

Black Kentucky Pioneers:

Jim Johnson (c1821-1906)

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 18 November 1906 p13:

"UNCLE REMUS" OF OWENSBORO

Dies at Age of Eighty-Five
Years

WAS BODY SERVANT OF TWO
CONGRESSMEN.

GUIDE FOR J. J. AUDUBON

Incident of His Devotion During the
War—Would Have Beheaded a
Union Soldier.

Not many of the strands that bind anti-bellum and post-bellum life in the South remain. The old master and the old servant—the one dignified, aristocratic, capricious it may be,—but indulgent; the other an imitator, wise in small things and faithful in all wherein his master is concerned—are all but extinct types. Here and there a remnant of this warmer, more exotic life, lingers under some sheltered bank far into this rigorous winter of latter day commercialism, retaining the semblance, though the substance be gone, of a civilization the like of which this world will never know again.

One of the last products in Owensboro of the old conditions was Jim Johnson, the aged negro who died last week. Jim said he was a hundred years old, though the family Bible shows him to be fifteen years younger. He was born in the family of Philip Triplett, a member of one of the old Virginia families, who came to Kentucky to practice law when this section of the state was hardly more than a wilderness, when the territory now constituting three counties was Ohio county. He

located at the Yellow banks, now gone into Owensboro, on an estate of hundreds of acres. Jim was the son of one of the women brought over from Virginia, and was born in the "quarters" at the Triplett residence in what is now the heart of the business section of Owensboro.

Only Three Stores Here.

Owensboro, when Jim first knew it, contained only three stores, and scarcely more than a score of residences. He was acquainted with every foot of the ground now covered by the city and, in spite of the many changes, always had a clear recollection of the original appearance of any particular spot that might be mentioned—he had caught a 'possum in a persimmon tree where this business block stands or had conquered with his ax a forest of black gums on the site of that handsome residence.

In many respects, Jim was a remarkable negro. No Indian who ever roamed the forests of the New World excelled him in woodcraft. In his younger days nearly all of Davless county was practically a trackless forest, full of wolves and panthers and deer. In the darkest night that the world ever knew, Jim could lead the way, straight as the flight of an arrow, to any point in the depths of the Panther creek forests. Take him away from his familiar low grounds into a forest which he had never seen and though clouds might shroud the sky so that moon nor stars gave him aid, he could unerringly tell directions by feeling the bark of the trees.

He never knew the need of a clock by day or by night. From the stars of the firmament, he could read the waning of the night almost to the minute, and though the stars did not shine, by some means known only to him and which he seemed not to be able to put in words, he could read the hour.

Weather Prognosticator.

He was a weather prognosticator, often more accurate in his predictions than the government bureau.

He was familiar with every animal of the forest. Show him a coon or a 'possum and he could tell whether it inhabited the swamps or high ground. He knew the meaning of the different wolf howls before Ernest Thompson Seton was born in the world.

In two things old Jim was a master—the handling of an ax or a harvesting cradle, but he stood preeminent as an axeman. A man who knew him well in the prime of his life vouches for the statement that he could place a toothpick on the chopping block, swing his ax full and clear over him and split the pick squarely in the middle. The greatest monarch of the forest made little obstruction to his ax.

But above all things, in his old days when rheumatism had twisted his once mighty muscles, he loved to tell of his triumphs in cradeling of wheat. They once brought a man from Hardinsburg to beat him, and then did not accomplish it.

The old negro knew many famous men in his time. When John James Audobon, the greatest ornithologist that America has produced was studying the birds of this portion of Kentucky, he stayed at the home of Col. Triplett, and the Panther creek flats constituted his most fertile field. Jim, by reason of his superior knowledge of that region, was the logical guide for the man of science, and accompanied him on many a tramp after the feathered denizens of the forest.

The old negro knew something of politics. He had two masters, Philip Triplett and James L. Johnson, the latter a son-in-law of the first, and both of them represented this district in the national congress. Jim heard many able political discussions in his capacity as servant to these two men. In his political career he never got much beyond the questions that separated the Whigs and Democrats during the two decades before the war but, in a crude way, he knew more of these than some men who have read history.

Typical of His Race.

In folk-lore the old man was typical of his race. "Uncle Remus" never told a story that was not familiar to Jim. He had told them hundreds of times for the amusement of the little folks before Joel Chandler Harris got his first line of type. There is a belief in some quarters that the "Uncle Remus" stories originated in the mind of the Atlanta journalist, but such is not the case. Where they did originate probably no man knows, but certain it is that they have been told by negroes all over the South, who only knew that they got them from their fathers.

