

Johnson, Ann Battles

(1815–20 Aug. 1866),

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free woman of color, property owner, and slaveholder in Natchez, Mississippi, was born enslaved. Her mother, Harriet Battles, was an enslaved mixed-race woman. It is not clear who Ann's father was, although presumably it was a white man due to Ann's racial classification as “mulatto.” It is not readily evident, however, that it was Gabriel Tichenor, the white man who claimed ownership of mother and daughter. In 1822 Tichenor crossed the Mississippi River to Concordia Parish, Louisiana, and manumitted Harriet when she was thirty years old. Because of the laws of Louisiana, the children of freed people could not themselves be freed until they too reached age thirty. Four years after Harriet's manumission, Tichenor navigated around that issue by transporting Harriet and the eleven-year-old Ann to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he had their free papers duly recorded. The mother and daughter then returned to Mississippi as free people of color. Tichenor and his wife then sold Harriet a city lot in Natchez for two dollars.

In approximately 1829 fourteen-year-old Ann began a romantic involvement with the twenty-year-old free barber of color William Johnson, whom she would eventually marry. After a five-year period of courtship punctuated by the two regularly attending the theater together as well as other public events, they were married on 21 April 1835. At the time of their nuptials William was the owner of Natchez's most popular barbershop, catering primarily to white patrons, including members of the wealthy and powerful plantocracy. He also held several thousand dollars in property as well as a few slaves.

Following the year of their marriage Ann and William became parents. Their first son, William Jr., was born on 10 January 1836. They would have nine additional surviving children, five boys and four girls: Richard, Byron, Anna, Alice, Catharine, Eugenia, Louis, Josephine, and Clarence. The family was a central component of Natchez's community of color, eventually integrating into the elite segment of that population.

In spite of the fact that both Ann and William were primarily white (perhaps as much as seven-eighths) they were recognized as free people of color and subject to the many constraints under which free blacks lived. For example, when Ann traveled to New Orleans in July 1842 the purpose of her trip was to baptize some of her children and have them formally recorded in that city as free people at St. Louis Cathedral. Although their children were recognized as free in Natchez, perhaps conditions necessitated one additional step for peace of mind. During this journey Ann, as a free woman of color, would have had to contend with second-class accommodations had it not been for the intervention of her husband. She would not have

been able to take her meals with white women and would probably have had to sleep on the floor. But William persuaded the captain to provide a stateroom for Ann and the children she brought with her to New Orleans. The remaining children were all similarly baptized in 1856.

Education was an essential value that Ann inculcated within her family. Although her mother appears to have been illiterate, Ann Johnson obtained the ability to read and write at some point in her early life. She and William recognized that literacy was crucial to their placement within the community and afforded that opportunity to their children by personally teaching them, hiring private tutors, and sending some of the children to schools in New Orleans. The Johnson children studied reading, writing, mathematics, geography, and literature. Additionally the boys learned the barbering trade from their father and Ann instructed her daughters in music as well as domestic skills like sewing. Ann's daughters Anna and Catharine utilized this education by eventually becoming schoolteachers.

Typical of women in affluent households, Ann managed domestic duties and also tended to business matters. Early in her marriage, prior to experiencing the prosperity that eventually characterized their household, Ann performed housekeeping chores. She also kept a garden stocked with fresh produce such as tomatoes, squash, beans, and okra. The cows, pigs, and chickens she maintained in pens and coops near the house allowed the family to produce their own meat, eggs, and dairy products. Ann sold the surplus to supplement the household income. She and her daughters were apt seamstresses and prolific producers of bonnets, scarves, hoods, caps, and the like, which they sold through the enslaved members of the household. Gradually she relegated most of her household tasks to the enslaved individuals and focused on the managerial aspects of the household.

The ownership of slaves guaranteed the family's hierarchical position within the free black community. During his lifetime William held at least thirty slaves; and after his murder in 1851 at age forty-two Ann inherited the remainder of them. These enslaved people performed a variety of tasks within the household: cooking, cleaning, working at the family's cotton plantation, Hard Scrabble, hawking Ann's handmade goods and produce on Natchez's streets, and hiring themselves out to others. Although the family engaged in slave ownership for economic reasons, there were other compelling reasons to enslave a few members of the household. In 1840 Ann purchased her cousin, Julia, and two daughters with the future plan to free them, which was difficult because of Mississippi's restrictive policy of manumission.

Ann Battles Johnson died in 1866 of intermittent fever. She had been the head of the family since William's murder in 1851 and had managed it well. She bequeathed to her children William's barbershop, their brick house on State Street, and some rental property, totaling thousands of dollars. After her death a friend writing to Ann's mother, Harriet, tried to comfort her by stating, "You know how much Anne leaned upon & looked up to you as her mainstay & had you been removed from her, how she would have suffered & how lost she would have been" (Gould, 41). No doubt Ann's death left a similar legacy to her own children.

Further Reading

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See also

Johnson, William <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-38351>>