

Businessman and slave-owner...not typical words applied to a person of color in the 1840s. William Johnson rose from slavery to a position of wealth and respect in pre-Civil War Natchez. In 1990 the National Park Service acquired the three-story William Johnson House to illuminate the free black story in Natchez, Mississippi.

Early Life

Born a slave in 1809, William Johnson could expect little more than a life of servitude and backbreaking labor. In 1820, however Captain William Johnson, young William's owner and probably his father, freed the boy. The boy's mother and sister were freed earlier.

Free blacks were subject to laws and rules not imposed on the white population. They could not vote, hold public office, serve in the militia, or testify in court against a white person. Employment opportunities were limited. Young William Johnson worked as an apprentice with his brother-in-law, also a freed slave, who owned a barbershop.

In spite of the restrictions imposed on his race, William Johnson determined at an early age to become a success. This meant owning property. His chance came in 1830 when he bought his brother-in-law's barbershop. This acquisition was the beginning of a remarkable rise to respectability and affluence.

Diarist and Family Man

"To Day my Little Daughter was Born And the Larges & Finest Child I Ever saw of its Age---Mrs Dickson was with Her, Ann was well at Dinner time." William Johnson's Diary, November 25, 1841.

In 1835 William Johnson married Ann Battles. That same year he began keeping the journal that would chronicle the rest of his life. The wealthy white planters often kept diaries, and Johnson emulated them in every way possible. His writings reveal a vivid picture of life in Natchez, Mississippi before the Civil War.

His entries told of his family and his businesses, of town gossip and his amusements. Johnson loved gambling and horseracing. He loved to hunt and shoot targets. For his home and barbershops he purchased elegant furnishings, musical instruments and many books. He also subscribed to numerous local and national newspapers.

The family grew rapidly, with 11 children born over 16 years. The Johnson's educated all their children at home. William and Ann sent their four oldest to New Orleans to attend schools for free people of color. Ann worried about sending her four children far from home to stay among strangers. To protect her children from being possibly kidnapped and sold into slavery, Ann had them baptized and registered at a New Orleans church.

The Johnson's owned as many as 15 slaves at a time, including 6 or 7 acquired from his mother's estate. How could a former slave own slaves? William Johnson wanted very much to be considered a success. In pre-Civil War Natchez, success meant land and slaves.

Business Dealings

"Business has been very Lively and a very great Quantity of persons in town do day---Mr. Edward Thomas paid me to day fifty Dollars. It was a debt that Mr. Marshall, the portraite Painter, Owed me for House rent...Messrs Barlow & Taylor paid me To Day One Hundred Dollars, money that I Loaned him a short time ago..." William Johnson's diary January 1, 1839

Energetic, shrewd, and opportunistic, Johnson was a prosperous and dashing businessman—the most successful barber in Natchez. Johnson owned several barbershops by 1850. All of the workers under his supervision were African-American, and his clients for haircuts, shaves, and baths, were all white. He chose furnishings for his barbershops that were similar to the furnishings of the palatial mansions around Natchez.

Johnson took advantage of other moneymaking ventures. He lent small sums of money at interest to white businessmen. He erected and rented out two commercial buildings. Johnson also bought and sold miscellaneous goods. He hired out his slaves and wagons for a small scale hauling business in the city of Natchez.

The William Johnson House

“To Day was in the afternoon very pleasant Day until past One Oclock and then we had rain, with One of the Greatest Tornadoes that Ever was Seen in this place before...” William Johnson’s diary May 7, 1840

As Johnson described, a massive tornado hit downtown Natchez killing hundreds of people. Johnson used brick, windows and doors salvaged from damaged buildings to erect a new home on a piece of property on State Street owned by his mother-in-law. He finished the interior walls of his home with plaster reinforced with human hair from his barbershops. This building would be home to his descendents for more than 100 years.

Johnson’s city properties afforded him financial reward but he still wanted more. He bought about 700 acres south of town and bought a few more slaves to work the land. Although his farm was not very profitable, Johnson enjoyed his status as a slave-owning cotton planter too much to shift his capital to more financially rewarding commercial ventures.

Johnson’s Legacy

“Our city was very much excited on Tuesday morning, by hearing that what could only be deemed a horrible and deliberate murder had been committed upon an excellent and most inoffensive man. It was ascertained that William Johnson, a free man of color born and raised in Natchez, and holding a respected position on account of his character, intelligence and deportment, had been shot.” Natchez Courier, June 20, 1851

William Johnson’s life and career were cut short by murder in 1851. Baylor Winn, a long time adversary, shot Johnson over a boundary dispute. Winn was arrested for the murder and three separate trials kept him in jail for two years. In the end he was released because the courts had difficulty ascertaining his race. He claimed he was of white and Indian blood instead of black as the Johnson family believed. Mississippi law prohibited testimony of black men against white men. The only witnesses were black.

Baylor Winn’s violent act ended the life of William Johnson. Johnson, however, left behind a recorded history of his life that endures and intrigues us today. He recorded the happenings of his life never dreaming they would be read by thousands of people over a century later. In 1951, exactly 100 years after Johnson’s murder, Louisiana State University published the diary. Its pages reveal a life lived in a shadowy world, neither slave nor entirely free. Johnson walked a tightrope in society. On one side were the slaves and poorer free blacks who envied his success. On the other was the white aristocracy. Johnson’s peers consisted of a very small group of successful free black families in Natchez. Johnson struggled to raise his status in life and copy the lifestyle of the wealthy planter society of which he could never really be a part. His house and diary document the extraordinary rise of a black man from bondage to freedom and to a position as a substantial citizen in the heart of the “cotton kingdom”.

Source:
National Historic Park
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