

REV MANSFIELD FRENCH



1810-1876

Photo taken about 1855



Rev. Mansfield French and
wife Austa Matilda Winchell
Aug. 28, 1872
Hempstead, Long Island, NY

Source: M. Joseph French. The Ancestors and Descendents of Samuel French The Joiner of Stratford, Connecticut, 1940. p 70

Born: Feb 10, 1809 Manchester, VT

Died: Mar 15, 1876 Pearsalls, Long Island, NY

Appointment(s):

U.S. Dept of Treasury/American Missionary
Association
Special Agent – Port Royal, SC
Jan. 2, 1862

National Freedmen's Relief Association
Superintendent of Education – Port Royal, SC
Feb. 1862

U.S. Army – Chaplain; Army Hospital #1
Beaufort, SC
Jul. 10, 1862

U.S. Army - Chaplain; 136th USCT Infantry
Hilton Head, SC
Oct 28, 1865
Mustered out of Army service Jan. 1, 1868

Freedmen's Bureau

Civilian Agent
Port Royal, SC – Jan. 1 – Feb. 29, 1868
Hilton Head & Savannah, GA - Mar. 1868-1871

Mansfield French was born on February 10, 1809 in Manchester, Vermont to Joshua French and Grace Bassett and was baptized on September 23, 1813 by Rev. Abram Bronson in the Zion Protestant Episcopal Church in Manchester. His father was a wealthy farmer, a magistrate and a warden in the Protestant Episcopal Church.¹ Mansfield French joined the Zion Protestant Episcopal Church as a teenager on August 13, 1826 and was a delegate to the Episcopal Church state convention in 1828.² He moved to Ohio when he was twenty years old and entered Kenyon College's school of divinity.³ During his theology studies, he was an instructor at Marietta College where he met his future wife, Austa, who was his student. Mr. French married Austa Matilda Winchell (1810-1880) on August 28, 1832 in Granville, Ohio and they had 5 daughters and 4 sons.⁴ In 1845, Rev French left the Protestant Episcopal Church because of its exclusivity and lack of evangelical spirit and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church where he became a prominent Pastor.⁵ He was an Agent for Ohio Wesleyan University

¹ French, Mansfield. Memoirs of Rev Mansfield French. "Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1876", *Archives of the Ohio United Methodist Episcopal Church*, p 62. Ohio Wesleyan University Digital Collections.
<https://dcollections.oberlin.edu/cdn/ref/collection/p15963coll29/id/4574>.

² French, M. Joseph, 1872- and Mansfield French. "Ancestors and Descendents of Samuel French, The Joiner of Stratford, Connecticut", 2nd ed, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Edwards Brothers, Inc, 1940. p 73.
<https://archive.org/details/AncestorsAndDescendentsofSamuelFrenchTheJoinerofStratfordConnecticutByMansfieldJosephFrenchPub.1940>. [Note: Hartman clarifies that this grandson's biography has many inaccurate details and highly exaggerates Mansfield French's relationship with President Lincoln].

³ French, Mansfield. Memoirs of Mansfield French, p 63.

⁴ French, M. Joseph. pp 72,74.

⁵ French, Mansfield. Memoirs of Mansfield French, p 62.

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from 1850-1852; President of Xenia Female College in Cincinnati, Ohio 1854-55 and founder of and major financial stakeholder in Wilberforce University, the first African-American owned institution of higher learning in America established in 1856.⁶ While in Ohio, Rev. French became friends with Salmon P. Chase, the former U.S. Senator and Governor of Ohio from 1856-1861. French asked Chase to serve on the Board of Directors of Wilberforce University. This relationship would prove important in French's later success in the Sea Islands. In the fall of 1858, Rev. French moved to New York where he and his wife became the editors of a religious monthly called *The Beauty of Holiness*, the journal of the Holiness evangelical movement.⁷ Ohio friend, Salmon P. Chase asked French to travel to Washington, DC with him as his secretary when President Lincoln convinced Chase to serve as the US Secretary of the Treasury in March 1861.⁸

