

Benjamin J. Sterling
Registry of Honor
2003

Benjamin J. Sterling was born under slavery on a small plantation near Whiteville, Georgia, in 1847. His owners, the Sterling's were good to him and whenever possible they would allow him to do a bit of studying. After the Civil War, he left the Sterling family and began working for a neighboring farm who paid him a small yearly salary and gave him two hours instruction each week from a McGuffey's First Reader, a Blue Back Spelling Book and a Monteith's Geography. He studied these books at different times and he learned them well. He purchased the spelling book by picking chestnuts for "young Mr. Jimmy". He was proud of his spelling book and learned to spell every word in it.

During the period of the occupation of the Federal Army in Georgia, a local unit of the Freedman's Bureau was established in Harris County. This organization began the task of bringing education to Negroes. Benjamin attended the school established in his neighborhood under Henry Marmenter, a Union soldier. He said, "I went to school on rainy days when I could not work in the fields or whenever my boss would permit." He learned to read and write, something very rear among Negroes during that time, and so began teaching others of his race to do likewise.

Professor Sterling came to Alabama in 1876 as a teacher in Chambers County. He attended Alabama State Normal and Industrial School and studied under W.H. Council who founded that institute. As a result of his study there, he received a teacher's life certificate.

Prof. Sterling never achieved the distinction of a famous educator, but his struggles and his life are excellent examples of a man who made the most of limited opportunities. His tenacity and perseverance in achieving a desired goal are worthy traits in any character. For his pioneering spirit and long years of faithful services, among three generations of his people, we extend to him a rousing tribute.

Prof. Sterling gave sixty years of his life as a teacher for his people; of which forty were spent in Sheffield. He served as principal of Sterling High School from 1898 to 1938.