



*"Founders of Black History Month"*

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Free Negroes of Petersburg, Virginia

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## FREE NEGROES OF PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

The story of the free Negro in Petersburg, Virginia, is both interesting and valuable. It is the story of those who have toiled, who by their toil have become property owners, and who by their personal upright conduct have won the respect and good will of their neighbors. This story gives also the record of a few who have forged ahead in artistic and literary activity. These achievements become all the more remarkable and worth considering in that they were accomplished under difficulties far greater than those which Negroes in America face today.

The slave status was the normal condition of Negroes in the South from the early colonial period until emancipation in 1865. However, there grew up alongside the slave Negroes a class we are discussing here, the free Negroes. Throughout the slave states the rise from the status of slavery was effected in several ways. In Virginia, as in other states, the free Negroes came from five main sources: Children born of free colored parents; mulatto children born of free colored mothers; mulatto children born of white servants and colored men; children of free Negro and Indian mixed parentage; manumitted slaves. Manumission in turn was brought about in three ways: By act of the legislature, by last will and testament, or by deed of emancipation.<sup>1</sup> By far most of the free Negro class resulted from manumission. The mulatto class was usually the offspring of a white father and a slave mother, so that under the Anglo-Saxon rule of the offspring's following the condition of the mother, such mulattoes were born slaves and not free Negroes. In turn, however, frequently the subject of manumission was this very mulatto offspring, induced, no doubt, by benevolence or ties of affection in the white parent.

<sup>1</sup> Russell, *Free Negro in Virginia*, p. 40.

During the entire slavery period Petersburg not only had a relatively large slave population but also an equally large free Negro class. On the free Negro side it had relatively and absolutely more free Negroes than any other city or town in Virginia. With the exception of 1860, the United States Census reports show that the combined free Negro and slave population was always greater than the white. In 1790, when the average ratio of free Negroes to slaves and to whites in Tidewater, Virginia, was 1 to 18, in Petersburg the free Negroes constituted one fourth of the colored population of the town, and were to the whites as 1 to 4½. In this town of 3,000 people there were 310 free persons of color.<sup>2</sup> In 1810, according to a local census which showed a total population of 5,656, there were 2,161 slaves and 1,087 free Negroes. In 1830 the total population had increased to 8,322. Out of this number 2,850 persons were slaves while 2,032 were free Negroes. This class, then, constituted practically 25 per cent of the total population. This was the highest proportion reached by them. In 1850, out of a total population of 14,010, 4,729 were slaves and 2,616 were free. This number of the free people of color was 245 greater than that of Richmond, although the capital had about twice as many slaves and twice as great a combined population as Petersburg. Finally, in 1860, this town was the home of 3,164 free Negroes, 5,680 slaves, and a number of whites only slightly greater than the combined black population. Here particularly, then, one may seriously seek to study this as a typical free Negro community.

Before presenting any biographical narrative of the free Negroes of Petersburg it becomes necessary first to see them relative to their legal status and also to see them in their proper historical setting. At the outset it can be said that the position and possibilities of the free Negro ran parallel to that of his slave brother. During the period of patriarchal slavery, the treatment of the free Negro class,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

as well as the slave, was comparatively good. Later, during the period of cruel slavery, when the Negro, at least in the cotton Gulf States, was debased to the level of beasts, life became extremely hard for the slave while the free Negro, at the same time, came to be regarded as the pest of society. The free Negroes could neither vote nor hold office. They were not permitted to enter the militia nor to serve on juries. Like the slaves, they could not generally bear testimony against white persons. After 1831 they were prohibited from preaching. After 1838 they were not allowed to leave the state for education; and, of course, years before that time they had been legally deprived of the benefits of education. They were permitted to enter business and to own property, however; and their property was taxed.

As shown above, free Negroes in Petersburg were almost as numerous as slaves. Out of the 2,032 free Negroes in Petersburg in 1830, according to the findings of one investigator, 503 of them were classed as heads of families<sup>3</sup> and in turn, among these heads of families, 107 were themselves owners of slaves.<sup>4</sup> These slaves ranged in number from one to six. After some study of original sources, the records of the city of Petersburg, including in manuscript the minutes of the Hustings Court, proceedings of the Common Council, city ordinances, deed books, land books, marriage records, miscellaneous private documents, legislative petitions, and, in print, old newspapers and city directories, the writer has discovered a large number of well-to-do, self-respecting free Negroes. There were in particular some outstanding families. All of these persons represented a distinct asset to the town. In some instances, by reckoning from the present time, five and six generations of families may be traced, the descendants of some of whom still live in Petersburg.

It is informing at this point to note that for generations the persons herein referred to in many cases enjoyed a reg-

<sup>3</sup> Woodson, *Free Negro Heads of Families in 1830*.

<sup>4</sup> Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in 1830*.

ular family life, having been married according to law. In many instances, despite the laws against them at one time or another, they educated their children through private instructors and provided for their spiritual needs in churches of their own. These persons owned property and in general merited the respect of Petersburg's white citizens. In short, many of the free Negroes made a record for which their descendants may justly feel proud.

