
Tanner, Alethia

(?-1864),

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.37986>

Published in print: 15 March 2013

Published online: 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

grocer and community leader, was born Alethia Browning in the late eighteenth century in Maryland to parents whose names are unknown. No information is available about her early life. Referred to alternatively as Aletha, Lithe, Lethee, or, most commonly, Lethe, Browning grew up enslaved in southern Maryland and first appears in the historical record at the time of her manumission by Joseph Daugherty in Washington, D.C. In July 1810 Daugherty had paid Rachel Pratt of Prince George's County, Maryland, \$275 for Browning, manumitting her four days later "for value received and other good causes" (Provine, 154). Subsequent histories refer to the \$275 payment to Pratt as a deposit toward the sum of \$1,400 that the white-woman demanded in return for Browning's freedom. Browning made the payments herself with money earned through independent work in Washington, D.C.

Rachel Pratt, the mother of the Maryland governor and U.S. senator Thomas George Pratt, also owned Browning's two sisters, Laurana and Sophia Browning, their children, and grandchildren. Sophia Browning ran a market stand in Alexandria, Virginia. She saved over \$400, enough money to purchase the freedom of her husband, George F. Bell, who was enslaved on a neighboring estate. Bell in turn purchased his wife's freedom for five dollars in 1809 and the couple worked over the next several years to free their remaining children from Pratt. In 1807 Bell and three other former slaves established the first school for black children in Washington.

Perhaps drawing inspiration from the success of her sister Sophia, Alethia Browning opened her own grocery stand in the District of Columbia while still enslaved by Pratt. The stand earned her the money necessary to purchase her own freedom. Situated on the periphery of the President's Park (later Lafayette Square), the stand's central location and proximity to the White House also allowed her to forge connections with the capital's elite. Tradition cites Thomas Jefferson as both a customer and sometime employer of Tanner during his tenure at the White House, and Senator Richard M. Johnson served as a witness for her manumission of her sister and nephews. Most importantly, the business allowed Browning to achieve the financial wherewithal needed to rescue over twenty people from enslavement.

At some point following her emancipation, Browning apparently married and took the surname Tanner. City directories from the 1860s listed her as the widow of Jeremiah, but no further information exists about her husband. It does not appear that she had any children.

Tanner began the process of emancipating her family about fifteen years after her own manumission. She began by purchasing the freedom of her older sister Laurana Browning Cook and her children and grandchildren. It took Tanner over a decade to complete the purchase of the entire Cook family. In 1826 she paid Rachel Pratt \$1,450 for Laurana Cook and five of her children. Two years later she

purchased the remaining Cook family, paying, according to some estimates, a total of approximately \$5,300 for her sister, her ten children, and five grandchildren. Between 1845 and 1846 Tanner also procured the freedom of at least thirteen other individuals between the ages of one and forty, including a number of her neighbors, Lotty Riggs and her four children, Charlotte Davis, and John Butler, who became a prominent Methodist minister.

Washington's population of free blacks in the early nineteenth century was an unusually resilient and cohesive community that built businesses, churches, and schools in the developing city. Having grown from 2,549 in 1810 to 11,131 by 1860, the city's free black population far outpaced the number of slaves in the city. The opportunities available to Tanner in Washington allowed her to continue her efforts on behalf of her family in the years following their emancipation.

The Cooks in particular emerged as one of Washington's most successful and respected families. Tanner paid twelve and a half cents per month for her nephew John Francis Cook Sr. to attend the Columbia Institute. In 1834 Cook assumed leadership of the school (later called Union Seminary), which eventually became the city's largest black school. Cook became a pioneering Washington, D.C., clergyman. After his death in 1855 Cook's sons continued the direction of the Union Seminary; one son, George F. T. Cook, eventually became superintendent of Colored Public Schools of Washington and Georgetown, a position he held from 1868 to 1900. John Francis Cook Jr. became a prominent businessman and public official.

Tanner continued to operate her grocery until at least 1853, when she last appeared in the city directories under that occupation. A mainstay of her community, Tanner became a founding member of the Union Bethel Church (later the Metropolitan AME Church), a church organized by slaves and former slaves in Washington, and her involvement in African Methodism earned her reverence as “the mother of the Church.” She and brother-in-law George Bell eventually rescued the church from foreclosure, providing personal backing to pay for the property when it was put up for auction.

At least as early as 1847 Tanner owned a frame house located near the White House on the corner of Fourteenth and H Streets, N.W., where by 1850 she resided with Henrietta Reed, listed in that year's census as an eleven-year-old mulatto. The 1860 census suggests that Reed probably remained with Tanner for an extended period—it lists an unnamed person between ages ten and twenty-four as a member of Tanner's household. This individual may be the same Henrietta who later married Tanner's nephew Thomas Cook.

Tanner composed a will on 15 May 1847. The document's shaky signature suggests that she could at the very least write her name. She bequeathed her house, along with her bed and bedding, to Thomas Cook. By the time of her death in 1864 she had outlived the two executors of her will, John Francis Cook Sr. and Francis Dutcher. Her grandnephew John F. Cook Jr. filed the will; he and his brother Joseph Tanner Cook inherited the remainder of Tanner's estate. Two years following Tanner's death, Washington's commissioner of education, Henry Bernard, remembered her in a report to the U.S. Congress. In addressing the state of African American education in the District of Columbia, Bernard hailed Tanner as a woman “whose force of character and philanthropy gave her remarkable prominence here and elsewhere among her race, who commanded the respect of all who knew her” (Bernard, *Report on Schools of the Colored Population*, House Ex. Doc 315, 41st Congress, 2nd Session (1869–70), 197).

Further Reading

The papers of the Cook family are held by the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Corrigan, Mary Beth. "The Ties that Bind: The Pursuit of Community and Freedom among Slaves and Free Blacks in the District of Columbia." in *Southern City, National Ambition*, ed. Howard Gillette (1995).

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See also

Cook, George F. T. <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-35537>>

Cook, John Francis <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-35233>>