts (1853-1930)

## One Man's Journey from Slavery to Madison Business Owner to State Assembly Staff Member

Every February during Black History Month we celebrate African-American leaders and heroes. But what was life like for post-Civil War black people who didn't become famous? Read the fascinating story of one Wisconsin man's journey from slavery to business owner to State Assembly staff member.

## From Bondage to Freedom

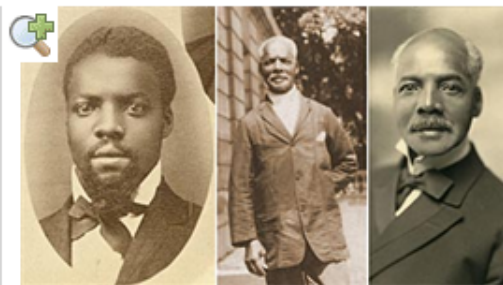
Benjamin Butts (circa 1853-1930) was an 11-year-old slave when Wisconsin soldiers occupied his hometown near Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864. He hung around their camp, as many displaced ex-slaves did. When Col. Thomas Allen of the 5th Wisconsin Infantry asked Benjamin if he would like to do light chores, he leaped at the chance.

When the regiment returned home to Wisconsin, Bennie (as he was known) did too. He went to Richland Center with Maj. Cyrus Butt. Like most former slaves, he had no surname of his own, so he adopted the major's. His former comrades found work for him to do until he was old enough to live on his own.

In about 1870 Butts moved to Madison. The city had very few black residents at that time, and prejudice was universal. Personal services like shaving and cutting hair were among the few vocations open to African Americans. Bennie worked as a porter and a clerk before finding a job in a barber shop.

## Tending to Madison's Elite

In 1872, while still a teenager, Butts opened his own barber shop at 5 Pinckney Street, across from the Capitol. "He shaved daily many notables from the Capitol," recalled a journalist years later. "Governors Rusk, Washburn, Taylor, Smith, Fairchild and Peck were among his best customers." For 28 years he tended to Madison's elite, and his intimacy with them led to moonlighting opportunities. In 1877, for example, in addition to running his own shop, he also held a position as **washroom attendant for the state Assembly** (and the only black person on the Assembly's staff).



**Benjamin Butts, (circa 1853-1930)**

Benjamin Butts (circa 1853-1930) was an 11-year-old slave when Wisconsin soldiers occupied his hometown near Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864. Source: [WHI-45152](#), [WHI-45153](#), [WHI-45156](#)

# Wisconsin Assembly Clerks and Employees



## A Well-Known Character

For many years Butts also served as doorman at official government ceremonies and as a butler at private parties on Mansion Hill. "A public function was not complete without Bennie," **recalled one observer**. "His manners were superb," said another, a remark tinged with the condescension that black people faced every day in turn-of-the-20th-century America.

In 1895, Butts was running his own business and raising a family, yet was one of only 41 African Americans in the city. He, his wife and their five children made up 10 percent of the entire black population of the city.

The Wisconsin Historical Society opened its grand new building on the University of Wisconsin campus in the fall of 1900. The Society's library served both legislators and university faculty, so it was essential to have someone who knew his way around town to deliver and retrieve communications. The Society hired the now-middle-aged Butts as a janitor and messenger. One photo from the Society's visual materials archives **shows him standing outside the Society's front entrance**. Bennie Butts was known and well liked everywhere, and he held the position for three decades.

## At the End of His Life

In January 1930 his wife died, and a few weeks later he contracted pneumonia and **died** at age 80 in his home a few blocks from the Capitol. The man who began life as a Virginia slave left an estate of \$1,300 (equivalent to \$35,000 today).

## Butts' Son Leo Makes His Own Mark on Wisconsin Football History

In an intriguing sidebar to the story of Bennie Butts' life and his years in Madison, in 1918 his son Leo became the first black football player for the University of Wisconsin Badgers. In the second game of the 1918 season, in a 21-0 victory over Beloit College, Leo Butts entered the lineup, becoming **the first known African-American Badger to participate in a football game**.

## From UW-Badgers website:

Leo Vinton Butts, the son of one of Madison's earliest black residents, was the first known African-American to represent the University of Wisconsin on the football field. A native of Madison, Butts was a substitute lineman on the 1918 varsity football squad.

Leo Butts' father, Benjamin "Benny" Butts, was born into slavery in the state of Virginia. During the Civil War, the elder Butts escaped to the camp of the Wisconsin 5th Regiment, who adopted the 13-year old Benny as the unit's "mascot." After the end of hostilities, Benny traveled back to Wisconsin with the 5th regiment, and, by 1870, he resided in Madison and operated a popular downtown barbershop. About 1900, Benny Butts took a position as the head messenger at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, a job he would keep for the next three decades.

Leo V. Butts, the second youngest of Benny and Amy Butts's five children, was born in 1898. For much of his childhood, the family lived at 639 East Dayton Street, and, in 1913, Leo entered Madison High School - the now defunct Central High School. Throughout his high school career, he participated in athletics, competing on his class football and track teams, as well as, playing one year of varsity basketball and two years of varsity football. Butts impressed on the gridiron, earning a starting berth as a lineman in both of his seasons on the varsity. Butts graduated from Madison High School in 1917, and the yearbook editors described their classmate thusly: "courteous and kind he was, and willing too."