Just as Petersburg had its well-to-do white families, it had among the free people of color well-known families named Jarratt, Elebeck, Colson, McCrae, Brewer, Hamlin, Updike, Crowder, Gallee, Sampson, Jackson, Farley, Lively, Bass, Curl, Williams, Shields, Brown, Scott, Campbell, Stevens, King, Garnes, Berry, Diggs, Morgan, Clark, Tinsley, Smith, Shore, Freeman, Ellis, and many others. These people, along with the free Negroes in general, found employment as barbers, carpenters, bricklayers, liverymen, caterers, keepers of restaurants, shoemakers, fishermen and owners of boats on the Appomattox and James rivers. These occupations were the more important and more independent ones. There were, of course, large numbers employed in unskilled and domestic service of one sort or another. Some found employment in the tobacco factories and warehouses as laborers do today in Petersburg.

For a long time the chief place of residence of the free Negroes in Petersburg was the section still known as Pocahontas. This was almost exclusively a free Negro section. As these persons lived on the water, many of them in turn made their living from it. The men fished in the river while their wives maintained stalls in the city market for the sale of fish. So numerous were these people on the Appomattox River that at one time they almost had a monopoly of the river in fishing and in the small carrying trade in boats of their own. In this connection, it is to be remembered that in the days prior to the railroad the rivers formed the main arteries of trade. Indeed, the site of Petersburg itself is determined by its being at the head of

tidewater on the Appomattox. Warehouses for coal, tobacco, and commodities of all kinds dotted the wharves along the river. Since the river was the main highway of trade and transportation, much more money was spent on its regular upkeep than is now the case.

Reference to the Appomattox and James rivers leads at once to a consideration of the Jarratt family. For at least three generations they lived in Pocahontas and made their living on these rivers. This family, like some others under discussion here, has a vital connection with the life of Petersburg practically from the beginning of the town and extending on down to the present. The manuscript records of the city, as well as other documentary sources, are teeming with references to various business transactions undertaken by the several generations of this family, such as the buying and selling of property, real and personal, tax receipts, and membership in a small mercantile enterprise in the days immediately following the Civil War. From another angle of life we have evidence to show that the relationships existing between members of this family were most wholesome. Affection and devotion were prominent ties among them.

The first of the Jarratt family of whom we learn is Richard Jarratt, who was born in Pocahontas about 1779 and was married in 1803 to Betsy Rollins. In 1820 this man is recorded as the owner of a house and lot in Pocahontas valued at \$831.25, with the extremely low rate of taxation on the same as \$1.80. In 1828 he further adds to his small holdings by buying a lot from one David Cary. This Jarratt ran a boat from Petersburg to Norfolk and kept a regular account book of his daily cargo. Another indication of the worth of this man is that he had his children educated. In 1814 he paid to Joseph Shappard, another free Negro, the sum of \$2.50 as one month's tuition charge for teaching his daughters Jane and Ellie.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The facts given here on the families of Jarratt and Colson are based on the original manuscript papers of these families. These Jarratt and Colson papers are in the possession of the Virginia Society for the Study of Negro History, Petersburg, Va.

One son of Richard Jarratt was Alexander, who was born in Pocahontas in 1806 and died in 1869. Like the father, he took to the water, at one time being a steward on a vessel which ran to New York. Alexander Jarratt added to the standing of his family by his marriage to Nancy Fuller, of Norfolk, who in turn came from a substantial family. John Fuller, of Norfolk, and his four sons all went to Liberia about 1855. One of these became a mayor and the others high sheriffs.

For a while Alexander Jarratt and his family lived in Norfolk where they made frequent trips by water to New York on both social and business missions. We get an inside view into this family through the following letter which was written by Alexander Jarratt in Norfolk to his wife, who was then visiting in New York:

Norfolk Oct. 31, 1838.

My Dear Wife

I have now sit down with but a short time before me to address you with a few lines to enform you of my health which is very good at presant and i am en hopes when they comes to hand they may find you and Lucinda enjoying the same Blessing of Health Your mother father sisters and Brothers are well Sister Becky say that she is very much pleased with her basket and thanks you ontel you are better paid She expects to leave when her month is up to assist your mother in market Mother was much pleased with your presant and says that they are very nice they wants to see you very much indeed and says they shall expect you on my return trip I wish you to carry Mrs. Mantey letter to Mrs perkins in Norfolk St no. 50 and oblige me if you please give my love to Lucinda sister Aby and except the greater part yourself i could say a great deal more but time will not admit therefore i must conclude with remaining your sincere and loving husband ontel Death us do part.

Alexander Jarrott.

There were twelve children born to Alexander and Nancy Jarratt. Two of them, John Fuller Jarratt and Mrs. Lavinia Anderson, are still living. John, the last of

this family to be mentioned, was born about 1848. From 1869 to 1898 this Jarratt was employed on the Appomattox River. He was in charge of a government tug boat, the *C. B. Phillips*, and as captain of the same boat had charge of all of her property while in operation. This boat was used for the constant improvement of the river by dredging from Petersburg to City Point. At various times he served as a watchman and had charge of a warehouse. This man's prominence was due to his being regarded by all as an expert in improving the channel bed of the river. After a long, useful career, first in the capacity mentioned and later as a fisherman, John Fuller Jarratt ceased work only eight years ago.

