

A Guide to the Major William Henry Johnson Papers (1858-1935) 1884-1935

Major William Henry Johnson Papers 1884-1935

1884-1935

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Descriptive Summary

Collection number
1957-3

Language
English

Abstract

The William Henry Johnson papers include correspondence, speeches, photographs and other documents. They reflect William Henry Johnson's life as an educator, soldier and community leader.

Repository

Special Collections and Archives, Johnston Memorial Library, Virginia State University

Administrative Information

Access

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

The papers of Major William Henry Johnson were given to Virginia State University around 1957.

Preferred Citation

Major William Henry Johnson Papers, Accession #1957-3, Johnston Memorial Library, Virginia State University.

Other Descriptive Data

Biographical/Historical Information

In 1935 the highest-ranking black officer in the disbanded 6th Virginia Volunteer Infantry, Spanish American War, died. Few Virginians have ever heard of the 6th Virginia, let alone their commander, Major William Henry Johnson.

His story is unique, also, because he was one of the most successful post-bellum blacks in Petersburg who was not a descendant of the antebellum free black population. (There were around 3,200 free blacks in 1860). Major Johnson was from the slave population (which numbered around 5,000 in 1860). Free blacks had a slight advantage over the larger slave population, although they themselves were not truly free. They did have a bit more freedom of movement than their slave brethren did. In addition, some had some property that could be sold or borrowed upon to finance to own or accumulate property; therefore at emancipation they were truly penniless.

Major Johnson's father, Henry Johnson, was born a slave around 1835 in Ettrick on Fleets Farm, what is now Virginia State University, and he grew up in the old plantation house. He remained a slave until the Union Army moved through Ettrick following Robert E. Lee in April of 1865.

William Henry Johnson's mother, Malinda, was also a slave; she resided in Petersburg. October 1, 1858, her only child was born on Old Street (which is now Grove Avenue). In fact, in 1865 when Ulysses S. Grant entered Petersburg, her owner, Major P. Branch, fled to Danville taking Malinda and her six-year old son with him. William Henry's early years were spent in several places in Petersburg. At one time he lived on Old Street near Market, opposite Dunlop's Tobacco Factory. Another home was on the site of the old Titus Foundry. He also lived for some time on High Street and South Sycamore Street.

After General Lee's surrender, his mother and father were reunited. Later in the year his father brought a piece of property in the old field area in the vicinity of what is now Rome Street. Here his father built a small house, which is still standing, at what is now 1151 Rome Street. The family moved in at Christmas 1865.

Henry Johnson for 45 years was a teamster, driving his own horse and wagon. For a brief time he was a partner in an oyster house near the corner of Union and Oak Streets.

Then, as today, many blacks connected upward mobility with one's level of education. William Henry Johnson's parents were of that opinion and began his schooling at home. His first teacher, other than his mother, was a Mrs. Addie Berry who taught school at her home on Perry Street. Next, was Mr. Collier Tabb who taught school at "East Hill" on Lombard Street. His next mover was to the basement of the Gillfield Baptist Church under a Mr. Bates. After spending some time there he was enrolled in another private school. A former Confederate Army officer, Major Giles B. Cooke, taught this one. This school was located in the same building as the old First Baptist church near Garrison and Filmore Streets. He was graduated in 1874 (the first graduating class).

During the summer and early fall months when school was not in session, William Henry prepared for a trade. He chose to become a cooper (one who makes barrels). He secured summer employment at a barrel company in Richmond where he remained for two summers. Here he learned the early stages of barrel

construction, called "slack work". Upon mastering "slack work" he apprenticed himself to a Mr. Wilson Goodwyn who had a shop on Union Street, to learn "tight work". During the next two years (1874-1886) he became a master cooper, making barrels for Myers Whiskey Distillery in Blandford, flour and hogshead and tierces for Ropers Tobacco Factory on Halifax Street.

After he completed his apprenticeship, his mother and father decided that he should go to college. The three of them met with Rev. Mr. Henry Williams, their pastor, and together agreed upon Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute. Despite the necessity of constant employment, after two years of study he was graduated from Hampton with a normal degree in 1878. In addition to his degree he also attended several summer teaching institutes at what is now Virginia State University.