Henry Grady in his great speech in Boston, the speech which was the culmination of his life work, described the Southern woman during the war, defenseless with her children at her knees and said, "I thank God that she is safe in her sanctuary, because her slaves, sentinel in the silent cabin, or guard at her chamber door, puts a black man's loyalty between her and danger." No negro ever more thoroughly vindicated this than old Jim.

A War Incident.

When Northern soldiers held Owensboro, the Confederates harassed them from every side. Now and then a home boy would slip under the shield of his friends, learn some of the enemy's secrets and return to the Confederate lines. The Federals were constantly searching houses to apprehend these dangerous messengers. One night they searched the house of Jim's "white folks." The master was away. Possibly the soldiers made more noise than was necessary and overturned more furniture than was absolutely required by their search, but they found no gray uniform and finally left. When one of the women of the family entered her room, she found a pair of cavalry boots protruding from beneath her bed.

She screamed, and Jim and Bob in the servant quarters heard the alarm. With his ever ready ax in hand, Jim rushed to the rescue, closely followed by Bob. The soldier was dragged from beneath the bed, and Jim had his ax drawn to brain him when his mistress appealed to him, "Jim, if you kill that man here the blood will ruin my new carpet." Jim respected the carpet but did not relent toward the offending soldier who was dragged by the stalwart negroes to the chopping block and Bob was holding his head ready for execution when a squad of soldiers, having missed their comrade, returned and rescued him.

Through the remaining forty years of his life after the war Jim remained as true to his "white folks" and to the white people in general as he was on the night when the cavalry boots were dragged from beneath his mistress' bed. He never went away from home hunting for freedom, and in the last days of his life he told his "Uncle Remus" stories to "Meh Lady," a little girl descended in the fifth generation from his first master.

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Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 2 March 2003 p3E:

Remembering 'Uncle Remus of Owensboro'
A notable life

By Glenn Hodges; Messenger-Inquirer

On Sunday, Nov. 18, 1906, the obituary of a black man was run in a prominent place at the top of a page in the Owensboro Messenger.

It was something very extraordinary in an age when segregation and Jim Crow laws ruled. It was done at a time when anything said in the newspaper about blacks was either negative and sensational, or meant to elicit a laugh at their expense.

But there it was. The lengthy life story of the man the Messenger called in its lead headline the "Uncle Remus of Owensboro."

Below that top headline were subheads lauding the other notable moments in Johnson's life: "Body Servant of Two Congressmen; Guide for J.J. Audubon; Incident of his Devotion During the Civil War - Would Have Beheaded a Union Soldier."

In his lead paragraph, the anonymous writer declared: "Not many of the strands that bind the antebellum and postbellum life in the South remain. The old master and the old servant - one dignified, aristocratic, capricious, it may be, but indulgent, and the other an imitator, wise in small things and faithful in all wherein his master is concerned - are all but extinct types. Here and there a remnant of this warmer, more exotic life lingers under some sheltered bank far into this rigorous winter of latter day commercialism, retaining the semblance, though the substance be gone, of a civilization, the like of which this world will never know again.

"One of the last products in Owensboro of the old conditions was Jim Johnson, the aged Negro who died last week," the writer continued. "Jim said he was a hundred years old, though the family Bible shows him to be 15 years younger."

Johnson, considered the oldest black person in Owensboro at that time, had died Nov. 13 in the cabin he had occupied for several years on Johnson's Lane.

As the story of Johnson's life unfolded, it was spread over three columns of the page.

In about 1821, Johnson was born into the family of Philip Triplett, a brother of entrepreneur Robert Triplett, the former coming to Daviess County to practice law about the time Owensboro became the county seat.

Johnson was the son of one of the black women the Triplett family had brought to Kentucky from Virginia. He was born in the slave quarters at the Triplett residence in the heart of the downtown business section of Owensboro. Johnson would later be the property of Philip Triplett's son-in-law, James Leeper Johnson, who came to Daviess County in 1836.

"In many respects, Jim was a remarkable Negro," the obit writer admitted.

Johnson was a man of many talents who made enduring impressions on those who ever saw him at work.

He was exceptional at handling a harvesting cradle, but a master in wielding an ax. "A man who knew him well in the prime of his life vouches for the statement that he could place a toothpick on the chopping block, swing his ax full and clear over him and split the pick squarely in the middle," the writer stated.

In his old days, when rheumatism twisted his once strong muscles, Johnson loved to tell of his triumphs in the cradling of wheat. Once a man was brought to Owensboro from Hardinsburg just to challenge Johnson's skills in a contest but failed.