Laws hostile to the free Negroes in Virginia meant nothing when they were not supported by public opinion. The laws herein mentioned no doubt reflected the opinion of the majority, but at the same time there is evidence to show that all of them were not always respected. There were some cases where the leading white citizens of Petersburg felt that the laws should not operate in certain individual cases. Such, for instance, was the case of Major Elebeck in 1810, who, like Richard Jarratt, becomes for discussion the first of another of Petersburg's worth-while free Negro families. Major Elebeck came into Petersburg in 1802 from Pennsylvania and remained there peacefully until 1810, when strangely and suddenly it dawned upon the city authorities that this man had violated the statute of 1793. This law provided that no free Negroes could come into the State for a permanent residence. In order to save Elebeck from being driven out of the State and thus possibly separated from his wife and young children, a large group of white citizens sent in a petition to the legislature praying that this man be made an exception to the law. They based their contention on the fact that he was a useful mechanic to the community and had purchased several lots of ground and erected buildings and improvements thereon. There were 175 names signed to this petition, the first of

which was the mayor of the town, Joel Hammon.<sup>6</sup> Elebeck was allowed to remain.<sup>7</sup>

Among the children referred to in the petition of 1810 were Mary, Sarah, Nelson, Junius, and Henry Elebeck, who by the decade of the 1830's figured prominently in the life of Petersburg. These children of Major Elebeck, in 1832, owned a lot and building worth \$1,400, while by 1859 their increased holdings were assessed at \$3,000.<sup>8</sup> Henry Elebeck was a well-known barber in the city, his services extending beyond the Civil War. Nelson figured well in business in Liberia, about 1836, in company with the firm of Roberts, Colson and Company to be mentioned later. Sarah, in 1826, became the wife of William Colson. After this, her first husband's death, in 1835, she married another very well-to-do free Negro of Farmville, Booker Jackson.

The Colson family, somewhat like the Jarratt and Elebeck families, has an honorable hold on Petersburg extending through six generations. In five of these generations the name of James or James Major has been preserved. The first James was born as early as the American Revolution and probably in Petersburg. Our first real knowledge of him comes in 1804, when, for the sum of forty-five pounds, he purchased from Hector McNeil, a white merchant of Petersburg, "one certain piece or parcel of land situate, lying and being in the town of Petersburg aforesaid, on the east side of the street known and distinguished in the plan of the said town by the name of Union Street." In 1820 this property, consisting of house and lot, was valued at \$1,050. In the meantime he had also bought one lot on Oak Street, which was assessed at \$131.25. This James Colson becomes the head of a remarkable line of

<sup>6</sup> Legislative petitions, Dinwiddie County, 1810. In manuscript at the Virginia State Library.

<sup>7</sup> A case similar to that of Elebeck, in the same year, was that of Uriah Tyner. Ignorant of the law, he too had come into the State in 1800 from North Carolina. The 115 petitioners in this instance claimed that Tyner was "an honest and an extremely industrious man," and that his expulsion from the State would be a loss to the town. *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Land Book of Petersburg, 1859.

descendants. When he died, in 1825, his property was taken over by his son, William Colson. The son in his early years was a barber in Petersburg, but a few years after his marriage to Sarah Elebeck, in 1826, he emigrated to Liberia in connection with the colonization movement of that time. In Liberia he engaged in a mercantile enterprise with Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who, too, came from Petersburg.

Roberts, Colson and Company did a respectable import and export business. For example, an invoice of merchandise shipped by these Negroes from Monrovia to Messrs. Grant & Stone, of Philadelphia, shows forty-seven tons of cainwood, eight puncheons of palm oil, eighty-eight small ivories, and seven large ivories. This total shipment netted \$3,389.80 to the firm. Other sales of this firm show them dealing in dry goods of all kinds, including cotton, muslin goods, and handkerchiefs. On a return trip of William Colson to this country in 1833 in the interest of the firm and while in Petersburg, he negotiated with the Petersburg white firm of Benjamin Jones & Company for hogsheads of tobacco. In writing on this matter in 1833 to Roberts in Liberia, Jones & Company said, "We have received your proposition. We are willing to purchase 6 Hhds. Tobacco, and ship them, to you, on joint account on your paying one Half-Cost. Tobacco is high now, and we think it is best to ship only 6 Hhds. now. We make this by way of trial, and shall be disposed to continue the business hereafter should it hold forth suitable inducements. Relative to shipments hereafter, we can confer with your Mr. Colson and make all necessary arrangements."