After graduating from Hampton, Johnson returned home to Petersburg and began trying to locate a teaching position. That October he was offered a position in Surry County, about three miles from the courthouse. His new job involved teaching night school and paid \$20 per month plus room and board and lodging. His students were both young and old, eager to learn, and he was an enthusiastic teacher.

He worked in Surry for five months. Later the following fall, quite by chance, on a walk through lower Chesterfield County he encountered a Captain Blankenship who was the County School Superintendent. A conference was held and the superintendent then offered a position at a new school that was under construction near what is now Virginia State University. He accepted the position and taught at that school, which was later called the "Old Brickyard School" on Dupuy Road in Ettrick.

Major Johnson taught at this school for seven years, seven months a year at \$30 per month. In 1886 he was offered the principalship of Lombard Street School in Petersburg, with a nine-month school year and a record-breaking wage of \$40 per month. He accepted right away. This was not just a raise of \$150 per year, this also made it possible for him to give up making barrels in the evenings from March through August. This job as a cooper paid \$3 - \$4 per day and was used to supplement his teaching salary. He remained at Lombard Street School for two years until a new position at the Jones Street School was offered and accepted. Here he remained as principal for 31 years until the building was razed and the new Peabody-Williams Building was erected as a combination elementary and high school in 1919. He opposed this combined school because he felt the two levels should be in separate buildings. Nevertheless, he became principal of the elementary division until he retired in 1929. After 43 years of teaching in the city of Petersburg and more than 50 years in the state of Virginia.

In 1887 William Henry Johnson married Miss Nannie Brewer. The new Mrs. Johnson was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Brewer, who were very highly respected citizens of Petersburg. Mr. John Brewer's father was born a slave and belonged to James Nicholas. As a slave, Mr. Brewer was allowed to "hire out," that is, he was allowed to engage in some type of extra work where a part of the money went to the owner and the rest was pocketed by the slave. By late 1864, Brewer had managed to pay his owner a \$1000 and was allowed to purchase himself from his owner. His self-purchase was within four months of the end of the Confederacy when all slaves were automatically free. In the early years, he was a painter. Later he owned and operated one of the most popular restaurants in Petersburg. His place was located at 10 Bank Street.

Nannie Brewer Johnson was educated in Petersburg and attended the 1888 Normal for Teachers, an institute held at what is now Virginia State University. Mrs. Johnson was active in community and church work. She was a faithful member of Gillfield Baptist Church. Major and Mrs. Johnson were married for 48 years.

During the era of black slavery, one of the greater fears of the white community was that of an armed rebellion of blacks. When the Civil War began, many free blacks in the south volunteered to take up arms for the Confederacy. This was true even in Petersburg. However, the state of Virginia was not prepared to accept armed black men, even volunteers. This policy remained until 1871 when Virginia reorganized the state Militia and allowed the formation of volunteer companies black and white.

The first black volunteer company in Petersburg came into existence in June of 1873. They were the Petersburg Guards, organized and captained by John H. Hill. For five years the Guards were the only black volunteer company in Petersburg. In 1878, however, Lieutenant Peyton L. Farley of the Guards resigned and organized the Petersburg Blues, which he also captained. William Henry Johnson joined the Blues in 1878 as a private. The Blues began compiling a notable record in competition with other companies throughout the state. In 1881 they were invited to participate in the inaugural parade of President James A. Garfield. In 1888 Johnson, now a captain, led the Blues on a very successful trip to Providence, Long Island, and Boston, Massachusetts. Between the years 1888-1897, Captain Johnson became Major Johnson and assumed command of the 2nd Battalion, Virginia Volunteer Infantry. In 1897 the Ulysses S. Grant Monument Parade was held in New York City and both the first and second Battalions made a fine showing for themselves and the state.

When war with Spain was declared in 1898, the two black battalions were federalized and became the 6th Virginia U.S. Volunteer Army of the Spanish American War. The men met and voted to serve anywhere they were sent and elected to serve under their own officers. When this reached the press, an uproar evolved over the latter statement. Some whites opposed the idea of black officers. The unit, nevertheless, moved to a training camp at Camp Poland near Knoxville, Tennessee. There, a rumor concerning the ouster of all black

officers were proven to be true.

