



Eldon W. Ward

By Sylvia Brooks

Dispatch Human Services Reporter

The first black chairman of the Columbus Foundation owns the oldest black-owned business in the United States.

As he surveys the board members, Eldon W. Ward, owner of The E.E. Ward Moving and Storage Co., he is reminded that one board member is related to a prominent Columbus abolitionist who helped Ward's great-grandfather speed slaves from the South to the North via the underground railroad.

"It's all in relationships," Ward said of history. "No matter what bad things or good things happened, those relationships endured."

Shirle N. Westwater, a foundation board member, is married to William K. Westwater, great-grandson of James M. Westwater. James M. Westwater and Ward's great-grandfather John T. Ward belonged to the same abolitionist group. Westwater joined the movement in 1840; Ward, in 1842.

The Wards and the Westwaters continue their community involvement generations later.

Ward said Charles I. Hood, a black man, had "a very fine grocery store" at S. High and Rich streets. "His prime customers were the Lazarus family. One of the Lazaruses went to school with him."

Hood also owned a store on E. Long Street and one in Grove City.

The end of World War I was



James W. Westwater

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Eldon W. Ward
Business owner

difficult, Ward said.

"The most drastic thing that happened was soldiers coming back in 1919 found the jobs they left had been occupied by blacks. There was much resentment. Some companies let the blacks go, but some didn't.

"Columbus Auto Parts continued to hire blacks. Jeffrey Manufacturing and Buckeye Steel also hired blacks. Jeffrey always had an open door policy, even in their administration."

These companies refused to be intimidated by increased activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, Ward said.

"They (KKK) paraded down High and Broad streets. I was an eyewitness," Ward said. "They had their encampment at Olentangy and Dodridge. It wasn't just blacks who suffered from the Klan. It was Catholics and Jews, too.

William Barbee Durham said he remembers going to the Ohio Theatre in the 1940s.

"If Negro patrons insisted they



John T. Ward

be admitted, they were made to stand in front of the ticket office," he said. "I was standing there, and people were wondering why the line didn't move. I told them they were out of change."

He and his friend were finally admitted.

"We were taken clear up to the top of the balcony. After the usher left, we moved down some, and the usher came back and flashed a light on us. He would do this every five minutes — come up there and flash that light on us.

"Finally people around us started noticing, asking what was going on. I told them the management did not want to admit colored people."

Durham and his friend were accused of causing a disturbance and were asked to leave.

Durham, a founder of the Vanguard League, which took many legal and social actions to foster integration, said after the theaters integrated, the restaurants followed.

"A Vanguard member would go into a restaurant. The establishment had these cards printed and would serve the white patron and lay one of the cards on the table," Durham said. "The cards said they had no choice but to serve Negroes.

"We had our own cards made up. When a card was placed in front of a white patron, we would go up and put down one of our own cards, saying we were glad to see the restaurant was obeying the law."

The Ward Family Business:

By Sharon Derrickson



Left to right: James B. Ward, Marie Ward Smith, Dolores Smith White, Harold E. Ward and in front: Eldon W. Ward

His company, E. E. Ward Movers at 1289 East Main Street in Columbus, though lacking some form of on-site public recognition, is the oldest black business in the country and the third oldest business in Columbus. "Patience and perseverance is the key to longevity in business. Things in business are

"Things in business are biblical. Give honor to God, respect your fellow man. . .and you have to adhere to discipline."

biblical. Give honor to God, respect your fellow man. . .and you have to adhere to discipline," Ward advised. After speaking with Eldon Ward of E. E. Ward Movers, one could easily assume that successful business operators in addition to being profound historians, were also astute philosophers. The company's

history is a "moving" one in more ways than one. The late John T. Ward, founder of the family business, began hauling merchandise from freight depots and warehouses in 1859, within the same five-block vicinity as it's current location—a precursor to the organized moving business founded in 1881.

At age 16, John Ward left his birthplace, Richmond, Virginia, to settle in Franklin County where he married Catherin Moss. There he bought a farm, and made a living through farming and contracts with wholesale and produce houses. But before and during his business ventures, John Ward born a free man in 1820, was keenly interested in aiding and abetting runaways, housing slaves on his farm on route to freedom. Eventually, Ward co-founded the Anti-Slavery Baptist

Church in 1947. His great-grandson, Eldon Ward, current president of the business, credits the success of the Underground Railroad to the fact that "it was a concerted effort between blacks and whites together in accomplishing their goals," efforts which Eldon Ward proclaimed were common then.

Basically, the main line of the business has not changed since its inception: Some aspects of the business have remained the same while some things have changed. They still utilize surface transportation to haul goods and merchandise. Then, a day's work consisted of 12-17 miles, compared to a modern day's distance of 500 to 600 miles or the equivalent of no more than 70 hours during an eight day span. Travel times are regulated by the United States Department of Transportation. Historically, households were not as mobile. Consequently, Eldon Ward explained that the bulk of the cargo consisted of transporting merchandise such as a piano from the warehouse to the store, since

businesses lacked warehouse space. Food brokers were also common customers.

Ward is proud of his customer service, citing an existing contract with a Florida family who has patronized his business for over one hundred years. Ward emphasized that if you give the right service in the beginning, then the opportunity for repeat service occurs.

He attempts to maintain a good relationship with all people—social and business.

Business prosperity as is everything else.



Eldon Ward, historical business owner

A Legend In Columbus and America

is cyclic. But Ward insists that the local segregation hurts business more than anything, the fact that his immediate business location has changed to a predominantly black area. He remembers when residents bought where they could afford regardless of location, and shopped accordingly. It was not uncommon to ride by black and white families interspersed. Ward blames economic stress for racial disharmony.

As a testimonial, he cites his father as an example. He was chief foreman for one of the largest transfer companies in the area because of hard work. Historians need to look at the complete record. Blacks were not just domestics or laborers, Ward emphasized. He said even during slavery, blacks were trained as bootmakers, livery operators, and other skilled craftsmen. And once slavery was abolished, the newly freed slaves carried their skills with them to new jobs.

In reference to modern civil rights crusaders who have fallen victim to the "look what I did" syndrome, Ward chastised that current successes are built on past contributions.

E.E. Ward Moving Company was just recently nominated by colleagues and business leaders for the 1991 Ohio Corporate Hall Of Fame.

"Service with dignity has been" a way of life for Ward, supplemented with liberal community volunteerism. He is proud that his business provides inspiration for new entrepreneurs, some who write in appreciation of the business's longevity. Ward closed with "life is supposed to be hard...challenging. It is that struggle which differentiates us from the dead."



The Ward Company staff



John T. Ward, Founder of E. E. Ward Moving Company



An early photo of Dolores Smith White, niece of Eldon Ward