William Colson best shows himself to us in a memorandum kept by him while on the return visit to Petersburg during the years 1833-35. We likewise gain further insight into the character of the business transactions of the firm of Roberts, Colson and Company. The items in his memorandum refer first to his business affairs and second to his family affairs and private life. Some of these items run as follows:

Jan. 1st (1834)	To cash paid F Jones for boxes, for samples, etc.	\$1.00
Feb. 1st	To postage on letter to Mr. McPhail to enquire the marks & numbers of Tobacco left	12½ (cents)
Feb. 6th	To Freight of Tobacco from Petersburg to City Point, Paid Rowlett & Bowden	\$5.00
Feb. 12th	To postage Paid on letter from Mr. McPhail with bill of Laden	.25
Feb. 12th	To postage Paid on letter from Mr. Garley on subject of Drafts	12½
March 18th	To postage on letter to Mr. McPhail on the subject of tobacco	12½
March 21st	To postage on letter written Mr. McPhail about shipping tobacco if suitable order	12½
June 14th	To postage on letter to the clerk of Fairfax ety (county) making enquiry if the person who went to Africa last fall was free & the State Found to transport, etc.	12½
August 20th	Postage on Double letter from A. J. Ralston of Philadelphia enclosing Draft for \$100 to N. Y.	28
August 23rd	Paid B. Ward & Co of N. York Fifty Dollars and Ninety One Cents, on note due them, with draft on Thos. Bell for Two Hundred & Fifty Dollars	\$50.91
August 25th	Paid B. Ward & Co., for ¼ Doz. Feather Fans at \$15 per doz, Thirty three Dolars & Seventy-five cents	\$33.75
August 26th	Paid James Moore in part for twenty five Boxes Cider at \$2.25 per Box, twenty five dollars	\$25.00

August & Sept	To travelling expenses to Washington to effect repeal of law on money, to collect drafts, to Fairfax C. H. to N. York to make effort to send out goods, travelling in pursuit of Bell to Chester N. H. etc	\$75.10
December 31st	Postage on letters from Theodore Clark N. Y. on the subject of his claims on our House	18½
Jan. 13th (1835)	Postage on letter to Mr. McPhail to ask advice about chartering a vessel at Norfolk	12½
Jan. 17th	Cash paid R. Gilliam Esq for writeing Deed in Trust in favor of Doct <sup>r</sup> Wm. J. Waller, connected with Benj Jones & Co. claims & James D. Lumdens & Co. claims	\$5.00
May 12th	Postage on letter from Mr. Roberts from N. York information about visiting Petersburg, Va.	18½
May 26th	To travelling expenses through different cities to N. York, back again to Petersburg, returning to N. York again to Philadelphia, etc.	\$66.25
May 25th	Advanced of individual funds to pay demands against the Sch <sup>r</sup> Caroline	\$22.27
July	Amount of cash paid for Mary A. Colsons (daughter's) half year Schooling up to 6th Feb'y next, and Mrs. Colsons travelling expenses etc, etc.	\$191.00

About the month of August, 1835, William Colson made the return voyage to Liberia to resume his business there with Roberts. He left his family in Petersburg. The man was so methodical in his make-up that he not only had left

what has been given above, but in addition he gave detailed information as to the contents of his wardrobe on his return voyage. He also named all the books he carried with him to read on the vessel on this, what turns out to be, his last voyage.<sup>9</sup> In his own words he relates :

“List of Cloaths etc composing his wardrobe taken to Africa, on board Sch, Caroline

“Thirteen new shirts nine linnen & four fine cotton, Two flannel shirts, Four inside new cotton shirts, Two cotton night shirts, Seventeen white cravats . . . Six Pocket Handkerchiefs, three fine white Cambrick & two colored & one white fine silk, nine vests viz : two fine white & two colored massails, two Black sattin, one Blk Bombazine, one Blk Silk Velvet, and one grey cloath vest, Two Jackets, Eleven pair Pantaloons . . . Five coats . . . Sixteen pair Hose, fourteen white & colord cotton and two pr yarn,—four new Berth Cotton Sheets, two pillow cases, one Pillow & one first rate Mattress, one calico spread, Five Hats & one Box (white), one Patent Leather Trunk, one large Hare trunk, one traveling Bag, two pair Boots, and three pair pumps and two pair olde shoes, Razor case, with five Razors, pr Scissors, Shaveing Box, soap, & Brush, Comb and Hair Brush, Boot Jack, Brushes & Blacking, Ivory Head cane, Umbrella, two Boxes segars, Two boxes Wine, Port & Clarett, One Basket with (?) preserves & ham with three jars current Jelly, One Portfollio with paper & writing apparatus.”

“List of his Books taken out to read on the voyage, viz Clarkes Commentary on the New Testament in two vols. Watsons Theological Dictionary, Watson Theological Institutes, Bucks Theological Dictionary, Four vols of Wesleys Works first, second, third and fifth vols, Usebious Ecclesiastical History, Sturms Reflections, Herveys Meditations, first vol of Village Sermons, second vol of Bensons Sermons & Plans, fourth vol of Sketches of sermons, Fletchers Appeal, Herseys Appeal, Clarke On the Promises, Christians Pattern, Christians Manuel, Pocket Bible, Book of Discipline, Hyme Book & Discipline in one, Hersey, Importance of small things, Authentic Key to the Door of F Masonry, Eulogy on Wilberforce etc, etc.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The life of William Colson was cut short. He died November, 1835, about three weeks after he returned to Liberia.

