

“Once the Slave of Thomas Jefferson”

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The Rev. Mr. Fossett, of Cincinnati, Recalls the Days When Men Came from the Ends of the Earth to Consult ‘the Sage of Monticello’ — Reminiscences of Jefferson, Lafayette, Madison and Monroe.

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THE REV. PETER F. FOSSETT, of this city, is probably the last surviving slave of Thomas Jefferson. Mr. Fossett is a very intelligent colored man. He is eighty-three years old and lives at No. 313 Stone street in a comfortable, well furnished and well provided home. It was there that a Sunday World reporter found the kindly old gentleman to-day, well preserved in mind and body, spending the winter of his days in comfort and happiness. He is held in great regard by colored people and is loved by all the white ministers of Cincinnati, who know him well and esteem him highly.

Recently Mr. Fossett was invited to deliver an address before the Cincinnati Baptist Ministers’ Association and in his speech he told the story of his early days, giving many reminiscences of the great founder of the Democratic party. In conversation with the Sunday World reporter he went into greater detail and chatted entertainingly about his life in “Old Virginy.” “I was born,” he said, “at Monticello, Jefferson’s beautiful Virginia home, on June 6, 1815, just before Waterloo. Jefferson was an ideal master. He was a democrat in practice as well as theory, was opposed to the slave trade, tried to keep it out of the Territories beyond the Ohio river and was in favor of freeing the slaves in Virginia. In 1787 he introduced that famous “Jefferson proviso” in Congress, prohibiting slavery in all the Northwestern Territory, comprising the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri. He had made all arrangements to free his slaves at his death by making three prizes of his property, &c.

‘I well remember the visit of Gen. Lafayette to Monticello. The whole place was in gala array in his honor. He was met at Red Gate and escorted to Monticello by the Jefferson Guards and the Virginia Militia. The latter consisted of all the school boys in the county, who had been drilled for the occasion, armed with sharp pointed sticks tipped with pikes. The meeting between Jefferson and Lafayette was most affectionate. They fell into each other’s arms with these words: “My dear Lafayette,” “My dear Jefferson,” and wept. “Mrs. Patsy Randolph, who had been Martha Ann Jefferson, received Lafayette with grace and dignity befitting a queen, welcoming him to the hospitality of the home of her father. They all listened to the addresses that followed. Even the slaves wept. A youth of eighteen made the address on behalf of the juvenile soldiers, and, I think, Gen. Chestin Cox, in behalf of the citizens. “The next day occurred the visit to the University, which had just been finished except the dome. There was a grand procession that day and the slaves had a holiday. First came the Jefferson Guards, then the carriage bearing Mr. Jefferson, with Gen. Lafayette on his right, with ex-President Monroe and Mr. Madison sitting opposite them. In the second carriage was Gen. Chestin Cox, President of the University Faculty. On his right sat George Washington Lafayette, son of the General,