After moving to New York in 1858, Rev. French became friendly with Rev. George Whipple and Lewis Tappan of the American Missionary Association. On November 7, 1861, Port Royal Sound was overrun with Union warships under the command of Commodore Samuel DuPont. White planters of the area fled and took many of their slaves with them, but most of the slaves eluded their masters and fled to the Union military camps. So, as Willie Lee Rose states, they had now become "non-free subjects of a non-slave holding government".⁹ Lewis Tappan of the AMA in New York asked French to get permission from Sec. Chase in D.C. to travel to the Port Royal war zone to investigate the conditions of the contrabands in order to set up relief aid by the AMA. After obtaining Chase's approval of his plan for the freedmen, French was told that President Lincoln would like him to present the plan to him in person. The President approved the plan in December which became known as the 'Port Royal Experiment'. Since the project was put under the Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary Salmon P. Chase arranged for his assistant French to be sent as an Agent for the AMA to Port Royal to investigate the needs of the 'contrabands'. On January 4, 1862, Rev. French was granted a pass to travel by government transport to the war zone in the South by Secretary of War Cameron and approved by President Lincoln, to determine how the government could best help the refugee blacks living in the military camps.¹⁰ Secretary Cameron also promised Rev. French free and protected transportation for all teachers recruited for Port Royal, South Carolina.¹¹

Sec. Chase appointed his friend Edward L. Pierce as a special Agent of the Treasury Department to accompany French in order to organize the harvesting of the

⁶ Ibid, pp 62-63.

⁷ Mansfield, M Joseph, p 81.

⁸ Hartman, Cory. "The Useful Life of Mansfield French: A Model of Multivocational Ministry", Vol I. Gordon-Thesis for Doctorate of Ministry. May 2015, pp 214, 231.

<https://ia803004.us.archive.org/3/items/2015HartmanCory/2015-Hartman-Cory.pdf>

⁹ Rose, Willie Lee, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: Port Royal Experiment. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, original c 1964; reprint 1976, pp 24-25.

¹⁰ French, Mansfield. *Memoirs*, p 62.

- French, M. Joseph, p 83.

¹¹ Hartman, Cory, p 214.

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cotton crop and coordinate the work with Superintendents of plantations.¹² French and Pierce had a short-lived but very productive partnership. Before Edward Pierce returned to Boston in February 1862 where he organized the Educational Commission in order to recruit more teachers, he and French had agreed upon a plan to uplift and educate the contrabands to present to Sec. Chase. French also became acquainted with two other influential men of the Port Royal Experiment in South Carolina: Rev. Solomon Peck, a Unitarian minister who had established the first school for freedmen in January 1862 in Beaufort¹³ and Captain Rufus Saxton, Chief Quartermaster of the Expeditionary Corps who was an abolitionist brought up in a Unitarian household.¹⁴ Pierce, French and Saxton were all convinced of the blacks' potential for self-support and governance and wanted to use the Port Royal Experiment to prove it.¹⁵ At the end of January 1862, French returned to New York where he helped establish the National Freedmen's Relief Association in February at the Cooper Union in New York City and was appointed as their agent in South Carolina.¹⁶ Mansfield proposed, to the authorities to accept "women of suitable experience and purposes to give industrial instruction to those of their own sex among these people, and who, visiting from dwelling to dwelling, shall strive to Improve the household life and give such counsels as women can best communicate to women".¹⁷ However, he still had traditional ideas on what roles women could fulfill. For example, he did not recommend any women as Superintendents. And on March 2, 1862, French wrote to Rev. Simeon S. Jocelyn of the AMA that he would only be able to take 2 of 3 women recommended by Jocelyn on the steamer the next day, because there was neither sufficient need at the moment for more teachers, nor enough housing. He promised that he would send for more women as soon as possible.¹⁸

On March 3, 1862 the United States 'Atlantic' departed New York harbor for Beaufort, South Carolina under command of Capt. Eldridge, with the first group of relief workers and teachers. Edward L. Pierce, special Treasury Department Agent and a friend of Sec. Salmon Chase, oversaw the expedition, and Rev. Mansfield French was responsible for the missionary/teachers, forty-one men and twelve women.¹⁹ The group included volunteers from Boston recruited by Mr. Pierce and from New York recruited by Rev. French who became known as the "Gideonites". On March 9 the 'Atlantic' arrived off Hilton Head and Bay Point and then landed at Beaufort,

¹² Pierce, Edward L. *The Negroes at Port Royal: Report of E.L. Pierce, Govt Agent to the Hon Salmon P. Chase*,

Sec of the Treasury. Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1862, p 32.