<sup>10</sup> For a copy of the letter from Roberts to Colson's widow announcing the death of her husband, see *The Journal of Negro History*, XI, 69-70.

William Colson was the father of three children, William, Mary, and James Major. The last of these particularly comes easily within the memory of Petersburg citizens living today. He was born in 1830 and died in 1892. James Major is to be remembered especially as a fine shoemaker, whose patrons included most of the prominent people of the town. It is said that his skill at shoemaking extended to the point where he could make a shoe to fit the special needs of a sore foot. A matter of interest for one today is the fact that during the Civil War this man made boots for \$400 a pair in Confederate money. He maintained an illustrated "ad" in the city directory.

James Major Colson was married in 1852 to a free woman of color, Fannie Meade Bolling. His wife naturally was primarily a homemaker, but at the same time her literary attainments were manifested in her production of poetry throughout her long life. This lady came along during the period of the hostile legislation against the education of free Negroes. She learned to read and write at odd moments while in the employ of a white family that took great care that she should put her lessons aside in the event that company or strangers came into the home. Thus her very employers, regardless of the law, helped make it possible for her to acquire the rudiments of learning. Immediately after the war she put her knowledge to good use by taking the initiative in starting a private school on Oak Street in Petersburg. She sent to Washington to secure a teacher for this purpose. As a conversationist, this woman was quite the equal or the superior of the average college graduate of today.

From the union of James Major Colson and Fannie Meade Colson there came a large family, nine of whom grew to adult age. One of this number was another James Major, this time the third. He was born in 1855, attended Major Giles B. Cook's private school after the Civil War and then taught school for a few years. Beginning in 1877, he extended his training by completing the high school

course at Middleboro, Mass. Immediately afterwards, he entered Dartmouth College and was graduated with the bachelor's degree in 1883. The registrar of this institution recently writes, "He was a high grade student and was elected to the Society of Phi Beta Kappa." With this thorough training, such as few Negroes at that time possessed, he returned to his native State and city and rendered efficient service in education and social uplift. He died in 1909.

Joseph Jenkins Roberts, referred to above in connection with William Colson, was born in Norfolk in 1809. His early manhood years, however, were spent in Petersburg. At one time in Petersburg he was a barber and married a Petersburg free woman, Ginsey Snow, the daughter of a well-known nurse. Roberts obtained a rudimentary education while running a flat boat on the Appomattox and James rivers. This man turned out to be, perhaps in those years, the most illustrious Negro whom Virginia produced, and, in a broader sense, one of the most capable of Virginia's sons, irrespective of race. Roberts went to Liberia in 1829 and for a number of years successfully conducted the enterprise of Roberts, Colson and Company elsewhere mentioned. In 1847 he became the first president of the republic of Liberia, held this position for several terms, and later became president of the Liberia College and a teacher of law and ethics. On diplomatic visits to England, France, and elsewhere, he was received with marked attention by the functionaries of these countries on account of his ability and bearing. He was an able writer, possessing, as he did, a fine command of language. Roberts was an able statesman and a successful president. All historians of Liberia so consider him. He was celebrated enough in 1876 to receive the recognition of the Petersburg *Index-Appeal* of March 20, 1876, in a very commendable article of that date on his death in Liberia. This was done no doubt as a measure for Petersburg to pay tribute to one of her greatest sons.

Another very outstanding and prosperous free Negro of Petersburg was John Updike. This man lived in Pocahontas, on the Appomattox River. His river front property embraced 200 feet or more. Updike was the captain of his own vessel and traded on the James River between Petersburg and Norfolk. He is rated as having done a large business. Updike married in 1822 and died about the time of the Civil War. This man seems to have acquired some official connection with the United States government, since at his funeral in the Gillfield Baptist Church, his coffin was wrapped in the Stars and Stripes.<sup>11</sup>

Edward Hamlin was another free Negro of merit. At one time he ran a grocery store on the main street of the town. He, like other persons mentioned here, is of importance not only for what he himself stood, but also through his descendants. Both he and his sons acquired particular prominence after 1865. Under the Republican administration following the war, Edward Hamlin was the clerk of the city market. His son, Cornelius, was a radical in politics, being very closely associated with the administration of Mayor Wood. On one or two occasions, for a day or two, in the absence of Wood, this man served as the mayor of the city. William Hamlin, son of Edward and brother of Cornelius, was the brightest light of this group. He was born in 1860 and died in 1891 at the early age of 31. William was the valedictorian of his class at Hampton in 1879, and he had a distinct leaning toward things literary and academic. He always carried some classic around in his pocket. His chief contribution to the history of Petersburg was his principalship of the Peabody High School from 1884 to 1889. He had some fine plans in mind for the educational system of the city, but after having run ashore on the rock of politics he lost his position in the system and died shortly afterwards.

Jack McCrae was a free Negro citizen of prominence in Petersburg during the decades immediately prior to the

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of a free Negro still living.