All black officers were ordered to take an exam to determine whether they would be allowed to keep their ranks. The black officers declared that they had all taken exams before training their ranks, and what if those exams were good enough then, they should be good enough now. When the second order was given, nine black officers resigned. White officers were immediately selected to fill the vacancies. The men of the 6th Virginia were very upset. Their former black officers asked them to go on without them. The war, however, ended so quickly that the men from Virginia never saw service in Cuba or the Philippines. The unit was discharged in Georgia in 1899. Virginia disbanded the black Volunteer companies and would not accept black again in the State National Guard for many years. Major Johnson continued to try and convince the governors of the state to allow the reformation of the black militia companies, but with no success.

Aside from a purely military function the black companies also served as social organs for the black community. Socials and picnics were held and enjoyed by all. The wives and sweethearts of the men formed various auxiliaries and took it upon themselves to help raise funds and to purchase such items as ceremonial swords and flags.

Major William Henry Johnson and his wife were members of the Gillfield Baptist Church , which has been located on Perry Street since 1815. He had been associated with the church since birth and was baptized in the year 1886. When the Rev. Mr. Henry Williams died in 1900 he became superintendent of the Gillfield Baptist Church Sunday School. He also served as church clerk and financial secretary, was a vice-president of the home mission and president of the Gillfield Baptist Church Temperance Society. He served the Bethany Baptist Sunday School Convention as president for twenty-five years and recording secretary for five years.

Although William Henry spent a considerable amount of time in other activities, he still found time to become involved with different groups around the city and state. He was vice-president of the Negro Organizational Society, which was founded in 1912 at Hampton Institute. This was an organization dedicated to the improvement of health, education and agriculture amongst black people. Johnson was one of the founders of a black Chamber of Commerce in Petersburg and served as their president in 1924. In 1925 he was elected vice-president of the Old Dominion Investment Company, a black local bank, and he was connected with the Ideal Investment Company and Realty Corporation of Virginia, also a local black banking concern.

Last but not least, he was one of the first black feature writers for a white southern newspaper. In 1919 the Petersburg Progress-Index engaged him to write a serious column about black life in the city. The column appeared first as "Rome Street" and was then renamed "Subjects of Interest to Colored Readers." It lasted for 16 years, until 1935.

Scope and Content Information

The papers of Major William Henry Johnson were given to Virginia State University around 1957. They reflect the accomplishments of a person born a slave of slave parents in an uncertain time. There is personal and business correspondence dating from 1884. Hundreds of photographs show the black population in and around Petersburg frozen in time, leaving us a vivid picture of what they considered important in their lives. Perhaps the most outstanding series of papers is that which concern most of his speeches and writings. These cover a variety of topics and gives us an idea of what the black elite thought about their own lives and how they viewed the issues of their day.

The Johnson papers are one of the most interesting bodies of papers left by a post-bellum black of this time period. They are a true reflection of a time now gone. These, and other items such as these, will help us to understand more about this time and the often-neglected role by blacks.

Series Description

Series I:Correspondence: Family, Personal, Business, and Military

Container: 1

Container: 2

Letters, postcards and telegrams arranged chronologically. 1884-1935

Series II:Financial and legal

Container: 3

Teaching contracts, receipts, agreements, certificates, and military discharge. Arranged by type

Series III:Speeches and Writings

Containers: 4-7

Four boxes of handwritten and several printed speeches and articles. Included is an autobiography. A list of Publications.

Series IV:Photographs

Containers: 8-14

Seven boxes, family, friends work and church scenes. In box 12 are the photos of the 6th Virginia United States Colored Volunteers.

Series V:Printed (Memorabilia)

Container: 15

Announcements, Commencement programs, Broadsides, Programs, Invitations, Pamphlets. Two very interesting items: A Restaurant Menu from his father-in-law's business on Bank Street, and the first invitation to the "Ugly Club" 1886.

Series VI:Scrapbooks

Containers: 16-19

Some of everything. Programs, cards, photographs and some correspondence.

