



Voices from the Days of Slavery:

Stories, Songs and Memories – George Johnson (transcript)

LC ANNOUNCEMENT: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

CHARLES JOHNSON (interviewer): Well, Mr. Johnson, we're going to start off.

GEORGE JOHNSON: All right... all right.

CHARLES JOHNSON: I want you to tell me how you got your name.

GEORGE JOHNSON: I got my name from President Jeff Davis. He was president of the Southern Confederacy. He owned my grandfather and my father. Brought them from Richmond, Virginia. My grandfather was a blacksmith. My father was a young kid... wasn't grown. And my father had learned how to write a little bit in Richmond, Virginia, before they brought him down here. Grandpa used to keep chalk in his shop to mark [unclear] things and my father take a piece, put it in his pocket and [when he] pass in front master Jeff's house, he write on the sidewalk. And so one morning master Jeff come by and saw that writing on the walk he go back and ask the cook, old lady named (?) Miss Liza: "There's writing on the sidewalk, who writing out there?" Say, "I don't know, master Jeff." Say, "Come out there I show to you. I can read it." So he read it. He say, "Meliza, if you can find out who ever wrote on that walk out there, [I carry you down (?)] to the store and give you a free dress." She say, "Yes, master, Jeff." So, one morning she's out, throw out some dishwater. And she peek under the dishpan and she look down and saw my father down on his knees writing on the sidewalk. She told master Jeff. Master Jeff sent for the boy to come to the shop. Come to the house, and, ah, asked him who learned him how to write? He said, "Master Jeff, I learned how to write Richmond, Virginia. A white woman learned me how to write. Before you brought me down here." "You did?" "Yes, sir." He give him a pencil and [say] "Write my name." My father's name, Isaiah. He called him, "Ike, write my name." He wrote Jeff Davis' name. He said write, "Joe Davis." He wrote, "Joe Davis." "Write Vicksburg." He wrote "Vicksburg," you see. "Ah ha, Ike, that's pretty nice for you."

And he send him on back to the shop and master Jeff's son from Richmond, Virginia, and got two teachers. They opened a nice school. Educate all his niggas. And made my father a civil engineer. And then made Isaiah Montgomery his bookkeeper. And on and on they made different ones [unclear] farmers, carpenters, sawmills, gins and all like that. That's just because of... my father and Isaiah Montgomery. Isaiah is born on Davis' Bend. He born on... on the Hurricane Plantation. Just [unclear] from Brierfield. I was born on Brierfield. Master Jeff had five plantations over there: Ursino, Brierfield, Hurricane, Palmyra and Lick Place [unclear]. It all belong to master Jeff. And...he had all those niggas from different places, on those plantation to come to that school. Nice school. He give them all a formal education. When they all got free, they could take care their self.

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AFC ANNOUNCEMENT: Welcome to the American Folklife Center's podcast series, "Voices from the Days of Slavery: Stories, Songs and Memories." Drawn from the unique collections of the Center's Archive, the series presents first-person accounts of African Americans whose experiences spanned the last years of slavery. They were recorded during the 1930's and 1940's, most often for the large-scale documentation projects sponsored by New Deal agencies during and after the Great Depression. Many of these recordings survive only as fragments and the audio quality occasionally suffers due to the deterioration of the original recorded media. Nevertheless, the compelling voices of these individuals transport the listener to a defining period in this country's history. In this interview from 1940, Mr. George Johnson of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, shares memories of slavery times, including his relationship with Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy. The interviewers are Charles Johnson, Lewis Jones, John Work, Elizabeth and Alan Lomax.

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GEORGE JOHNSON: Everyone admired him. Obeyed him. Don't care where he's going he obeyed master Jeff. Once master Jeff was going to landing in a buggy, in a hack. The gate was locked. That same old man I tell you about, Old Man Jack Raily [unclear], he got to the gate, say "Master Jeff this gate's locked." He say, "Oh, well, Jack, it's locked, it's my gate, break it down! It's my gate." So the boy picked it up and Jack said, "Break down the gate!" He took the fence down. And drove on through there and the wagon on behind him, you understand, with the band, carry him to the landing, and when they come back, they put the fence up. That's the reason why master Jeff need his Negro. And when he met his Negro - on the road - first thing master Jeff look up there and see him, he tip his hat to him. And everyone give him the same thing back. Give him honor.