Civil War. He was a caterer and as such found lucrative employment among the white citizens of the city. He ran an establishment on Bollingbrook Street. His property on Gill Street in 1859 was valued at \$1,550.<sup>12</sup> A character similar in occupation to McCrae and at one time associated with him was John Brewer. He was at one time a painter but at the same time or later ran a restaurant on East Bank Street. Brewer served the white people at their fine dinners and maintained a very high rank as a culinary artist. His family life likewise was pure and of a high order.

Among the outstanding mechanics of the city were Charles Tinsley, Thomas Garnes, and Christopher B. Stevens. Tinsley was a bricklayer and a "corner workman." He possessed considerable native ability and was a leader among his people. Thomas Garnes was a brick contractor of some standing. When this man died he was buried in the present white Blandford Cemetery very near the famous old church of the same name. Christopher Stevens was a carpenter and a contractor. In 1859 he was the contractor for the new Gillfield Baptist Church of which he was a member.<sup>13</sup> In 1872, when the present Harrison Street Baptist Church completed its new structure, this same Stevens erected the tall steeple which may be seen there today. During the reconstruction period following the Civil War Stevens' son, William, became a State senator and an active worker in education. This same William in 1859 held property valued at \$1,400.

According to the federal census of 1860 about thirty per cent of the free Negroes of Petersburg and Dinwiddie County were mulattoes. This means that they had varying proportions of white and Negro blood. Along with the white admixture, among some of this number, there was a further infusion of Indian blood. In some instances the Indian blood was predominant. Such is the case of Lavinia Sampson. The property holdings of this woman included

<sup>12</sup> Land Book, 1859.

<sup>13</sup> *Petersburg Daily Express*, April 17, 1859.

some six or seven residences in Pocahontas and Blandford with a total valuation in 1860 of around \$5,000.<sup>14</sup> Of similar admixture as Lavinia Sampson were Joseph Gallee and his sister Mary. Both of these people were school teachers. Joseph, by the very nature of the case, was of the itinerant type, going from house to house. In order to evade the law the free Negro families had this man come to their homes at night. He was an excellent bookkeeper. After the Civil War the sister, Mary Gallee, taught a private school on Wilcox Street and also cooperated with Fannie Meade Colson in her efforts to enlighten the recently emancipated people.

With respect to longevity in residence in Petersburg and the period of time the free Negro status obtained, by no means were all of the families and individuals herein mentioned in a class with the Jarratts, Colsons, or Elebecks. Some of them were born outside of Petersburg but later made their residence there. Others acquired their freedom only in the immediate decades preceding the Civil War. One of this class was Robert Clark, who worked as a slave at a hotel in Petersburg and later bought his freedom.<sup>15</sup> Immediately afterwards he opened a livery stable on Lombard Street and did exceedingly well. During the decade of the 1850's there was hardly a free Negro in Petersburg who excelled Clark in business prosperity. By 1860 his real estate and personal estate amounted to \$9,000. He had "continually on hand for hire, horses, buggies and carriages, open or close." Similar in occupation, but with a longer free Negro status, was William Ellis, a liveryman. To this man was born in 1862 a son, William Ellis, who likewise has followed his father's calling, but with greater success. Shadrach Bass, another free Negro, was born about 1850 and is still living in Petersburg. His father was a slave but his mother was a free woman. Hence the child took the status of the mother. As a groceryman Bass

<sup>14</sup> Land Book, 1860.

<sup>15</sup> Claiborne, *Seventy-five Years in Old Virginia*, p. 58.

has acquired some property and has earned the good will and respect of his neighbors and fellow citizens.

Another man who appears earlier among the free Negroes than those just mentioned was Edward Shields, better known to a later generation as Ned Shields. He is one of the free Negro heads of families listed as of 1830. This man, like Clark, was originally a slave. He bought himself from a prominent lawyer of the city, David May. Shields comes into his own after the war, when for about twenty-five years he ran a dairy and supplied the best people of Petersburg. He owned a place on Dunlop Street. Singularly enough, Shields was the father of twelve sons but no daughters. From this line there has come a group of persons who have shown marked scholarship.

Of a similar bearing to the intellectual and economic life of Petersburg was the union of David Scott and Eliza Smith. Scott was a property owner on Lee Avenue. He was a miller and at one time engaged in the oyster business on Union Street. Jerry McH. Farley, like Shields, was born a slave but later purchased his freedom. He was a minister, and as such was the leading spirit after the Civil War in establishing the present A. M. E. Zion Church on Oak Street. There are extant some of his sermons in manuscript. Another valuable citizen of Petersburg is James Monroe Smith, whose free Negro status runs back several generations. He was born in the fifties and still lives. He has been a contractor and was at one time active in politics. During the Readjustor movement he was a member of the City Council. Like Smith in prominence was Andrew Smith, who was an active educator along with William Hamlin.

