

William Johnson House

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natchez National Historical Park
Mississippi



The “Barber of Natchez”



In the mid-1800s, the commercial district of antebellum Natchez bustled with activity. The sounds of carriages, villagers, steamboats, and livestock created a constant clamor. Streets that were alternately muddy or dusty were lined with hotels, churches, shops, and houses. The town was peopled by about 3,000 whites, 1,600 black slaves, and 200 free blacks who were mostly mulatto (mixed-race). Prominent among the free people of color was William Johnson, who owned a brick-structured building on State Street, which contained both rented retail shop space and the family’s home. William Johnson, born a slave, was freed at age eleven and became a successful businessman, slaveholder, and diarist during the heyday of the cotton kingdom economic boom. Although Johnson reaped the material benefits of his economic success, he still walked a fine line between the full rights of a white citizen and the bondage of slavery.

From Slave to Master

In 1809, William Johnson was born the son of a mulatto slave woman in Natchez. At the age of eleven, William was emancipated by his white slave owner, also named William Johnson, who is presumed to be his father. The boy’s mother Amy and sister Adelia had been freed at an earlier date. James Miller, a free black barber and husband to Adelia, trained young William as an apprentice.

Following completion of his training, Johnson purchased his first barbershop in Natchez in 1830. He would eventually own and operate three barbershops and a bath house in the city. Clients

received services from Johnson himself, from free blacks hired by Johnson, from apprentices, and from slaves owned by Johnson.

State laws concerning property ownership did not prohibit any free person from owning slaves, even if that person had formerly been a slave. Slave ownership was a signal of economic and social status. By reaching a certain level of financial success, Johnson was able to purchase slaves and profit from slave labor in his business, in his farmlands, and in his family’s home. By the 1840s, he had acquired substantial land holdings and established himself as a farmer as well as an urban businessman.

A Record of Daily Life

The diaries of William Johnson cover sixteen years of his life beginning in 1835 and ending with his death in 1851. In addition to managing his business affairs, Johnson spent free time enjoying hunting and fishing trips, buying and selling goods at local auctions, gambling at horse races, and raising his family. All of these activities provided opportunities for entries into Johnson’s journals.

Reports of parades, fires, natural disasters, and political rallies nestle among the humdrum accounts of business and jottings of daily events. In his diaries, Johnson also spins lively tales of fistfights, horse races, and town gossip. He creates comical characterizations of local townsfolk sometimes identified only as “Mr. McA,” “the Dutchman,” or even “the Snob.”

Personal Reflections

Little in William Johnson’s diary provides the reader with insight into his personal feelings about warm family relationships, why he wrote a diary, or even his thoughts about slavery or race. An exception is Johnson’s discourse about “poor Steven,” a young, alcoholic slave who caused Johnson considerable strife. Steven’s disorderly behavior and frequent escapes caused Johnson to become increasingly harsh in doling out punishments. Eventually, under much distress,

Johnson sold Steven. His diary entry about the matter reveals Johnson’s conflicted feelings:

I rested bad Last night. I had much Care On my mind, the night appeared very Long—I got up this morning early and took Steven with me down to the Ferry Boat and gave him up to the Overseer of Young & Cannon. . . I felt hurt but Liquor is the Cause of his troubles; I would not have parted with Him if he had Only have let Liquor alone but he Cannot do it I believe.

January 1, 1844

The Johnson House

William Johnson constructed a three-story brick structure on his mother-in-law's State Street property after an 1840 tornado destroyed much of downtown Natchez. In March 1841, Johnson moved his family into their new home upstairs above the commercial space at street level.

The Johnsons had a large household including William and his wife Ann, his mother-in-law Harriet Battles, ten growing children, and a handful of house slaves. Behind the home stood a two-story dependency (no longer standing), which probably contained the family kitchen and dining rooms, as well as quarters for the slaves. The current kitchen building was built by Johnson's children in the 1890s.

The Death of William Johnson

In early 1851, Johnson brought surveyors to determine the boundary of his property at Ellis Cliffs south of Natchez. His neighbor Baylor Winn, who had been selling timber from the disputed area, was displeased with the survey and threatened Johnson on several occasions. Johnson filed suit against Winn and the two agreed on a settlement before the case went to trial; however, on June 16, 1851 Baylor Winn ambushed William

Johnson and shot him in the back, fatally wounding him. Prior to his death the next morning, he identified his murderer and authorities arrested Winn. Under Mississippi law, a black man, slave or free, could not testify in court against a white man, and the only witnesses to the crime were his son, a slave, and a mulatto boy. After three mistrials in the attempt to prove Baylor Winn was mulatto, he was freed two years after the crime.

Johnson's Story Lives On

Even though William Johnson is no longer living, his life, as well as the rich history of Natchez during the heyday of the cotton kingdom lives on through his carefully preserved diaries located at Louisiana State University and through the Johnson family home preserved in Natchez.

The diaries were preserved by Johnson's descendants in the family home on State Street for decades. Finally, LSU purchased the diaries in 1938 and published them in 1951, allowing a rare glimpse into the life of a free person of color through his own words. In addition to his diaries,

a collection of family photos, business papers, account books, sheet music, books, and periodicals are preserved at the university.

In 1976, the house was purchased from the Johnson family heirs by the Preservation Society of Ellicott Hill, who performed initial preservation and archeological study. The National Park Service acquired the Johnson property and the adjacent McCallum residence in 1990. The National Park Service conducted extensive historical research into the construction and original finishes as a guide to the restoration of the structure.

Your Visit to the William Johnson House

The William Johnson House site features a visitor center, public restrooms, and a first-floor exhibit room with interactive programs and universally accessible displays. The wheelchair-accessible second-floor living quarters are restored and furnished with many of the Johnson family's original pieces.

Special group and education tours can be arranged by appointment.

Hours: Open daily, 9 am to 5 pm
Closed, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day
Free Admission

Contact Information:
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William Johnson House Site
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