

Zacharie Kinslow

James K. Polk Home

We come here today to honor the lives of Elias and Mary Polk. Elias Polk was born into slavery in 1806 on the farm owned by Major Samuel Polk in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. When Elias was less than a year old he was moved, with the Polk family, west to Tennessee. For the next 18 years of his life lived on the Spring Hill farm in Middle Tennessee. In 1824 after the marriage of Sam Polk's oldest son, James K. Polk, to Sarah Childress, Elias was given to the newlywed couple as a wedding gift. Elias would spend the next 25 years of his life staying close to James Polk. It was around this time that James Polk began a political career that would reach a climax with his election to the presidency in 1844. Elias would reflect on his years with the Polk's with great admiration in his later years. After the death of James Polk in 1849, Elias continued to live with Sarah Polk at "Polk Place" in Nashville, Tennessee. During the Civil War, when Sarah remained neutral on the issue, Elias made it known that he was a strong supporter of the Confederate cause. After the war, he began an illustrious political career, that saw him rise through the ranks to become one of the most influential African American orators of his time and Tennessee's first black Conservative. Elias was considered to be a candidate for the Tennessee State Legislature in 1867, he worked for the Tennessee State Senate as a porter from 1871-1875, he worked as a messenger at the U.S. House of Representatives from 1876-1881. When Elias was dismissed from the House in 1881 it was so controversial that the Clerk, Edward McPherson, had to explain his decision in the Washington Post. Elias returned to Nashville where he met and married Mary E. Mansfield. Mary was forty-one years younger than Elias, but their love must have been strong. Elias and Mary moved to Alexandria, Virginia in 1882, where Elias took work at the post office, but due to his failing health the couple soon moved back to Nashville. In 1886 Elias made one more trip to Washington, D.C. He was looking for work and met with President Grover Cleveland, who he referred to as a "Democrat of the old school." Later, during this same trip, Elias met with Captain Donelson, who informed him that Elias would be appointed back to the House of Representatives. However, as the paperwork was being completed for the appointment, Elias Polk passed away at age 80 due to complications from pneumonia. Mary was left with the great amount of debt that Elias had acquired. She had to mortgage her Nashville home and her carriage to pay off the debts, however this left her with no money to have Elias's remains moved from D.C. to Nashville. When Sarah Polk heard the news, she contacted Captain Donelson and asked him to place his remains in Graceland Cemetery until the money could be raised to have Elias's body brought to Nashville. After Mary took out ads in local newspapers, the money was raised and after three months Elias's body was moved from D.C. to Nashville by train. Funeral services were held at Clark's Chappell and Elias was buried in Nashville City Cemetery where he remains to this very day. A year later Mary would join him in death and be placed next to her husband in this same cemetery. By placing these headstones here today it shows that these people mattered. That they were more than just slaves, wives, or widely forgotten historical figures. Elias's life matters greatly when it comes to our understanding of the complex political and social climate of the post-Civil War South. Thank You.