

## Johnson, William Isaac

(14 Feb. 1840–1 Jan. 1938) United States Colored Troops soldier, bricklayer, and building contractor, Brian Neumann

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was born into slavery in Albemarle County, Virginia, to unknown parents. His owners were Anderson and Nancy Johnson, who probably moved him and his family to Goochland County in the 1840s. Anderson put him to work before he turned ten years old, forcing him to tend the chickens, sheep, and cows. When he was a teenager, Anderson trained him as a butler and hired him out to a man in Richmond.

Decades later Johnson still vividly remembered the violence of slavery. Speaking to a Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewer in 1937, he described Anderson beating his slaves, placing them in shackles, and selling them into the Deep South if they tried to escape. Johnson, however, also emphasized Black agency and resistance. He recalled his fellow slaves refusing to work, hiding in the woods to avoid being hired out, and forging slave passes to help others escape from bondage.

Anderson died in October 1860. When the Civil War began, Anderson's four sons enlisted in the Confederate Army, leaving Johnson in "complete charge of the plantation house." Then, in January 1863, one of Anderson's sons brought Johnson to the front lines as a "servant and horseman." Johnson heard news of the Emancipation Proclamation soon afterward and "wondered whether young master had taken me away in the army to keep the Yankees from getting me" (Perdue, p. 167). Decades later he recalled the drudgery of camp life, as Confederates forced him to dig trenches, polish boots, clean horses, and care for wounded soldiers.

In July 1864, when his "young master" took part in General Jubal Early's attack on Washington, D.C., Johnson had an opportunity to speak with several captured Union soldiers. The prisoners confirmed the news of emancipation and encouraged Johnson to flee to Union lines. While pretending to run an errand, Johnson and several other men escaped through Confederate picket lines to Washington, D.C. Union officials sent him to Boston, Massachusetts, where he enrolled in the quartermaster corps of General Benjamin Butler's army. He participated in the Siege of Petersburg but "never took part in any active fighting 'cause I was always busy behind the lines keeping the rations in readiness" (WPA Slave Narrative, 28 May 1938). He mustered out in Washington, D.C. around October 1865 and returned to Goochland County to reunite with his family.

Johnson settled in Richmond, Virginia, in January 1866 and found work as a good carrier at Maynard's Brickyard. He married Hannah L. Hardaway around 1880, and they had six children together: Carrie Belle, Mary, Helen, Rosalie, Alice, and William. Their first child, Carrie Belle, died in November 1881 at the age of three. Johnson became foreman of the Redford Brick Company in 1890, and in 1907 he began his own contracting business. He also played an active role in Richmond's social and religious life. He became a member of the First Baptist Church in May 1870 and joined the Freemasons, the Order of Odd Fellows, and the Good Samaritans in the late 1870s.

Johnson was committed to education and determined to give his children a better life. He taught himself to read and worked hard to ensure that his children received college educations. He also helped educate his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He lost his leg in 1932 after suffering from an infection, and the amputation forced him to finally retire. His WPA interviewer described him as an “affluent-retired building contractor” who “faces the future with strength, vigor, and alert mind.” His wife Hannah passed away on 14 December 1933, and he died of arteriosclerosis in Richmond four years later, on 1 January 1938.

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## Bibliography

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