Jim was also an able guide. He had lived in Owensboro when it only had three stores and a score of residences so he knew every foot of the city, most of the county and remembered all of it well into the final years of his life.

"In the darkest night, Jim could lead the way straight as the flight of an arrow to any point in the depths of the Panther Creek forests," the writer said. "Take him away from his familiar low grounds into a forest which he had never seen and though clouds might shroud the sky, so that moon nor stars gave him aid, he could unerringly tell directions by feeling the bark of the trees," the writer said.

In his younger days, Johnson's instincts were so refined that he somehow didn't need a clock to tell time, the writer opined. "He was familiar with every animal in the forest ... and was a weather prognosticator, often more accurate in his predictions than the government bureau."

When John James Audubon, America's great ornithologist, naturalist and bird artist, came to Daviess County, he stayed at the Triplett home and went to the Panther Creek flats to look for birds. "Jim, by reason of his superior knowledge of that region, was the logical guide for the man of science and accompanied him on many a tramp after the feathered denizens of the forest," the Messenger writer said.

Johnson also knew something about politics. His two masters both represented this area in Congress - Philip Triplett from 1839 to 1843 and Johnson from 1849 to 1851. Jim heard many astute political discussions in his capacity as servant to both men.

In his contact with the two white politicians, the writer concluded, Johnson "never got much beyond the questions of the Whigs and Democrats (the predominant political parties of his time) during the two decades before the war, but in a crude way ... knew more of these than some men who have read history."

Jim Johnson was best known for his ability as a storyteller, was revered for his loyalty to "his white folks" and touted for the gallant way he protected the women of his family during the Civil War, the Messenger said.

He was most remembered for the latter because of his part in an incident that occurred in the Johnson household during the rebellion. When Union soldiers occupied Owensboro, Confederates harassed them from every quarter. If a local rebel would slip into town under the shield of his family and friends, Federal soldiers would search the houses where they hid, hoping to capture the Confederates before they could escape with some Union secret.

One night, the Federals searched the Johnson house but left when they found no Confederates. When one of the women of the family returned to her room, she found a pair of cavalry boots sticking out from under her bed.

"She screamed, and Jim and Bob (another slave) in the servant quarters heard the alarm," the Messenger wrote. "With his ever ready ax in hand, Jim rushed to the rescue closely followed by Bob. The soldier was dragged from beneath the bed, and Jim had his ax drawn to brain him when his mistress appealed to him, 'Jim, if you kill that man here, the blood will ruin my new carpet.' "

According to the story, Jim respected the carpet, and he and Bob took the soldier outside to the chopping block. "Bob was holding his head ready for execution when a squad of soldiers, having missed their comrade, returned and rescued him."

The Messenger writer also ventured that Jim Johnson was telling "Uncle Remus" stories to local children long before the Atlanta journalist, Joel Chandler Harris, originated the tales.

"In folklore, the old man (Jim) was typical of his race," the Messenger wrote. "Uncle Remus never told a story that was not familiar to Jim. He had told them hundreds of times for the amusement of little folks before Harris got his first line of type."

Probably no man knows where the Uncle Remus stories originated, the Messenger writer asserted. "But certain it is that they have been told by Negroes all over the South, who only knew that they got them from their fathers."

In his closing paragraph, the obituary writer said of Johnson: "Through the remaining 40 years of his life after the war, he remained true to his white folks and to white people in general as he was on the night when the cavalry boots were dragged from beneath his mistress' bed. He never went away from home hunting for freedom, and in the last days of his life he told his Uncle Remus stories to 'Muh Lady,' a little girl descended in the fifth generation of his master."

The obituary about Jim Johnson in that Messenger edition of 1906 may have been a tribute to a man who many readers today would call an "Uncle Tom." These people might dismiss what the writer recalled about Jim's importance as a nostalgic, condescending longing for the comfortable days of slavery before war separated the races. And the writer's viewpoint might just reflect an accurate social perspective of those times.

But the affectionate, often-moving death notice may also have been a sincere remembrance of an old man who was loved by both races, had touched many lives in a personal way and would not soon be forgotten.

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Additional Notes by Jerry Long

c1810-1824

John James Audubon (1785-1851), the famous ornithologist and painter, located in Henderson, Henderson County, KY during 1810-1812 and made his home there until 1824. In

the article “Audubon in Panther Creek Flats” published in the Owensboro Messenger (Owensboro, KY, 10 December 1905 p24) it is stated that Audubon was the guest of Phillip Triplett in Owensboro “soon after settling in Henderson.” Audubon became a regular visitor at Triplett’s home. “A room was fitted up for his work and many of his bird paintings were made there.” Audubon spent many days exploring in the Panther Creek flats in Daviess County, KY. Most of his drawings in his books on the Birds of America were drawn during the 1820’s and 1830’s because of this and the presumed age of Jim Johnson (“Uncle Remus”) it is unlikely that Jim Johnson served as Audubon’s guide. Possibly Johnson told stories about Audubon’s visits to his former master, Phillip Triplett’s home and others in retelling the tales changed the facts a little.