Series VII:Artifacts

Containers: 20-25

Household articles, toys and games. Two boxes of military items. There are also two military footlockers and the sheath for a dress saber.

Series VIII:Oversize

Container:

Maps and Photos

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Box-folder 9:247

Robinson, Anna Belle

Box-folder 9:248

Robinson, (Mrs.) Rebecca

Box-folder 9:249

Robinson, (Mrs.)

Box-folder 9:250

Rountze, Hillard Cato

Box-folder 9:251

San Jose Mission

Box-folder 9:252

Scotland, Alice

Box-folder 9:253

Scott, A. E.

Box-folder 9:254

Scott, James L.

Box-folder 9:255

Shields, Emma

Box-folder 9:256

Simpson, (Mr.)

Box-folder 9:257

Smith, Helen Cralle

Box-folder 9:258

Smith, Rosa Wilson

Box-folder 9:259

Snell, Pearl, Eveline

Box-folder 9:260

Sutton, S. J.

Box-folder 9:261

Swann, (Mrs.) Elizabeth

Box-folder 9:262

Texas, (Mrs.) Sutton

Box-folder 9:263

Troy, (Rev.)

Box-folder 9:264

V.S.U. - First Faculty and Class

Box-folder 9:265

Watts, Robert

Box-folder 9:266

Williams, (Rev.) Henry (Funeral)

Box-folder 9:267

Williams, (Rev.) Henry (Funeral)

Box-folder 9:268

Williams, (Mrs.)

Box-folder 9:269

Williams, (Mrs.)

Box-folder 9:270

Williams, (Mrs.)

Box-folder 9:271

Wilkerson, Elenora King

Box-folder 9:272

Wilson, Mrs. Nannie J.

Box-folder 9:273

Wilson, Jefferson

Box-folder 9:274

Wilson, Jefferson

Box-folder 9:275

Winfield, Richard

Box-folder 9:276

Wisher, (Elder)

Box-folder 9:277

Worsham Family Home

Box-folder 9:278

Word, Mrs. Adeline

Box-folder 9:279

Unidentified Subjects n.d.

Box-folder 10-12:405

Extent 125 photos

Militia Photographs**Johnson, William Henry**

Box-folder 12:406

Johnson, William Henry

Box-folder 12:407

Stevens, J. C. S.

Box-folder 12:408

Stevens, J. C. S.

Box-folder 12:409

Johnson, William Henry

Box-folder 12:410

Gould, Edwards, W.

Box-folder 12:411

Unidentified Individual

Box-folder 12:412-415

Extent four photos

Unidentified Troopers

Box-folder 12:416-417

Extent two photos

Johnson, William H. & Sergeant

Box-folder 12:418

Stevens, J. C. S. & William H. Johnson

Box-folder 12:419

Company on Parade/ Prussian Style Uniforms

Box-folder 12:420

Battalion on Parade

Box-folder 12:421

Battalion Officers & N. C. O. s

Box-folder 12:422

Battalion on Parade

Box-folder 12:423

Battalion Officers

Box-folder 12:424-426

Extent three photos

Spanish American War Veterans Meeting

Box-folder 12:427-428

Extent two photos

Gillfield Baptist Photos**Henry William & Steve Jordan/Bible Class at Gillfield Baptist Church**

Box-folder 12:429

Gillfield Adult Sunday School Class

Box-folder 12:430

Gillfield Church Members

Box-folder 12:431-432

Extent two photos

Gillfield Sunday School

Box-folder 12:433

Gillfield Church Members

Box-folder 12:434

Johnson at work, home, school, and the farm**Johnson at work**

Box-folder 12:435-437

Extent three photos

William Henry Johnson

Box-folder 12:438

Home 1151 Rome Street

Box-folder 12:439

School Interior

Box-folder 12:440

Schools

Box-folder 12:441

Farm Scene

Box-folder 12:442-443

Extent two photos

Work Scene

Box-folder 12:444

Glass Types Framed

Box 13

Series V.Printed Memorabilia

Printers Blocks

Box 14

Announcement-Literary and Musical Program 1929

Box-folder 15:445

Announcement-Bethany Baptist 1904

Box-folder 15:446

Announcement-Farmers Conference n.d.