¹³ Rose, pp 29-39.

- *New York Tribune*. "Aid for the Contrabands". Feb 21, 1862. <http://www.newspapers.com>

- National Freedmen's Relief Association. *Annual Report of the New York NFRA of NY with Sketch of Its Early*

History. NY 1866.

¹⁴ Hartman, Cory, p 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 218.

¹⁶ French, M. Joseph, p 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ French, Mansfield. American Missionary Association Archives. New Orleans: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center. Item # AMA85863. [Letter to Rev SS Jocelyn, New York, March 1862].

¹⁹ French, M. Joseph, pp 86- 87.

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headquarters of Major General Rufus Saxton, Military Governor of South Carolina.²⁰ Mr. Pierce assigned the men who had been appointed as Superintendents of Plantations to their locations while Rev. French had to find housing first for all of those who had been appointed as teachers. French and Pierce had a short-lived but very productive partnership. Before Edward Pierce returned to Boston in February 1862 where he organized the Educational Commission in order to recruit more teachers, he and French had agreed upon a plan to uplift and educate the contrabands to present to Sec. Chase. In April 1862, a group of teachers arrived aboard the 'Oriental' from Philadelphia, including Miss Laura Towne, the founder of Penn School on St Helena's Island.²¹ This group came from the Philadelphia Port Royal Relief Committee, established by Philadelphia Friends/Quakers. Rev. French established headquarters in an abandoned plantation house in Beaufort, later called the Mission House, which also became the temporary home of many teachers and relief workers passing through Beaufort on their way to their assigned plantations. Rev. and Mrs. French made their home in this 'mansion' and welcomed new teachers and dignitaries to Beaufort there. Rev. French represented the needs of the abandoned former slaves to relief agencies in New York as well as to the government officials in Washington, D.C. In June 1862, French wrote a letter for the AMA newsletter, *American Missionary* describing the suffering of the slaves.

"A more needy field I never beheld. The condition of the people is...conclusive evidence that slavery is an outrage on all human feelings, a sin against man, and a direct insult offered to God...No man who fears God, and has a heart, *right toward his fellow man*, can look things in the face, as they really exist here, and consent to the re-enslavement of this people."²²

On July 10, 1862 Mansfield French was commissioned in the U.S. Army as a chaplain of the 136th Regiment under the following commission:

WAR DEPARTMENT, Washington City, D. C , July 10th, 1862.

To all who shall see these Presents, Greeting: KNOW YE That Mansfield French has been, and is hereby, appointed Chaplain of the United States Hospital at Beaufort, S.C. with authority to do and discharge the duties of that office during the pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being. Given under my hand, at the City of Washington, this Tenth day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, and in the eighty-seventh year of the Independence of the United States. By the President:

Abraham Lincoln. Edwin M. Stanton. Secretary of War. Sent by mail, Accepts July 29 1862;

Age 52; Residence N.Y. July 11 '62. Born in Vermont; Methodist Episcopal ; US General Hosp No 1.²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rose, pp 76-77.

²² French, Mansfield. American Missionary Association Archives. New Orleans: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center. [Letter from Washington, D.C. to AMA newsletter *American Missionary*, June 1862].

