
Davis, Noah

(Mar. 1804--?),

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slave, shoemaker, and pastor, was born in Madison County, Virginia, to John and Jane Davis, slaves belonging to Robert Patten, a wealthy merchant and mill owner. Both of Davis's parents were devout Baptists who instilled in Davis a strong relationship to the church.

By Davis's account, Patten was a comparatively fair master who valued his slaves and who accorded John Davis many privileges, among them the ability to raise livestock and to keep his children with him until they were old enough to go into trade. John Davis was the head miller at Patten's merchant mill located on Crooked Run, a stream between Madison and Culpeper County. He was able to read and figure, but he could not write.

When Noah Davis was about twelve, Patten sold his mill and emancipated Davis's mother and father. Davis's family moved to one of Patten's farms near Stevensburg. In 1818, at the age of fourteen, Davis was apprenticed to Thomas Wright, a boot- and shoemaker who lived in Fredericksburg, about fifty miles from Davis's home. Davis's older brother was also apprenticed to Wright, and his presence helped assuage some of Davis's homesickness.

For the first year of his apprenticeship, Davis helped Mrs. Wright in the house and kitchen, as was required of black apprentices. In his second year Davis entered the shop. He picked up drinking from the other shoemakers but was an honest and hard worker who enjoyed the esteem of both Mr. and Mrs. Wright.

In addition to learning the shoemaking business, Davis learned how to write. He had already learned the alphabet from his father and now began to copy the names of customers written on the lining of boots and shoes. Davis also became increasingly religious. He had what he described as a conversion experience and was baptized at the Baptist church in Fredericksburg on 19 September 1831. He was subsequently elected a deacon of the church and married another recently converted slave, with whom he eventually had nine children.

In an attempt to pursue his religious calling, Davis approached Patten to purchase his freedom. Patten agreed, fixing a price of five hundred dollars. In July 1845, Davis traveled to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other northern cities to raise his purchase price. After four months he returned to Fredericksburg with only one hundred fifty dollars. Discouraged, Davis returned to shoemaking but was then unexpectedly invited to Baltimore to serve as a Baptist missionary to the African American community. Leaving his wife and seven small children, Davis accepted the offer and, with the help of his white Baptist friends, secured an appointment as missionary of the Domestic Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

While in Baltimore, Davis raised, through subscriptions and loans, the money to purchase his wife and two of his children. He worked steadily to increase the city's small Baptist population, establishing a church and a Sunday school. In 1855 the church moved to a new building and was christened the Saratoga Street African Baptist Church.

Despite the increased financial burden of his church's new facilities, Davis managed to purchase the freedom of two more of his children. To help raise the money to free his last three children, Davis traveled to Baptist churches in Providence and New York to plead his case in front of their congregations. In 1859 he also published a slave narrative entitled *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man, Written by Himself, at the Age of Fifty-Four*. In its conclusion Davis voiced his hope that by "making a book" he may not only raise the funds to free his children but also to discharge the heavy debt incurred by his church. Appended to the end of the narrative was one of Davis's sermons.

Davis's narrative is similar to that of Moses Grandy in its function as a fund-raising device to purchase enslaved family members. Unlike other slave narratives, however, Davis's work is unusual for its conspicuous absence of scenes of violence. Robert Patten and the Wrights are good masters, and Davis does not appear to endure or even witness whippings or starvation. The presence of the concluding sermon also suggests the narrative's function as religious document, in keeping with Davis's position as a Baptist missionary. It has been noted that Davis's account of his conversion experience is reminiscent of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. As such, his work is a notable example of the intersection between spiritual autobiography and the slave narrative.

Further Reading

Davis, Noah. *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man, Written by Himself, at the Age of Fifty-Four* (1859)

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography 1760-1865* (1986)

Foster, Frances Smith. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (1979).

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See also

Grandy, Moses <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-35670>>