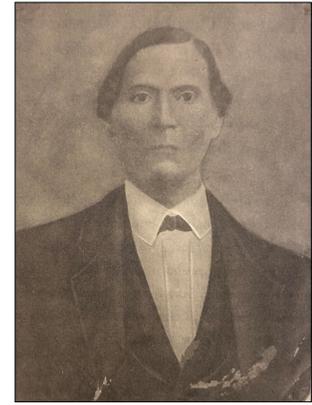


# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Sherrod Bryant (1781-1854)\*

Born in 1781 into a Black, white, and Native American farming settlement in Virginia, Sherrod Bryant (1781-1854) also lived in Granville County, North Carolina before moving to Davidson County, Tennessee. Sherrod's grandfather and his father, Silas, one of the community elders, had European white ancestry, while his mother was of mixed African and Native American descent. A highly intelligent and curious child, Sherrod attended community school, worked in the fields with his father and brothers, and learned trades from his father. At a young age, he expressed a keen interest in the environment and farming operations and informed Silas of his desire to pursue the profession of husbandry.

During his time in Virginia, Sherrod voluntarily entered into indentured servitude under a white plantation owner named Jesse Cole. There he met Cole's daughter, Mary Polly Cole, with whom he would have an affair and father a child. Though Sherrod had built Mary a cotton dynasty in Virginia and the two shared a deep love for one another, he knew he had to leave before her husband returned from conducting business in England for the elder Cole. Around 1806, Sherrod and his brothers, William (a farmer) and Silas (a barber), decided to move to Tennessee and explore potential opportunities, including property ownership after learning about land grants that the government gave to encourage heads of household in Virginia and North Carolina to relocate and settle in Tennessee. The brothers rode horses and backpacked their way over the mountains and all were financially stable enough to take this risky journey.

Silas and William decided to settle along a ridge at the junction of Davidson and Rutherford

counties, combining their resources to lease half an acre of land near Black Fox Spring. Sherrod spent time in central Nashville, where he studied the people and relationships in this new city. At the time, only thirteen free people of color lived in Nashville. Sherrod quickly realized that he wanted to live and work in a rural area along the Davidson/Rutherford county line, as the land was green and the soil fertile, ideal for crop cultivation. He made contact early on with the John Donelson family, who hired him to oversee logging operations. Sherrod was also hired to manage the construction of a grist mill, owned by David Dickerson, in late 1807. His interminable work ethic garnered deep respect from the families around Mill Creek and the Stones River, located east of Nashville. Sherrod did not yet have a home of his own, so he rotated between staying at Robert Renfro's (Black Bob's) Tavern and livery in the town center, at the log camp, and with his brothers or other acquaintances.

Soon after, Mary Polly Cole visited Sherrod and told him of their forthcoming child. She offered to buy Sherrod land in the Nashville area so he could build a residence, with the goal that their child have one of the finest homes in the country. While she was a powerful and driven Southern white woman, Mary Polly loved Sherrod and wanted to help make his dreams of landownership a reality. In November 1811, Sherrod purchased a 274-acre tract of land, including all water rights, along McCrory's Creek at the Stones River from Mathew Brooks, Sr. at a cost of three hundred and sixteen dollars. Neighboring tracts belonged to John Buchanan, Thomas Coolidge, and John Carter. In an effort to encourage growth and prosperity, Sherrod named the property "Bryant Town." This monumental achievement was happening for Sherrod, a free man of color who had been

This publication is a project of the 2026 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials. Image: Portrait of Sherrod Bryant, undated. Credit: *Bryant Acres: A Love Story* (2018), Ann L. Patterson Early and Quinn Early. \*Historical records list Bryant's name as Sherrod, Sherod, and Sherwood.

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accepted into Nashville's influential political circles, at a time when the State of Tennessee was starting to require that free people of color carry passes, or emancipation certificates.

In 1812, Sherrod purchased four young Black enslaved men to help him build a house. While they would be considered "slaves" in the eyes of the law, Sherrod wanted them to feel more like a part of his family. Sherrod and these men built his two-room log cabin with front and back porches as well as a large barn with loft and crawl spaces where the men could stay temporarily. As he built a reputation across Nashville for his industrious spirit and recent sizeable land acquisition, Sherrod encouraged his brothers to join in this new community. Silas was still working as a barber and William had turned to stonemasonry and rock smithing, so with Sherrod's logging expertise (including grist and saw mill construction), he knew they had the resources and skills to realize this dream together. He envisioned Bryant Town as a self-reliant and mixed heritage community, with private education and religious instruction.

Sherrod bought cattle, horses, and hogs to help support the settlement and purchased eleven additional enslaved persons to aid in the work and establish new businesses. By 1814, he built a sawmill, distillery, and lumberyard and was trapping, selling furs, tanning skins, fishing, and logging. In June 1815, Sherrod began selling goods to Nash's grocery store, which proved to be a wise and ultimately lucrative decision. Sherrod met a white woman named Nancy Johnson and had four children with her at Bryant Town—William, Phoebe, Catherine, and Nancy Elizabeth. Nancy taught school to the children and both enslaved and free residents of Bryant Town. The community eventually grew to encompass a church and several businesses, including a general store, blacksmith shop, weaving shop, carpenter shop, gristmill, and barbershop. Sherrod's son by Mary Polly Cole, Henderson Bryant, lived at Bryant Town with his father and in the late 1820s established his own nearby property called Bryant's Grove.

Sherrod continued to grow his land holdings across Nashville and Davidson County including

acquisitions of adjacent acreage from the estate of Charles Hill in 1827; a lot on College Street in 1830; and Davidson County tracts of fifty-eight acres and sixty-nine acres in 1831 and 1837, respectively. He also expanded Bryant Town by purchasing fifty-two acres in 1844 and forty-three acres along McCrory Creek in 1846; twenty-nine acres near James Buchanan's tract in 1852, including access to a spring on George F. McWhirter's lot; and another eight acres along McCrory Creek in 1854. By 1850, free Black persons comprised only 5.9% of Nashville's population; yet, Sherrod Bryant had amassed significant property holdings, personal belongings, and enslaved persons valued at more than \$25,000, making him likely the wealthiest free Black person in Tennessee at that time. Estimates of his total land holdings range from 700-1000 acres. Bryant Town had well surpassed 100 inhabitants by late 1853. (The majority of the Bryant Town and Bryant's Grove lands were in the vicinity of present-day Nashville International Airport, J. Percy Priest Reservoir, and Long Hunter State Park.)

According to descendant Carl Bryant, Sherrod Bryant owned two homes and had at least fifteen children by two wives. Closing out his final chapter at Bryant Town, the thriving, self-sustaining, multiracial settlement he created, Sherrod Bryant departed this life on August 5, 1854. Interred in Donelson's Bryant Town Cemetery among rows of hundreds of uninscribed fieldstones and ground depressions, his noble obelisk rises up and punctuates his legacy with the words, "whose honesty, piety, and industry were examples."

*Caroline Eller*

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