And...he was on the plantation that one day, on Lick Place, he told Mrs. [unclear] say, "Mrs. [unclear], I'm going home tomorrow, don't forget to feed my niggas. When they get through laying the crops, let them be. Wouldn't even let them cut cord wood. But don't disturb them. I want them undisturbed. See, anything happen to any of my Negroes, we to see Mr. Davis. And don't forget, I'm Mr. Davis. See, my Negro is my summer shade. He's my winter fire. He's my umbrella. Don't disturb them."

CHARLES JOHNSON: You, tell me how ... the story as to how Isaiah T. Montgomery's father saved the plantation during the Civil War for him?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Yes, well, when, .. the Yankee was coming South. Look after those places down there to rob somebody, Uncle Ben see it. Uncle Ben went to Mrs. Varina, his wife, say, "Well, Mrs. I'm have to go Richmond. Got to see master Jeff." She say, "What you want to see master Jeff for, Ben?" Say, "I got to see him." [unclear] "No, Mrs. you can't do no good. I can't.. I don't want to see you. I want to see master Jeff. I want a passport. Send me to Richmond, Virginia, to see master Jeff." So they give Uncle Ben the passport. He went on to Richmond..got some bread in his sack and went on to

Richmond, Virginia. Got on his [unclear] where he went on to Vicksburg. On to Richmond, Virginia, and met master Jeff [unclear]

[*Mr. Johnson taps his cane to imitate knocking*] "Who's that? Come in." Walk in there. "Hi there, master Jeff." "Hey, Ben, what you doing here?" Say, "I come here to see you, master Jeff." Say, "Ben, sit down and tell me all you know. How everybody doing?" "Everybody all right, master Jeff, but something I come to see you about." "What is it, Ben?" Say, "Master Jeff, those Yankees coming South near Vicksburg. They coming down South getting our white folks' land and robbing the niggas. Steal all the mules. And they in pursuit of Davis' land. I'm tell you what I want you to do." Say, "What is it Ben?" "I want you to deed this land to me. So I'll have it." He say, "Ben that won't do no good." Say, "Don't you belong to me? The land's mine. You mine. Why, that won't do no good." Say, "Yes, it will do, master Jeff. It will do." Say, "How do you know?" Say, "Master Jeff, can't you free me?" Say, "My God, free me, man." Master Jeff held his head down and say, "Ben you right." Sent Ben up to Saint [unclear] coast and deed that land to him and freed him. And made notes [unclear] on a page, you understand. And free [unclear] and send him back home.

And them Yankees got down to the Bend, our home there. The Yankees come, you understand. They asked, "Davis land? Is it Davis' farm?" Say, "Davis ain't got no land." "Who land is here?" "It belongs to Ben Montgomery." "Where's Ben Montgomery?" "Yonder he is." Say, "Come here, Ben." "This your land?" "Yes, sir." "Where did you get that?" "Bought it from my old master." He called my, called Mrs. [Davis]. He asked her to bring those papers, you understand. Show it to him. Read these notes and papers, you understand. "Ah ha, that is your land. Now I want white folk...I don't want no kind of Negro land. Ride on!" Ran across the river... didn't bother the land at all. And when, freedom time come back, master Jeff come on home, you understand. And he met them and they give him back his money [unclear]!

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CHARLES JOHNSON: You started to tell me about this band that ah, Jefferson Davis organized for his slaves.

GEORGE JOHNSON: Yes, he organized that band for his Negroes, in Davis Bend, on Brierfield Plantation. And, he hired a man in Vicksburg named Charles Morgan, teach them boys music. And he taught those boys music. They got so they could play and he escorted them from landing up home in a wagon and master Jeff be in his hack, and the band would play for them going and coming. And after they got so they could play he bought them a uniform, and named that band the Davis Bend Band. Escorted everywhere he went.

CHARLES JOHNSON: How many pieces were...how many pieces were in the band?

GEORGE JOHNSON: They had fourteen... fourteen men in the band. Fourteen men.