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His duties included not only chaplain responsibilities at the hospital, but also oversight of all the freedmen in the Department of the South under Gen. Rufus Saxton, including supervision of their teachers and schools. When they first arrived, French reported that there were already about 10,000 slaves within the Union military camps and some distrusted the US Army. But most viewed the troops as angels, in "spite of the lies told them by their masters about the damned Yankees, that we were all angels, and when they heard the profanity of our troops, and witnessed the terrible drunkenness of our army, and saw the frequent outrages upon their women, they were stupefied."²⁴ In August 1862, Gen. Saxton sent Mansfield and the slave Robert Smalls of *Planter* fame, to Washington, D.C. to persuade the Secretary of War, Edward Stanton and Secretary of Treasury, Salmon Chase that the former slaves should be recruited for military service. Soon after that meeting, the War Department started enlisting them in the Department of the South, so French personally recruited two hundred Negroes from Beaufort to be part of the 1st USCT (colored) Regiment. His message to the former slaves was that in order to obtain the privilege of U.S. citizenship in the future, they must be able and willing to serve in the military.²⁵ On November 3-10, 1862, Rev French participated in the first operation of the recently formed 1st South Carolina Colored Troops [later renamed the 33rd USCT] along the Georgia and Florida coasts. On November 12, 1862, Brig Gen Rufus Saxton wrote to Secretary of War Stanton praising French's contribution to their success.²⁶ Rev French was discharged from his duties as Army Chaplain on January 1, 1868 after serving for six years.

The French family believed that Chaplain French exerted a strong Influence upon President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.²⁷ It was issued Sept. 17, 1862 and became effective Jan. 1, 1863. In carrying out the order that the Emancipation Proclamation be read on Jan. 1, 1863, General Saxton and his staff, the teachers from the Mission House in Beaufort and the troops of the First USCT (colored) Regiment proceeded to the Smith Plantation on Port Royal Island, where the ex-slaves and others were already gathered. Mr. Judd, General Superintendent of the Island, presided over the ceremonies and Chaplain French opened with a prayer. Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in command of the Regiment, was called upon and he announced that the Proclamation would be read "by a South Carolinian to South Carolinians", Dr. Brisbane, who read the Emancipation Proclamation and also Gen. Saxton's order making it effective in his area. The crowd broke into cheers and Chaplain French then presented to Col. Higginson, in the name of New York friends, a silk flag of colors of the regiment. As Col. Higginson was about to express his appreciation, a woman began to sing "My Country, 'tis of thee". The throng of former slaves and dignitaries on the platform joined in the singing, until all joined in the closing refrain.

²³ French, M. Joseph, p 88.

²⁴ Ibid, pp 84- 85.
Hartman, p 215.

²⁵ French, M. Joseph, pp 88-89.

²⁶ Ibid, p 89.

²⁷ Ibid, p 91.

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The cotton crop of 1862, produced under the supervision of Treasury Agents, broke all records for volume, quality and price and proved so valuable that northern speculators swarmed to the Port Royal area. The U.S. Direct Tax Act of 1862 allowed the government to seize plantations in the Department of the South for non-payment of taxes by the plantation owners. The land was to be redistributed to the 'contrabands, but in a letter to Sec. Chase on January 6, 1863, French voiced apprehension over the future of the 'freedmen'. "I am greatly troubled in view of the land sales. The sharp eyed speculators are on hand and with larger purses than those of the friends of humanity. If the plantations fall into their hands, most of the colored people will suffer greatly."²⁸ "Such a state of things would both embarrass and dishonor the government and set back the cause of human freedom."²⁹ He requested that General Saxton be permitted to use cotton money to purchase some land for the freedmen. On February 6, 1863, Congress voted to allow a certain amount of the government-held land to be set aside for educational use for the freedmen. Gen. Saxton and Chaplain French were determined that the Negroes should be given an opportunity to acquire small farms from the lands abandoned by their former masters. Chaplain French went to Washington and helped secure legislation under which these lands were to be allotted to the Negroes. Farms of twenty to forty acres were to be granted upon payment of \$1.25 per acres to either blacks or whites who had lived on the land for at least three months or had worked for the Army Quartermaster for at least six months.³⁰ This also gave the northern Superintendents, agents, and teachers, as employees of the Government, the right to purchase land. In the fall of 1863 Gen. Saxton Issued orders for those eligible to go ahead and stake out lands. Many of the eligible Northerners staked out the best locations on the plantations and gave the Impression to the former slaves that they must go elsewhere. On Jan. 1, 1864 Rev French held a meeting to clear up the confusion. He advised the Negroes to select and stake out immediately, any lot they desired that was on Government land. However, within two months northern speculators controlled a large area and prices soared from \$1.25 per acre to \$5.00 and some land sold as high as \$25.00 per acre.³¹ A group of the tax commissioners headed by Dr. William Henry Brisbane from South Carolina had been planning to sell all the lands at public auction and went to Washington to oppose the orders previously obtained by Gen. Saxton and Chaplain French. Brisbane told Congress that the lands were being claimed by private speculators, who were reaping the benefits instead of the Government, which provoked new orders from Washington reversing the Saxton-French 'preemption' plan. Chaplain French himself was eligible to purchase land and on Jan. 26 1864, he purchased the Mission House property, in which he had lived since 1862, at public auction for \$1700. It was described in the deed as Lot C in Block Ninety-nine and was located at the north-east corner of Bay and Harrington Streets. The house was built of oyster shell concrete during the colonial period. It had a high basement, comprising the kitchen,

