
Snowden, John Baptist

(14 May 1801–8 Sept. 1885),

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minister and author, was born a slave in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, the son of Fanny and Nathan Snowden, slaves belonging to Nicolas Harden and Ely Dorsey, respectively. John's maternal grandmother, Sarah Minty Barrikee, was stolen from a coastal African village in Guinea in 1767 or 1768. There she had a husband and child whom she never saw again. The Hardens were Catholic and introduced her to Christianity through their Catholic faith. Sarah regaled her children and grandchildren with stories about Africa and the traditions of her people until her death in 1823 or 1824. Thomas Collier, a white Englishman, was John's maternal grandfather. Family lore has it that only the anti-miscegenation laws of the period prevented them from marrying. Little is known of John's paternal lineage except that his paternal grandfather was a slave named John Snowden and is therefore responsible for the family name.

Fanny Snowden was a religious woman who had nine children, of whom John was the seventh. She died in 1815 after giving birth to John's youngest sister. John's father Nathan, as the property of Ely Dorsey, lived seven miles away in Elkridge Landing. Despite the distance and the fact that he did not share Fanny's religious convictions, Nathan managed to be a frequent presence in John's life until he died shortly after John's mother.

As a child Snowden was big and strong for his age and full of spirited vitality tempered by religious mores that fostered an uncritical acceptance of the institution of slavery as reflecting God's will and the natural order of things. Hence in his autobiography, *From Whence Cometh* (1980), which traces three generations of the Snowden family, Snowden stated with pride, "I was obedient to my owner, always ready to-obey their commands" (Snowden, 18). Yet he painfully recalled his frostbitten feet for lack of shoes during the winters of his youth, the coarseness of his clothing that grated on his body, and the unremitting work that consumed most of his days. Serious and solitary, Snowden preferred to perform tasks that would leave him alone with his thoughts rather than in the company of other slaves or under the watchful eye of a master or overseer.

Snowden had five owners during his period of bondage. He saw one sister sold off to New Orleans, and the threat of a similar fate helped convince slaves in border states like Maryland that their lot was far better than that of slaves on large cotton and tobacco plantations deeper in the South. Most of Snowden's owners were related by birth or marriage, and he was transferred from one owner to another by will or dowry. As a testament to his exceptional behavior and high moral character, Snowden related that he was "never whipped save once by any of my owners"—though he later came to regard slavery as "a great crime, one that man should give account of in the day of judgment" (Snowden, 25).

In 1820 Snowden heard several sermons that moved him profoundly, and in April of that year, while felling trees in the woods, he had a conversion experience that permanently changed his life. He claimed that in 1821 he had a vision similar to that of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah in which God called him to preach. He began to pursue this vocation by first becoming a Methodist exhorter, a person who expounded on scripture and rallied the devout. In 1826 he delivered an inspiring sermon before a competency panel at the Methodist Quarterly Conference. His oration was based almost entirely on verses he had learned by heart because he could not yet read. The deciding clerics were so impressed that they granted Snowden a license to preach, and his reputation as a minister grew.

Like many other slaveholders, Elisha Bennet's wife, the mistress of the plantation, did not approve of Methodist theology and practices that stressed the potential of human perfection (many were in fact called "perfectionists") through faith, the strict moral disciplines of abstinence from alcohol and smoking, or the egalitarian and socially radical belief in universal salvation without regard to race—doctrines that often were taught at interracial and spirit-filled camp meetings. In an effort to break Snowden's faith, the mistress treated him harshly and went so far as to strip him of his bed covering to force him to renounce his belief. Snowden described her as being "the worst thing the devil ever made," a remark uncharacteristic of his general penchant for understatement, from which one can infer that she also prohibited him from preaching or receiving additional religious instruction. However, Snowden was so transformed by his epiphany that he kept his faith a secret rather than renounce it and defiantly continued his religious education on his own.

In a manner reminiscent of Maryland's most famous ex-slave, Frederick Douglass, Snowden achieved literacy by observing the white children who sometimes studied in his presence. They were often amused and encouraged by his interest and in this way became unwitting tutors. Also like Douglass, Snowden used what little money he could earn independent of his master to pay white children to explain things he did not understand and to purchase the books that he could not legally own. Although it was against the law to teach a slave to read or write, Catherine Lynch surreptitiously schooled Snowden for a small fee because she believed that he wanted to become literate in order to read the Bible. It was only after he learned to read the Bible for himself that Jesus's story took definite shape in his mind.

Belying his rather benign description of slavery, Snowden refused to marry while he was a slave or to marry a woman who was still in bondage because such a family would be at the mercy of unpredictable masters. Instead he decided to earn enough money to purchase his own freedom. Snowden worked without stint weaving baskets and hickory brooms, distilling peppermint drops, and trapping partridges, all of which he could sell for a few cents each. In December 1830 Bennett told Snowden that he was worth \$1,000, far more than Snowden had saved. But realizing that Snowden was so intent on being free that he might run away if he had no hope of emancipating himself and recognizing that Snowden had served him well and might continue to do so for a short while longer, Bennett agreed to free Snowden for \$200 and ten additional months of work.

In May 1831 Snowden married Margaret Coone, who had been born a slave in Westminster, Carroll County, Maryland, in 1809. When her German owner, Grand Adams, died, Margaret and her mother were manumitted and were left all the property and money that was not bequeathed to the Catholic Church. Even though they were later defrauded of most of their inheritance, Margaret was a remarkable woman who had an excellent business sense, was a well-respected nurse and midwife in her community, and was fluent in German, Pennsylvania Dutch, and English. In addition Snowden

boasted that Margaret could “shear the sheep, card the wool, spin the yarn, and knit the socks. She could plow the ground, sow the flaxseed, pull the flax, thresh it, put it out to rot, break the flax, and spin it” (Snowden, 33–34). They had fourteen children, six of whom preceded them in death.

Snowden had wanted to raise his family in Philadelphia, where free people of color had greater opportunities for education and economic advancement. But he and Margaret had deep roots in Maryland, and in his sermons Snowden routinely associated sin and debauchery with city life while extolling the virtues of tilling the soil and working by the sweat of one's brow. Most of their children were homeschooled. Their son Thomas Snowden eventually earned degrees from Howard University and Boston University before becoming the first black professor of theology at Centenary Biblical Institute, now Morgan State University.

John Snowden was the only black Methodist minister in western Maryland until Bishop Levi Scott, with Snowden, formed the Washington Conference in 1864 as a body that would organize and advocate for black Methodists within the predominately white Methodist Episcopal Church. By this time large numbers of black Methodists were so frustrated with the slow rate of ordaining black ministers and the prevalence of subtle and overt forms of racism that they were leaving the church en masse to join the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church founded by Richard Allen in 1816. Snowden was one of those stoic black ministers who remained within the Methodist Episcopal Church. He served it for over forty years; for twelve years he worked a circuit of seven congregations, which sometimes required him to walk as far as thirty miles to make engagements.

Snowden died at the age of eighty-four of what was probably pneumonia. He never gained fame or acquired great wealth, but because he wrote a detailed memoir that was later published by his grandson, Houston D. Snowden, he provided an important portrait of black faith, fortitude, and self-determination during a bleak period in U.S. history.

Further Reading:

Snowden, John Baptist. *From Whence Cometh, 1767–1977* (1980).

Obituaries:

Democratic Advocate and American Sentinel, Sept. 1885.

See also

Allen, Richard <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36060>>

Douglass, Frederick <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34351>>