Another man, like Edward Shields, Robert Clark, and Jerry McH. Farley as to the origin of his free Negro status, was Peter G. Morgan. Unlike these men, however, he was not a native of Petersburg, but his real prominence dates from his residence in the city. During his life Morgan was twice sold as a slave, but during the decade of the

fifties he first purchased himself for \$1,500, and in like manner, a few years later, purchased his wife and two children for the same sum.<sup>16</sup> He came to Petersburg with his family from a nearby county in 1863. By trade Morgan was a carpenter and, later, a shoemaker. The rudiments of learning he picked up largely by himself. So great was his ability to do this that in a short while he became a fairly well-educated man for his time. He became a successful leader in Petersburg's civic and political affairs in the days immediately following emancipation. He was particularly instrumental in bringing about the erection of the Peabody High School in 1874, when a member of the Board of Education. In 1867 Morgan became a member of the Constitutional Convention of that year. A year or two later he served two terms in the Virginia legislature.

The ancestry of Bass and others leads to a discussion of marriages between free Negroes and slaves, and also to the question of ownership of slaves by free Negroes. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, free Negroes and slaves in Virginia were not always isolated. On the contrary, there was considerable social intermingling between the two which sometimes led to marriage. However, at the same time, it is certain that the superiority or inferiority complex did grow up between the two for one reason or another. Slave men married free women and vice versa. The offspring in turn became either one or the other according to the condition of the mother. A free husband might purchase the freedom of his wife. She, in turn, in the eyesight of the law, became his slave, and the children in like manner were the slaves of the father. A free husband who had bought his wife might go so far even as to sell her back into slavery.

The large number of free Negro slave owning heads of families in Petersburg, 107 in all in 1830, is to be explained largely as just mentioned above. Edward Shields furnishes a case in point. In 1830 he was rated as having

<sup>16</sup> Russell in *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 8, p. 341.

four slaves. In reality these slaves were his wife and three children. Aside from the slave ownership through blood, free Negroes owned other Negroes from motives of benevolence. Prior to 1832 especially, they went on the market and bought slaves so as to prevent their being sent South. They did not want to see their brethren exploited. John Updike, for instance, frequently owned slaves and from all appearances he seems to have been prompted by philanthropic motives. In 1854 he owned one Jane Green who had previously belonged to white people. Shortly afterwards he emancipated her. Jane Green thereupon immediately went back to her former owners, who, along with a dozen other prominent white citizens, signed a written statement to the effect that Jane Green was a woman of good character and industrious habits.<sup>17</sup> No doubt this effort was made in order to save her from being a victim to the law providing for her expulsion from the State in twelve months. In 1831 this same Updike emancipated Rheuben Rhenalds "whom he had recently purchased from Shadrach Brander."<sup>18</sup>

During the slavery period, the Negroes of Petersburg, slave and free, had churches of their own. They also belonged to the white churches, particularly in the Methodist denomination of the Washington Street Church, then located on Union Street. The separate Negro churches of Petersburg were the Harrison Street Baptist, the Gillfield Baptist, and the Third Baptist. The first contained a sprinkling of free Negroes; the second had a more equal distribution of both slaves and free persons, with the latter constituting the ruling element; the third (Third Baptist) was just about a free Negro church entirely. The congregation, however, was always smaller than the other two. This last church, unlike the others, was not organized until 1842.

The Gillfield Church is of especial interest in this dis-

<sup>17</sup> Manuscript documents in the possession of the Virginia Society for the Study of Negro History.

<sup>18</sup> Deed Book, no. 8, Hustings Court, p. 389.

cussion. This church started among the free Negroes of Petersburg as early as 1803 on the Appomattox River and carried the name of Sandy Beach. We find that in 1818 the trustees of this body bought land in Gill's field from M. B. Pillsborough. Richard Jarratt and Joseph Shepard, whom we have already mentioned, along with several others, acted as the original trustees in this purchase.<sup>19</sup> It happens, moreover, that most of the free Negroes mentioned herein were leading members of Gillfield, as deacons, trustees, clerks, or choir leaders. All of the pastors were white men, in conformity with the acts of the legislature following the Nat Turner insurrection when Negroes were forbidden to preach. After having had two frame structures as houses of worship, in 1859, as already noticed, the \$7,000 brick structure was erected. This last structure gave way about 1870 to the present commodious building.

In 1815 the Gillfield Church had the honor of being received into the white Portsmouth Association, and in 1820 was even host to the convention of that year.<sup>20</sup> During the slavery period, as in the period of freedom, this church enjoyed comparative peace and harmony. After the organization of the Third Baptist Church in 1842 there was some exchange in memberships of these two churches. The edifice still occupied by the Third Baptist congregation is said to be one of the oldest in Petersburg, having been previously occupied by one or two white denominations. Immediately after the war the Third Baptist Church for a short while was pastored by the celebrated John Jasper.