CHARLES JOHNSON: What kind of music did they play? Do you remember any of pieces they played?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Oh, lord, yes indeed know them, I played them myself. Played *Grand National*, *Fort Watch* (?), *Regiments* (?), *Mount Rose*, *Dream On*, *Please the Birches Mountain*, *Not Guilty*, *Band* [unclear], *I'm A Soldier*, *Farm Quickstep*. All that kind of stuff. We played, I played it myself...

...We had dances. We had dances, you know, this...this quad...quadrille. And danced ... thirty-two on a set. And twenty-four on a set. Had this thing called *Point at Your Partner* (?), and *Dance to Your Partner*, like that..., then, *Palm Major Swing*, all that kind of stuff, you understand, see? And...you pointing at your partner...pointing her to a bar. Had a bar, you know. Where they bought candy and so on like that, you know. And apples and oranges, understand. Carry your partner and spend a dime or a quarter on them, buy them candy .. or something else like that, you know. Never had no soda water, you understand. They had...lemonade made in a barrel.

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CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, what year did you leave ... leave Davis Bend?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Davis Bend? I left Davis Bend the year of [18]84. Left Davis Bend...cousin Isaiah come from Vicksburg. We come near Vicksburg and stay there till 1887. Cousin Isaiah get in touch with, with Major McGinnis [Major George W. McGinnis], his father in law who was one of the supervisors on the railroad company... he's a white man, you understand, you see. And give him part of his land where he could dig out up here and make it set up his Negroes. And they got him to come up here and got this land. I came with them, me and another boy named Shelton Allen, his father, stepfather rather, and my father, Peter Montgomery. They had twelve of us come up here, you understand. And ... they offered us this land, you understand. See in... December, January, they moved two families here. Shelton Allen's mother was the first one to cook bread here. Cooked bread here in [18]87 on a stump. Over there, Delia (?)Allen. Cooked bread on a stump. I never forget that bread...never forget that bread.

In July, the twelfth... that evening we come up from Vicksburg up here. Got off the train at Marigold. Walked up here, you understand. And the men had made some staves, cross ties. We took the slabs, picked them up and made a shack. And that evening she cooked that bread on a stump right close to the shack, right out there out of stump. She made a big fire, we made a big fire for her and ... took those coals and put it on the stump and put the skillet on there, you understand. Put the lid on the skillet and put coal on top the lid, and bake that bread. And we got the first bread. That in [18]87. How many years that been? ... Fifty-four years.

CHARLES JOHNSON: Fifty-four years?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Fifty-four years, last July. Yes, sir!

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CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, how many...families were here the next year?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Next year? Oh, we got, we had about fifteen families the next year. Just about fifteen families. Next year... we had...about fifteen families come here about, that [unclear] the next year. They come, we advertised, you understand, getting people [former slaves] come here. Come from the old country in the South, you understand, you see. Cousin Isaiah had them come, by...by letter and by advertising in the paper...newspaper, you understand. Had a paper out there [advertise (?)] trip, like that, you know. They sent it to them, went right on through the country. They all come here on account of cousin Isaiah. He know what he was trying to do. Sell all the folks land. Come from Davis Bend, where we left Davis Bend. They all come from the Bend. And come across road a new town, and out edge of the hills, from Vicksburg. Come right to cousin Isaiah cause they know what he was trying do. Give them all a home. And they bought that land and it's gone though now. Land here, [but] the folks all gone. Yes, sir.

CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, when, when would you say that you had your greatest prosperity here?

GEORGE JOHNSON: Greatest prosperity? In life we had it here when cousin Isaiah lived, and Charles Banks and John Francis. They was the life of Mound Bayou. Since they gone, why, Mound Bayou gone! There is no backbone. There is no back bone in...in this community at all. Need somebody out... get in front. They... every... every gang has... a need... to have a leadership. Gang of chickens got to have a leader. Well they got no leader now, you understand. See, they need leadership. What they ain't got!

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AFC ANNOUNCEMENT: That concludes this program in the American Folklife Center's podcast series, "Voices from the Days of Slavery: Stories, Songs and Memories." This episode was produced and edited by Guha Shankar, American Folklife Center and Lisa Carl, North Carolina Central University. The audio engineer was Jonathan Gold, American Folklife Center. The website for the online collection, "Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories" was developed by John Barton and the Library's American Memory Project team. To hear and read George Johnson's unedited interviews, along with other personal accounts of slavery days, please visit the Library of Congress website - "memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/.

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