1821 tax list of Daviess County, KY: Phillip Triplett (c1799-1852) is listed as a resident of Owensborough. Jim Johnson, slave of Phillip Triplett, was born in Owensboro circa 1821.

1839-1843: Phillip Triplett (c1799-1852) served in US Congress. Jim Johnson during this period accompanied him as a body servant.

1849-1851: James Leeper Johnson (1818-1877) served in US Congress. Jim Johnson during this period accompanied him as a body servant.

22 April 1850: James Leeper Johnson (1818-1877) married Harriette Triplett (1832-1882), daughter of Philip Triplett & Eliza Hopkins. Daviess County, KY Marriage Book A, page 209. Probably at about the time of his marriage the ownership of Jim Johnson (slave) was transferred to him from his father-in-law, Phillip Triplett.

1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule for Daviess County, KY: James Leeper Johnson (1818-1877) is shown as being the owner of 10 slaves, 7 males & 3 females.

1870 census of Owensboro, Daviess County, KY: listed at the residence of lawyer, James Leeper & Harriette (Triplett) Johnson are three Blacks :

Johnson, James	50	B	domestic servant	KY
Bettie	40	B	domestic servant	KY
Philip T.	6	B	domestic servant	KY

1889 City Directory of Owensboro, KY: Johnson, James (Black), hostler, at Dr. Phillip T. Johnson’s (this is Phillip Triplett Johnson son of James Leeper Johnson & Harriette Triplett).

30 July 1890: James Johnson married Fannie Harding in Owensboro. Negro Marriage Book G, page 26.

1903 City Directory Owensboro, KY: Johnson, James L. (wife Fannie H.), house on Johnson’s Lane and Lewis Street. (Johnson’s Lane is now 18th Street, it was named for James Leeper Johnson, 1818-1877).

Dropped Stitches in Owensboro History

AUDUBON IN PANTHER CREEK FLATS.

During the first quarter of the last century a young naturalist, gun and spy glass in hand, traveled over the entire face of the American continent, from the cypress swamps of Louisiana to the cliffs and crags of Labrador studying the nature and habits of birds—sketching them in order that he might paint their pictures, and following an individual of a rare species for days to hear its song, to see how and on what it fed, in what manner it flew and walked and after what fashion it nested, and then, in remarkably clear and charming language, writing the "biography" of the bird. His canoe pushed its nose among the bushes and under the overhanging vines along the banks of winding rivers; he struggled through the tangled briars of the cane brake, and splashed through marsh and morass; his rifle cracked among the crags of towering mountains. No place was too difficult of access or too remote from the comforts of civilization for him to journey to learn the smallest fact about its smallest feathered denizen.

Greatest Ornithologist.

That naturalist was John James Audubon, the greatest ornithologist America has produced—dead half a century ago, but in the fact that he has never had a peer in his chosen line, still a contemporary. Every person of tolerable literary attainments in Owensboro knows of Audubon, but only the smallest part of them know that some of his best work was done in the Panther creek flats south of Owensboro and on the river island and along the banks above and below town. The child as well as the more mature student studies reproductions of Audubon's pictures—very rarely the originals—but they do not dream that many of them were painted in an old brick house in Owensboro, which stands adjacent to the federal building. After the fashion of individuals and communities, Owensboro has forgotten its acquaintanceship with a great mind in the rush and grind of commercial trivialities. But for two or fifteen years Audubon was a frequent visitor to Owensboro, a well known figure in the surrounding forests.

Born in New Orleans.

Something in the nature of a sketch of the great naturalist is necessary in order to tell to the best advantage of his connection with the early days of Owensboro and Davless county. Of French extraction, he was born near New Orleans, May 4, 1780. He was educated in France and studied painting under David. About the year 1809 he settled in Pennsylvania, where he lived for several years and where he married. But his love for ornithology drew him away from his home, and immediately after his marriage in 1810, he descended the Ohio river, ac-

companied by his wife, her brother and his wife. The succeeding several years were spent for the most part in Kentucky.

In 1826 Audubon went to England and exhibited his drawings in Liverpool, Manchester and Edinburgh and finally published them in an unrivaled work of double folio size with 435 colored plates of birds the size of life. The plates were in four volumes, entitled "The Birds of America," and accompanied by five 8mo descriptive volumes "Ornithological Biography." The appearance of the books covered a period of twelve years, from 1827 to 1839.