²⁸ Lincoln, Abraham, President. *Abraham Lincoln papers, Series 1. General Correspondence, 1833-1916.* Letter from French in Beaufort, SC to Sec Chase Tues, Jan 6, 1863. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/ms000001.mss30189a.2101100>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ French, M. Joseph, p 88.

³¹ Ibid, p 111.

- French, Mansfield. American Missionary Association Archives. New Orleans: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center. Item # AMA 15869. [Letter published in *American Missionary* Jan 4, 1862].

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work-rooms and quarters for house servants who entered from the rear. This is the same house in front of which some of the first teachers to arrive with Rev. French posed for a photograph.³²

After the war, Gen. Saxton was appointed as the first Director of the new Freedmen's Bureau on March 3, 1865 and French continued to work with him from 1866-1867 to advance the interests of the freedmen in both South Carolina and Georgia.³³

Rev. Mansfield French played crucial roles in the founding or early development of three institutions of higher education that still exist today. He had:

- overseen the education of hundreds of antebellum women and thousands of freed slaves,
- seen hundreds converted to faith in Jesus Christ and hundreds more profess entire sanctification in response to his preaching,
- with his wife Austa had promulgated the doctrine of holiness among thousands of Methodist readers,
- secured authorization to enlist and arm five thousand escaped and abandoned slaves before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued,
- and had overseen the legalization of thousands of freed people's marriages.

These are merely endeavors in which he succeeded; they do not include his failed attempts to secure permanent title to parcels of confiscated plantations for freed people, to be elected a United States senator or to win American diplomatic recognition of an independent Cuba. He was discharged from civil service on February 29, 1868 but remained in South Carolina a while longer to tie up loose ends and continue to advocate for the freedmen. After restoration of a civil government in South Carolina, Rev French felt that his purpose with the freedmen in the state had been accomplished, so he resigned his position there in 1871 and returned north.³⁴ He served as Pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Newtown, Long Island from 1871-72 and in his last post as Pastor of the Pearsalls, Long Island church from 1873-76.

Rev. Mansfield French died of heart disease at home in Pearsalls, Long Island, New York on March 15, 1876³⁵ Ironically, his death occurred the same year that the election of President Rutherford B. Hayes announced the end of Reconstruction. Mansfield and his wife were buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, New York City, Lot 268, Section 59.³⁶ His son, Mansfield Joshua, applied on November 28, 1932 for a military tombstone for his father's gravesite and it was approved on February 24, 1933. Evidence of the wide-spread respect Rev. French had garnered, was evident in his obituaries published in Boston, Ohio, New York City, Washington, DC and Beaufort, South Carolina. *The New York Tribune* described him as a "prominent Methodist

³² Cooley, Samuel A., photographer. US Library of Congress. Silver stereograph print. Mission House in Beaufort. 1862.
<https://www.loc.gov/resources/stereo.1s03859/>

- French, M. Joseph, p 71

³³ Ibid, p 97.