and opposite them were Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the grandson of Mr. Jefferson, and Gen. Lavassor. Surrounding these two carriages were the Virginia Militia. "Thomas Jefferson Randolph was orator of the day, and there were addresses by all the great men present. "There was never such a time in Virginia as during the visit of Gen. Lafayette. Two years after this Mr. Jefferson died. Then began our troubles. We were scattered all over the country, never to meet each other again until we meet in another world. A peculiar fact about his house servants was that we were all related to one another, and as a matter of fact we did not need to know that we were slaves. As a boy I was not only brought up differently, but dressed unlike the plantation boys. My grandmother was free, and I remember the first suit she gave me. It was of blue nankeen cloth, red morocco hat and red morocco shoes. To complete this unique costume, my father added a silver watch. "At Monticello we always had the house full of company. Not only did Jefferson's own countrymen visit him, but people from all parts of Europe came to see his wonderful home. On the first floor was Mr. Jefferson's study, called the "green room." Here such men as Madison, Monroe and others were wont to discuss the problems of the day. I was too young to know much about these great men, but I remember [seeing?] them and being in the same house with them. "Mr. Madison used to come and stay for days with Mr. Jefferson. He was a very learned man, as was also Mr. Jefferson. He was a kindly looking old gentleman, and his coming looked for with pleasure by the older servants for he never left without leaving each of them a substantial reminder of his visit. "Mr. Monroe did not live as far from our home as Mr. Madison, and his visits were more frequent. While he was a wise and great man, and a friend of Mr. Jefferson, their companionship was not as close as that existing between Mr. Jefferson and Madison. He was more of a statesman than a scientist, while Madison and Jefferson were both. On the north terrace of Monticello was the telescope, and it was here that Madison and Jefferson spent a great deal of their time. One day while Mr. Jefferson was looking through his telescope to see how the work was progressing over at Pan Top, one of his plantations, he saw 500 soldiers, headed by Col. Tarleton, and led by a traitor whose name I have forgotten, coming up the north side of the mountain to capture him along with the Congress which was being held at Charlottesville. "He hastily called up his servants, told them to collect and hide the silver, and gathered his valuable papers. My mother's uncle saddled his horse and took him up to Carter's Mountain, where Mr. Jefferson hid in the hollow of an old tree. He had told his butler to hoist the flag over the dome of his home while the soldiers were there and to take it down when they were gone. This he did. My father's aunt hid the silver in the potato cellar. When the soldiers came up she was standing over the keyhole. The house was searched and nothing could be found. They came to her and with arms drawn demanded that she should tell them where the silver was. Then they turned their attention to the wine cellar, broke all the casks, and with their swords cut all the tops off the bottles of wine that stood on the shelves. The rare old wine that he sent to France for covered the floor to the depth of three steps. "They caroused around the place for about three hours, and one of the soldiers rode up into the house on his horse, and the beautiful floor of the music room, inlaid with gothic fret-work, still bore the prints of the horse's shoes when I left Monticello. "His summer residence, Poplar Forest, where he spent three months in each year, was a Mecca for all the great men of the world, and the Indians also. In those days they ran the wisest and best men for office, and not the most unscrupulous, as now. At 10 o'clock every day he went to the University and returned at

2 for dinner. Many times have I ordered his horse, a large chestnut bay, which bore the name of Eagle. As for the social enjoyment of the men of those days the people of this time do not begin to come up to it. Weddings, parties, barbecues and the like, even the slaves participated in. "As a master Jefferson was kind and indulgent. Under his management his slaves were seldom punished, except for stealing and fighting. They were tried for any offense as at court and allowed to make their own defense. The slave children were nursed until they were three years old, and left with their parents until thirteen. They were then sent to the overseers' wives to learn trades. Every male child's father received \$5 at its birth. "Jefferson was a man of sober habits, although his cellars were stocked with wines. No one ever saw him under the influence of liquor. His servants about the house were tasked. If you did your task well you were rewarded; if not, punished. Mrs. Randolph would not let any of the young ladies go anywhere with gentlemen with the exception of their brothers, unless a colored servant accompanied them. On July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson and Adams died. I was eleven years old.

'Sorrow came not only to the homes of two great men who had been such fast friends in life as Jefferson and Adams, but to the slaves of Thomas Jefferson. The story of my own life is like a fairy tale, and you would not believe me if I told to you the scenes enacted during my life of slavery. It passes through my mind like a dream. Born and reared as free, not knowing that I was a slave, then suddenly, at the death of Jefferson, put upon an auction block and sold to strangers. I then commenced an eventful life.

'I was sold to Col. John R. Jones. My father was freed by the Legislature of Virginia. At the request of Mr. Jefferson, my father made an agreement with Mr. Jones that when he was able to raise the amount that Col. Jones paid for me he would give me back to my father, and he also promised to let me learn the blacksmith trade with my father as soon as I was old enough. My father then made a bargain with two sons of Col. Jones—William Jones and James Lawrence Jones—to teach me. They attended the University of Virginia.