An interesting sidelight on the legal religious standing of the free Negro in Petersburg is furnished by the petition sent to the legislature January 8, 1839, by white citizens asking that an act be passed to allow the Hustings Court to permit colored preachers to perform the funeral services, marriage ceremonies, and baptisms among their own people. They stated that the free colored persons experienced

<sup>19</sup> Deed Book, no. 5, Hustings Court, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup> Kennard, *History of the Gillfield Church*, p. 16.

considerable difficulty in securing white ministers for these purposes on account of their great poverty, and that further the white ministers were preoccupied with their own duties.<sup>21</sup> This petition was presented by J. F. May and carried one hundred or more names. It was rejected by the legislature. As this petition shows, spiritual leadership among both classes of the blacks could be exercised by white men only.

The organized group spirit among the free Negroes of Petersburg manifested itself not only in churches but also in one fraternal organization. In 1852, and before, there existed among them the Beneficial Society of Free Men of Color of the City of Petersburg and the State of Virginia. This organization, like all fraternal organizations, existed primarily to care for the sick, to pay death claims, and promote social group spirit. An original copy of their constitution as revised in 1852 is extant. It is held by one of the descendants of some of the members involved. The form and grammatical construction of the instrument are perfect. It carries the usual officers, with some detailed instruction as to their duties, time of meeting, membership dues, and the like.

As might be expected, by no means were all of the free Negroes of Petersburg well-to-do; nor were those, on the other hand, who owned property prompt in paying the taxes on the same. Some of those able to do so failed to comply willingly with this regulation because they did not derive much benefit from the revenue thus obtained. There are frequent instances of delinquency among them. In 1830, for instance, we find that by an order of Hustings Court, Peter Valentine, William Brander and about ten others, who had failed to pay their taxes, were hired out for the payment of the same.<sup>22</sup> Again we notice that in 1837 the Common Council appointed a committee "to enquire into the expediency of providing for the more effectual collection of the corporation taxes from free persons

<sup>21</sup> Legislative petitions, Dinwiddie County, January 8, 1839.

<sup>22</sup> Minute Book, Hustings Court, Oct. 22, 1830.

of color." During the Civil War period, under the caption of "What's the matter," the Petersburg *Daily Express* of January 6, 1862, states that "there are at present 817 free Negro residents of this city who have not yet paid their taxes now overdue." One week later, in the same paper, another notice says that every year from three to five hundred Negroes do not pay their taxes and are sold for them. Such persons might free themselves of this condition by working out at the rate of ten cents a day. It must be said that some of the taxes referred to here were capitation and personal property taxes as well as real estate.

It will be interesting to note, too, how the sympathies of the free Negroes ran during the Civil War. Were they for the South or the North? From the point of view of all Petersburg Negroes living today, of course, the free people of color of the war period were in sympathy with the Union, even though they did assist in building fortifications for the Confederacy. Eye witnesses and participants in the struggle so testify today. However, at the same time, we must take into account a speech made by Charles Tinsley, free Negro orator, referred to above, at the opening of the war. During the month of April, 1861, a large group of Negroes were assembled on the Court House square to listen to a speech from one John Dodson, ex-mayor of the town. The occasion for this gathering was the leaving of town of these Negroes to work on Confederate fortifications at Norfolk. The ex-mayor made his speech, then Tinsley stepped forward to receive the Confederate flag. In reply to Dodson's speech Tinsley said in part: "We are willing to aid Virginia's cause to the utmost extent of our ability. We do not feel that it is right for us to remain here idle, when white gentlemen are engaged in the performance of work at Norfolk, that is more suitable to our hands, and of which it is our duty to relieve them. There is not an unwilling heart among us . . . and we promise unhesitating obedience to all orders that may be given us." In reference to the flag he said, "I could feel no greater pride, no more

genuine gratification, than to be able to plant it first upon the ramparts of Fortress Monroe." <sup>23</sup>

On this same question of the seeming allegiance of some free Negroes to the Confederacy, one of them, Richard Kennard, is reported by the daily newspaper to have given \$100 to the Confederate cause. Whether or not we shall conclude that the free Negroes of Petersburg as a group were loyal to the Southern cause, from these events just related, we are uncertain. We do know, however, that as a class the free Negroes generally during the reconstruction inclined more toward the conservative view in the settlement of affairs while the ex-slaves leaned more toward the radical wing.

By way of conclusion, it must be said that the Negro people in America today did not begin their existence as full-fledged, normal human beings in 1865. To the contrary, as this account shows, many of them were thinking and acting as good, solid, American people long before emancipation. So far as Petersburg itself is concerned, the foundation for the present high relative standing of property ownership among the Negroes of this city was laid very early. In 1860, for example, one year before the war, 186 free Negro heads of families in Petersburg were owners of real estate.<sup>24</sup> This number represented about 25 per cent of the total number of such heads of families. Out of the 186 property owners, twenty-one of them held property ranging in value from \$1,000 to \$9,000. Many of them could read and write, even though after about 1830 they had to acquire this knowledge by clandestine methods. The free Negroes of Petersburg thus achieved; some of them, like Joseph Jenkins Roberts and William Colson, were outstanding. Such are the persons who have been forgotten and about whom we need to know more today.

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<sup>23</sup> *Petersburg Daily Express*, April 26, 1861.

<sup>24</sup> Census records, 1860, in original manuscript form at the Census Bureau, Washington, D. C.