On his final return to the United States he labored with Dr. Bachman on "The Quadrupeds of America." He died in New York June 27, 1851.

Married in Pittsburg.

Audubon's connection with this section of Kentucky began shortly after his marriage. He was married in Pittsburg to Lucy Bakewell. The same ceremony joined as husband and wife Thomas W. Bakewell, a brother of Lucy, and Elizabeth Page. Miss Page was an aunt of Mrs. Frank I. Hall, of this city, who has in her possession a book of psalms presented by Mrs. Audubon to her brother, Thomas W. Bakewell. On the fly leaf is her signature with the words, "To my brother, T. W. Bakewell, as a token of affection from his sister."

Honeymoon on the Ohio.

By way of spending their honeymoon the young couple fitted out a small boat and started out on a trip down the Ohio river, and it must have been the ideal honeymoon. Two young pairs, as happily mated as the birds among whom one of them lived, with so prosaic a soul to intersperse his marsh, hum-drum, commonplace—alone and face to face with the great power of nature—floating placidly down one of the most beautiful streams in all the world, in that early day when the hum of machinery and the din of traffic had not chased the holy silence from the shores—watching the glimmering moonlight printing fantastic pictures on the silver water or the cloudless sunset making a sea of burnished gold.

Explored the Forests.

The trip was a long one, both in distance and in time. No feverish anxiety to return to business marred its pleasures. At frequent intervals, in nature's fairest spots, the boat was anchored, and Audubon made incursions into the forest and brought back rare specimens of birds. In the little boat or on the shady bank he painted his matchless pictures and wrote his glowing sketches. He discovered a field so rich that he could not leave it fallow, and when the boat reached what was then the little village of Henderson, the trip was ended. The bridal party went ashore and Audubon and his young wife set up house keeping in the little town. The manner in which his wife assisted him in his great work was the kind of good

fortune to which only an occasional genius falls heir.

First Trip Here.

Shortly after settling in Henderson Audubon made his first trip to Owensboro. He was the guest of Philip Triplett, a scholar of considerable attainments, one of the pioneer lawyers of Owensboro, and subsequently member of congress. His house—the now dilapidated old brick building just east of the federal building on Third street—was famed throughout this end of the state for its hospitality and Audubon became a regular visitor there. A room was fitted up for his work and many of his bird paintings were made there. The diary of the late Mrs. Harriett T. Johnson, a daughter of Philip Triplett, contains numerous references to Audubon.

In Panther Creek Flats.

Audubon spent many days tramping through the forests known as the Panther creek flats. Perhaps in all America there was not a spot where material of the kind he sought was more abundant than there. Besides being able to get closer acquainted with many of the well known varieties, Audubon found some very rare birds along Panther creek. In all his life he was never able to find but two specimens of the "Carbonated Swamp Warbler," and both of these, he says in his book, were shot near Owensboro. "I shot the two little birds here represented," he says, "in May, 1811. They were both busily engaged in searching for insects along the branches and amongst the leaves of a dogwood tree. On examination they were found to be both males. I am of the opinion that they were each young birds of the preceding year, and not in full plumage, as they had no part of their dress complete except the head. Not having met with any other individuals of this species, I am at this moment unable to say anything more about them.

"They were drawn, like almost all other birds I have represented, immediately after being killed, but the branch on which you see them was not added until the following summer. The common name of this plant is service-tree. It seldom attains a greater height than thirty or forty feet and is usually found in hilly ground of secondary quality. The berries are agreeable to the taste, and are much sought after by many species of birds, amongst which the red-headed woodpecker is very conspicuous."

Another rare bird of the same genus, the Nashville swamp warbler, was found here. "I have shot only three or four birds of this species," writes Audubon, "and these were all that I have met with. I found them in Louisiana and Kentucky. With the exception of a few low, eagerly repeated creaking notes, I have not heard any sounds from them. I am not aware of its nest having been discovered or described by any naturalist."

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY
Sunday, 12 August 1906 p5:

Dr. C. R. Hemphill, one of the Bible conference instructors, is an authority on negro dialect. He was reared in Western South Carolina, and has made a special study of the dialect of the upland district of the middle South, the "Uncle Remus" type. Dr. Hemphill says that this dialect differs essentially from the dialect of the Ohio valley. He visited old "Uncle" Jim Johnson, probably the most typical old time Kentucky negro in Owensboro, Friday, for the purpose of comparing the dialect as spoken by him with that spoken by the old time Georgia and Western Carolina negroes.