³⁴ French, M. Joseph, p 63.

³⁵ Hartman, Cory, p 3.

³⁶ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/175093974>. Findagrave.com Memorial ID 175093974
created 8 Jan 2017 by Patrick White. Photo of tombstone added 14 Nov 2018 by Robert Diaz.

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minister and a widely known friend of the colored race..."³⁷ The *New York Herald* had been an opponent of Mansfield French during the War and carried an article by Benjamin C. Truman accusing French of corruption and scandal. Under the headline of "Affairs in the South", Truman claimed, "The colored people have been swindled beyond all consideration' and if the Freedmen's Bureau Bill now before the House becomes a law, God help the colored man of the South. The most distinguished and most successful of all of these negro robbers is a former chaplain known as Father FRENCH, who has in the past four years accumulated a quarter of a million dollars in cash and real estate. He had Gen. SAXON [sic] completely under his control and got him into bad repute."³⁸

Many politicians, government and military leaders wrote letters of support for Rev. French, but especially effective was the letter by Gen. Saxton on December 23, 1866 to the *New York Herald*: "I have known Rev. Mansfield French many years; an active, earnest, faithful Christian minister, especially zealous in labors for the freedmen and the elevation of the colored race."³⁹ Then, he requested that the newspaper issue an apology to French, his family, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the entire colored race. All charges were finally cleared and the *New York Herald* published an apology on January 29, 1867, stating that "French survived the oblivion of all aspersions that malicious partisans, including this paper, cast upon him during the war" and spoke highly of his role in organizing the First SC Volunteer colored troops.⁴⁰ His son Winchell had this apology reprinted in the *Beaufort Tribune* and *Crescent* on March 22, 1876.⁴¹ Two funerals were held – one in Pearsalls with closest friends and church members and an elaborate one in the Seventh Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City where the Frenches had been members in 1858.⁴² Perhaps the greatest honor came from one-time Presidential candidate, William Cullen Bryant in his eulogy published in the *New York Evening Post*:

He was an ardent abolitionist and conceived the idea of enlisting negroes under the national flag. He passed three days in conference with Sec. Stanton on this point and finally prevailed. He also was mainly instrumental in obtaining permission for negroes to pre-empt land on the valuable sea islands of the south. In all actions benefitting the negroes, he was one of the prime movers, and his name should always be remembered by them with affection.⁴³

³⁷ Hartman, Cory, p 13.

- *New York Tribune*. "Mansfield French" [obituary]. Mar 17, 1876, mss copy, French Family Papers 1831-1945. Syracuse, NY: Onandonga Historical Association Museum and Research Center. Item # (3F21-035-038)

³⁸ French, M. Joseph, p 351.

³⁹ Ibid, p 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 97.

⁴¹ *New York Herald*. "Rev Mansfield French". Mar 17, 1876. <http://www.newspapers.com>

- *The Crescent*. Beaufort, SC: Wed, March 22, 1876.

- *New York Times*. "The Case of Rev Mansfield French: Further Correction of Misstatements". March 25, 1867, p 8. http://www.newspapers.com/clip/20244101/rev_mr_French/.

⁴² Ibid, p 570.

⁴³ *New York Evening Post*. Mar 17, 1876. mss copy, French Family Paper 1831-1945. Syracuse, NY: Onandonga Historical Association Museum and Research Center. Item # (3F21-039-040).

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The French Manse, Beaufort, South Carolina.

Source: French, M. Joseph. "Ancestors and Descendents of Samuel French, the Joiner of Stratford, CT, 2nd ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Edward Bros, Inc 1940, p <https://archive.org/details/AncestorsAndDescendentsofSamuelFrenchTheJoinerofStratfordConnecticutByMansfieldJosephFrenchPub.1940>



Findagrave.com
Memorial ID 175093974
created 8 Jan 2017 by Patrick White.
Photo of tombstone added
14 Nov 2018 by Robert Diaz.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/175093974>.



Beaufort, SC Mission House
[same house as home of Rev French]
Source: US Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
<https://www.loc.gov/resources/ster eo.1s03859/>