



Andrew Johnson and his Slaves



Believed to be Dolly with Johnson's grandson



Sam



Dolly's son, William Andrew Johnson

Andrew Johnson's Slaves

Andrew Johnson may have owned as many as eight slaves at once, the number never being large enough to exceed domestic duties. He never sold one.

Dolly and Sam, half-sister and brother, were purchased in 1842 at a slave auction in Greeneville, Tennessee. Dolly was about 14 years old at the time of purchase and Sam about 12.

According to William, Dolly's son, Dolly asked Johnson to buy her. "She looked around the crowd of buyers before the auction started, and she saw Andrew Johnson and liked his looks," William said. "So she went up to him and asked him if he wouldn't buy her."

Sam was purchased along with her. After Johnson's purchase, Dolly eventually had three children: Liz, Florence and William.

Sam was known as Johnson's favorite, probably because of his confident and independent nature. Johnson's daughter Martha once said, "Old Sam boast that he was my father's servant, but the fact is, my father was Sam's servant." Sam was allowed to choose jobs around town, like chopping wood and keep part of the money.

Sam was close to Johnson until his death and was one

of the few persons that knew where Johnson wanted to be buried.

No one is sure where the slaves lived, but there are a couple of ideas. They may have stayed in a cabin, about 20 by 30 feet, located on the Homestead grounds or in a basement room where the current kitchen is located.

Their duties would have been domestic, including tasks such as washing and ironing clothes, cooking, cleaning, gardening, caring for horses, caring for Johnson's wife Eliza while she was sick and working for others around town. Johnson took Florence with him to Washington, D.C.

Eliza Johnson taught William to cook and he later became a great pastry cook at Weaver's Grill in Knoxville. He said the Johnsons treated him like one of their own.

"He was a fine master, and I never could understand why he was impeached," William said. "I nursed him and was with him until he died in 1875. During his last 10 days, I always slept in his room as I had done when I was younger."

Liz, Dolly's daughter, moved to Knoxville by 1900 with her husband and nine children.

Andrew Johnson's Evolving Attitudes About Slavery

Andrew Johnson worked hard to defend the Constitution. Originally, he believed in gradual emancipation, rather than immediate. He thought immediate emancipation would bring rebellion against the white race, preventing racial harmony.

His Gag Resolution Speech before Congress on January 31, 1844, demonstrates that he believed, "... that the black race of Africa were inferior to the white man in point of intellect - better calculated in physical structure to undergo drudgery and hardship ..."

However, by 1864, he was for immediate emancipation, proclaiming freedom for all Tennessee slaves. In February of 1865, he supported a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery in Tennessee. Later that year, as President, he strongly supported ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which abolished slavery nationwide.

Once the slaves were freed, he believed they should be included in the American political system as soon as possible. Johnson believed in immediate but qualified black voting rights for those educated in the duties of citizenship. He wanted immediate voting rights for all literate blacks that owned property. Once the rest were educated on citizenship, they could vote. The goal was full black voting rights.

In Andrew Johnson's speeches, his evolving attitudes are evident. Twenty years after his Gag Resolution Speech, on January 8, 1864, during a speech in Nashville he said, "Slavery is the cancer upon the body politic, which must be rooted out before perfect health can be restored." In the same speech he said, "I have owned slaves ... They were confiscated and sold; yet two of them ran away from the Rebel dominions and came here to me. I hired them - made a bargain with them for their labor, and thus recognized their freedom ... Now if any of you are slaveowners, I advise you to go and do likewise, while you have a chance."

Freeing of his Slaves

On August 8, 1863, Andrew Johnson, then-military governor of Tennessee, freed his personal slaves.

Johnson's wife Eliza reported the news. "One day Mrs. Johnson called us all in and said we were free now," William recalled. "She said we were free to go or we could stay if we wanted to. We all stayed."

Emancipating Tennessee Slaves

On October 24, 1864, a little more than a year after he had freed his own slaves, Johnson proclaimed freedom for all Tennessee slaves.

"I, Andrew Johnson, do hereby proclaim freedom, full broad, and unconditional, to every man in Tennessee. I invoke the colored people to be orderly and law-abiding, but at the same time let them assert their rights, and if traitors and ruffians attack them, while in the discharge of their duties, let them defend themselves as all men have a right to do."

On February 25, 1865 the African-Americans of Nashville presented him with a gold watch in recognition of his "untiring energy in the cause of freedom."

Later that same day, he issued a proclamation certifying the ratification of the state constitution to end slavery in Tennessee forever.

The 8th of August Celebration

Today, the 8th of August is not only commemorated in Greeneville, but in other communities throughout the region. As early as the 1920s there were great celebrations in Knoxville at Chilhowee Park involving thousands of participants. This was the only day of the year that the park was open to African-Americans.

In past celebrations great excursions took place. An August 9, 1888 Knoxville, Tennessee newspaper article mentions, "Some 200 Negroes returning at East Tennessee Depot from an excursion to Greeneville."

Another newspaper in 1871 tells how "the colored people of Greeneville had a celebration at that place yesterday ... they were addressed by ex-President Johnson ... President Johnson went out about 11 o'clock in a two-

horse buggy in company with several other gentlemen. The procession commenced moving ... to Tusculum College, near which the speaking and picnic exercises were held."

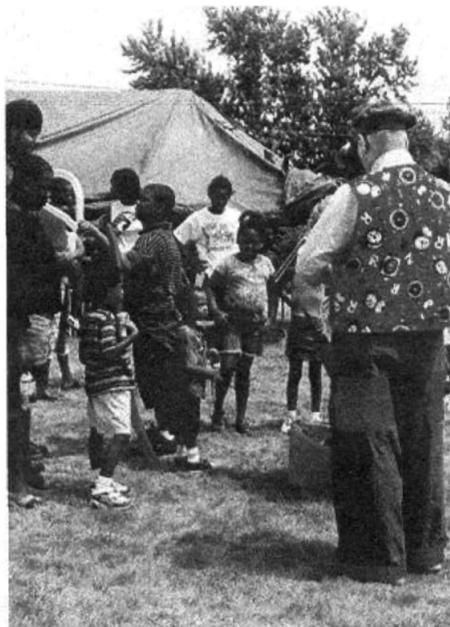
Since those days, the celebrations have continued. Recent festivities held in Greeneville have included picnics, concerts, card game tournaments and dancing.

Sometimes it is a two-day event, with a dance being held the Friday night closest to the 8th and the rest of the activities taking place the next day.

However it is chosen to be celebrated, August 8th is a very important day in the region's history.



Photographs of the 1986 "8th of August Celebration" in Greeneville, Tennessee



Photographs of the 2002 "8th of August Celebration" in Greeneville, Tennessee