

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
 American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)
 Jacksonville, Florida

342

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 Complete
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Slave Interview
 November 30, 1936

A Centenarian

Luke Towns, a centenarian, now residing at 225 West Eighth Street, Jacksonville, Florida, was the ninth child born to Maria and Like Towns, slaves, December 24, 1835, in a village in Tolberton County, Georgia.

Mr. Town's parents were owned by Governor Towns, whose name was taken by all the children born on the plantation; he states that he was placed on the public blocks for sale, and was purchased by a Mr. Mormon. At the marriage of Mr. Mormon's daughter, Sarah, according to custom, he was given to this daughter as a wedding present, and thus became the slave and took the name of the Gulleys and lived with them until he became a young man at Smithville, Georgia, in Lee County.

His chief work was that of carrying water, wood and working around the house when a youngster; often, he states he would hide in the woods to keep from working.

Because his mother was a child-bearing woman, she did not know the hard labors of slavery, but had a small patch of cotton and a garden near the house to care for. "All of the others worked hard", said he "but had kind masters who fed them well."

When asked if his mother were a christian, he replied "why yes: indeed she was, and believed in prayer; one day as she traveled from her patch home, just as she was about to let the 'gap'(this was a fence built to keep the hogs and horses shut in) down, she knelt to pray and a light appeared before her and from that time on she did not believe in any fogyism, but in God."

" I cannot remember much now; he says, "of what happened in slavery, but after slavery we went back to the name of Towns. I know I got some whippings and during the war my job was that of carrying the master's luggage." (1)

After the war he went to Albany, Georgia and began working for himself, hauling salt from Albany to Tallahassee, Florida; this salt was sold to the stores. His next job was that of sampling cotton.

Just before he was 30 years old he was married to Mary Julia Coats, who lived near Albany, Georgia. To them were born the following children: Willie, George, Alexander, Henry Hillman, Ella Louise, and twins+ Walter Luke and Mary Julia, who were named for the parents.

He was converted to the Baptist faith when his first child was born; there were no churches, but services were held in the blacksmith shop on the corner of Jackson and State streets. Later he became a member of Mount Zion Baptist Church

Albany, Georgia, and served there for 50 years as a deacon.

He remained in Georgia until 1899 when he moved to Tampa, Florida and there he operated a cafe. He joined Beulah Baptist Church and served as deacon there until he sold his business and came to Jacksonville, 1917, to live with his youngest daughter, Mrs. Mary Houston, because he was too old to operate a business. In Jacksonville he connected himself with the Bethel Baptist Church, and while too old to serve as an active deacon, he was placed on the honorary list because of his previous record of church service.

As a relic of pre-freedom days, Mr. Towns has a piece of paper money and a one-cent piece which he keeps securely locked in his trunk and allows no one to open the trunk; he keeps the key.

Mr Towns, who will celebrate his one-hundred-first birthday, December 24, 1936, is not able to coherently relate incidents of the past; he hears but little and that with great difficulty.

He says he has his second eyesight; he reads without the use of glasses; until very recently he has been very active in mind and body, having registered in the Spring of 1936, signing his own name on the registration books. He has almost all of his hair, which is thick, silvery white and of artist length. He has most of his teeth, walks without a cane except when painful; dresses himself without assistance.

Mr. Towns rises at six o'clock each morning, often earlier. Makes his bed (he has never allowed anyone to make his bed for him) and because it is still dark has to lie across the bed to await the breaking of day. His health is very good and his appetite strong.

Upon the occasion of his one-hundredth birthday, December 24, 1935, his daughter Mrs. Houston gave him a child's party and invited one hundred guest; one hundred stockings were made, filled with fruits, nuts and candies and one given each guest. A high cake with one hundred candles adorned the table and during the party he cut the cake. At this party, he showed all the joys and pleasures of a child. His other daughter Mrs. E.L. McMillan, of New York City, and son, Mr. George Towns, for years an instructor in Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia, were present for the occasion.

Mr. Towns has been noted during his lifetime for having a remarkable memory and has many times publicly delivered orations from many of Shakespeare's works. His memory began failing him in 1936.

He is very well educated and now spends most of his time sitting on the porch reading the Bible. (3)

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REFERENCES

1. Luke Towns, 1225 West Eighth Street, Jacksonville, Florida
2. Mary Houston, daughter of Luke Towns, 1225 West Eighth street
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