Box-folder 15:447

Announcement-First Baptist Church Anniversary 1918

Box-folder 15:448

Announcement-Shiloh Baptist Sunday School 1923

Box-folder 15:449

Announcement-Colored Cemetery 1925

Box-folder 15:450

Broadsides-Gillfield Baptist Sabbath School 1905

Box-folder 15:451

Broadsides-Henry Williams at Gillfield n.d.

Box-folder 15:452

Cards-Thank You

Box-folder 15:453

Certificates-Bethany Baptist n.d.

Box-folder 12:454

Certificates-Boy Scouts 1929

Box-folder 15:455

Certificates-Gillfield 1919

Box-folder 15:456

Certificates-Gold Coin Club 1907

Box-folder 15:457

Certificates-Teaching Certificate 1907

Box-folder 15:458

Certificates-Teaching Certificate 1919

Box-folder 15:459

Certificates-Membership to NAACP 1933

Box-folder 15:460

Invitations-Hampton Normal And Agricultural Institute 1895, 1896, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1922, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1930

Box-folder 15:461

Invitations-Howard University 1928

Box-folder 15:462

Invitations-Peabody 1921

Box-folder 15:463

Invitations-Peabody 1924

Box-folder 15:464

Invitations-Virginia State 1926

Box-folder 15:465

Invitations-Ugly Club 1886

Box-folder 15:466

Pageants-Boy Scouts 1930

Box-folder 15:467

Pamphlets-Petersburg Colored Association n.d.

Box-folder 15:468

Program-Jones Street School Play 1910

Box-folder 15:469

Programs-37th Anniversary Bethany Baptist 1925

Box-folder 15:470

Programs-Bishop Payne 1911

Box-folder 15:471

Programs-Virginia Normal Debate 1918

Box-folder 15:472

Programs-Emancipation Program at Peabody 1932

Box-folder 15:473

Programs-Garden Club 1931

Box-folder 15:474

Programs-Gillfield 1903

Box-folder 15:475

Programs-Gillfield 1904

Box-folder 15:476

Programs-Grant Parade 1897

Box-folder 15:477

Programs-School Improvement League 1910

Box-folder 15:478

Programs-Negro Organizational Society 1914

Box-folder 15:479

Programs-Peabody High School 1927

Box-folder 15:480

Programs-YMCA (Petersburg) n.d.

Box-folder 15:481

Programs-Piedmont Sanatorium 1924

Box-folder 15:482

Programs-AMEZ 1912

Box-folder 15:483

Programs-Virginia Federation of Colored Women 1934

Box-folder 15:484

Programs-Williamsburg 1919

Box-folder 15:485

Programs-Presidents Day Virginia State 1925

Box-folder 15:486

Tickets-Colored Agricultural and Industrial Association 15:1887

Box-folder 15:487

Restaurant Menu-John Brewer's Restaurant n.d.

Box-folder 15:488

YMCA (Petersburg) 1893

Box-folder 15:489

Anniversary Program 1928

Box-folder 15:490

Programs-Virginia Teacher Association 1906

Box-folder 15:491

Program-Benefit Entertainment 1895

Box-folder 15:492

Tickets-Gillfield 1895, 1897, 1901

Box-folder 493

Tickets-Jones Street School 1910

Box-folder 15:494

Programs-Lindsay Treble Clef Club 1934

Box-folder 15:495

Five Sunday School Pins from Gillfield n.d.

Box-folder 15:496

Oversized photos, framed. Photo Albums.

Box 15-A

Series VI.Scrapbooks

Box 16-19

Extent

Contains programs, cards, photographs, and some correspondence.

Series VII.Artifacts

Box 20-25

Extent

Contains household articles, toys and games; two boxes of military items and two footlockers; also the sheath for a dress saber.

Series VIII.Oversize

Extent Maps and photos.

Parade Route for the Grant Inaugural Parade (1897), Parade Route for the Peoples Cemetery 1897

Folder 497

Broadside-An Hour in Old Gillfield 1915

Folder 498