Butts entered the University of Wisconsin and answered the call for football candidates in September of 1918. Due to wartime travel restrictions and an influenza epidemic throughout the Midwest, the season got off to a late start, and the Badgers played an abbreviated slate of only six contests. In the second game of the campaign, a 21-0 victory over Beloit College on November 2nd, Butts entered the lineup as a substitute right guard, becoming the first known African-American Badger to participate in a football game.

The Daily Cardinal saw potential in the young lineman, and reported that although he "came out late in the season... he has shown lots of pop and action and promises to put up a good game." It is unclear whether or not Butts appeared in the rest of the games on the schedule, but he proved valuable enough to be selected as one of only four substitute linemen to make the traveling squad for the two road games at Minnesota and Ohio State.

In addition to his football activities in the fall of 1918, Butts was a private in the Students' Army Training Corp. The athletic and military commitments took time away from his studies in the Pharmacy School, though, and, during the next two years, he gave up football to concentrate on his coursework. In 1920, Butts received his degree and was, reportedly, the first African-American to graduate from the University of Wisconsin School of Pharmacy.

As the final requirement for his Ph.G. (Graduate in Pharmacy) degree, Butts penned a 25-page thesis titled "The Negro in Pharmacy" about the contemporary state of African-American pharmacists. Despite scouring the professional literature and corresponding with prominent black pharmacists, he had trouble finding information about "the people of my own race in my chosen profession."

In the introduction to his thesis, Butts poignantly lamented that "the library of the University of Wisconsin contains one of the best, if not the best, and largest pharmaceutical libraries in America. It is replete with all kinds of pharmaceutical literature, historical, scientific, and commercial, yet in all this library there is scarcely a reference to the Negro in pharmacy."

Soon after receiving his degree, Butts moved to Gary, Indiana, where he worked as a postman for 20 years. After World War Two, Butts finally put his pharmacy degree to work and purchased the Owl Drug Store in Gary. An active participant in the Northern Indiana Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association, Butts operated the Owl Drug Store until his death from a "heart ailment" in 1956.

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From the Richland County History Room:



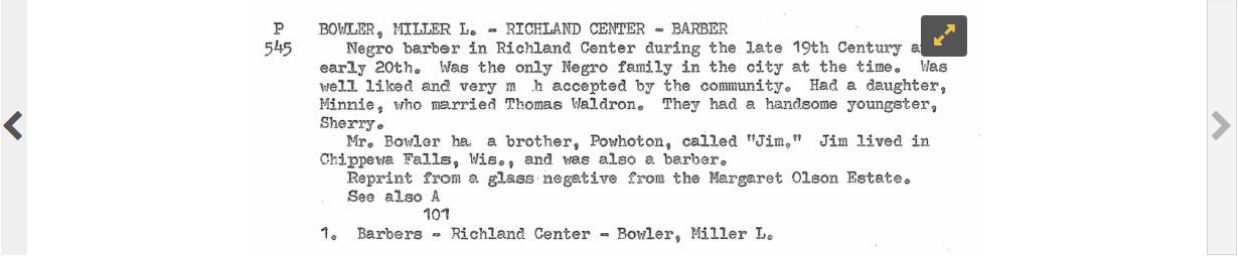
Miller L. Bowler

Only negro in P.C. at the time.  
He had a grandson  
named Sherry Waldron,  
a handsome youngster

Taken between 1885-  
P. 1909

545-01

County Room  
Brewer Library



Object Description	
Title	Miller L. Bowler, barber, Richland Center, Wisconsin, ca. 1900.
Notes	Front Picture Description: Black and white image of a man standing outside of a doorway wearing a white shirt, medium colored pants and a light colored hat and has a pipe in his mouth. Said to be African American. Back Print: County Room Brewer Library Back Writing: Miller L. Bowler Only negro in R.C at the time. He had a grandson named Sherry Waldron, a handsome youngster Taken between 1885-1909, P545-01, Glass Plate Negative a101, Had a brother, Powhoton, called Jim, in Chippewa Falls, Jim was also a barber Accession Book Description: P545 BOWLER, MILLER L. - RICHLAND CENTER - BARBER Negro barber in Richland Center during the late 19th Century and early 20th. Was the only Negro family in the city at the time. Was well liked and very much accepted by the community. Had a daughter, Minnie, who married Thomas Waldron. They had a handsome youngster, Sherry. Mr. Bowler had a brother, Powhoton, called "Jim." Jim lived in Chippewa Falls, Wis., and was also a barber. Reprint from a glass negative from the Margaret Olson Estate. See also A101 1. Barbers - Richland Center - Bowler, Miller L.
Year	ca. 1900
Family Connection	Bowler, Miller L. (ca. 1828-?);
Donor	<u>Parfrey Olson, Margaret P. (1895-1981)</u>





P Powhatan  
309-01 +  
Sheridan

Waldon

"Powy + Sherry"

County Room  
Brewer Library

Gift of Marcia Nobel  
These two little Negro  
children went to the old  
white school - teacher  
Yellie Fries (Knobell)  
Mr Waldon - son-in-law of  
Mr Bowler - Both were barbers