'Mr. Jefferson allowed his grandson to teach any of his slaves who desired to learn, and Lewis Randolph first taught me how to read. When I was sold to Col. Jones I took my books along with me. One day I was kneeling before the fireplace spelling the word "baker," when Col. Jones opened the door, and I shall never forget the scene as long as I live.

"What have you got there, sir?" were his words.

'I told him.

'If I ever catch you with a book in your hands, thirty-and-nine lashes on your bare back.'" He took the book and threw it into the fire, then called up his sons and told them that if they ever taught me they would receive the same punishment. But they helped me all they could, as did his daughter Ariadne.

‘Among my things was a copy-book that my father gave me, and which I kept hid in the bottom of my trunk. I used to get permission to take a bath, and by the dying embers I learned to write. The first copy was this sentence, “Art improves nature.”

‘Col. Jones, when he bought me, promised my father to let him have me when he could raise the money, but in 1833 he refused to let him have me on any conditions. Mrs. Jones declared that she would sooner part with one of her own children. They had become very attached to me, and then I was a very valuable servant, notwithstanding that all the time I was teaching all the people around me to read and write, and even venturing to write free passes and sending slaves away from their masters. Of course they did not know this, or they would not have thought me so valuable.

‘Amid these scenes it was during my stay with Col. Jones that I first saw my state as a sinner. The white Baptists where I lived had no church. They held services in the Court-House and sometimes in the Episcopal Church. The Baptist churches were all in the country near some creek convenient for baptizing. It was in these churches during the summer that they held three-day and ten-day meetings, at which many were converted, and here their greatest revivals took place.

‘It was during one of these meetings that I was convicted of my sins from a sermon preached by Cumberland George. I was converted at a two weeks’ meeting at Piney Grove. Mrs. Jones, my mistress, was called the mother of the Baptist church, and our house was the stopping place for all the preachers. It was here when they were holding these meetings that my eyes were opened.

‘I well remember the struggle they had in the great controversy with Alexander Campbell. Two eloquent young preachers—Lindsay Coleman and James G[]—the pride and hope of the Baptist denomination, took Campbell’s side, and tried to take the church from them. The people belonging to the church had a church meeting which lasted for a week, day and night. Every time a vote was taken it was a tie. If it had not been for that young hero, Robert Ryland, who was chaplain at the University of Virginia, they would have succeeded. At last Col. Nimrod Branham, the moderator, who was on the fence, gave the casting vote, and the regular Baptists retained possession of the church.

‘Col. Jones had by this time become very fond of me, and would not arrange any terms by which I could gain my freedom. He respected me, and would not let me see him take his “bitters.” He was surprised and pleased to find that I did not touch liquor. Being with and coming from such a family as Mr. Jefferson’s, I knew more than they did about many things. This also raised me in their esteem. My sister Isabel was also left a slave in Virginia. I wrote her a free pass, sent her to Boston, and made [an?] attempt to gain my own freedom. The first time [I fai?]led and had to return. My parents were here in Ohio and I wanted to be with them and be free, so I resolved to get free or die in the attempt. I started the second time, was caught, handcuffed, and taken back and carried to Richmond and put in jail. For the second time I was put up on the auction block and sold like a horse. But friends from among my master’s best friends bought me in and sent me to my father in Cincinnati, and I am here to-day.’

Concerning the taking of a life mask of Jefferson at Monticello, in 1825, Mr. Fossett said: "I never saw the bust made from this life mask, but I remember when the mask was taken. I was then ten years old. The man who took the mask covered Mr. Jefferson's head, shoulders, arms and body down to the waist with clay or plaster of some kind. He left holes for the nose and eyes. Somehow or other he left the plaster on too long and it got too hard. He had to take a chisel [] knock it off and when he got it off Mr. Jefferson [] greatly exhausted.

"The report got around that Mr. Jefferson had been killed, and there was the greatest excitement until we all saw Mr. Jefferson again alive and well. I see a magazine writer says there was no trouble about taking the life mask, but I know better, for I was there and remember well the excitement it caused everywhere."

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<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/slaves/memoir.html>