

Sally Thomas
1780 – 1850

Section 31 # 310022

Sally was born into slavery in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1789. When she was about 30 years old, her slave owner Charles Thomas took her and her two young sons, John and Henry, to live on land he owned near Nashville. She was granted permission to live in town and take in laundry. She was, in fact, hired out by her owner who would take part of her earnings. When her older son John was ten years old, Sally arranged for him to work for Captain Rapier, a river barge owner. Captain Rapier left funds in his will to take care of John. The captain's estate funds purchased John's freedom when he was 21 years old.

In Nashville Sally gave birth to another son and named him James. When James was seven years old, the Charles Thomas estate was broken up in Virginia. Sally, Henry and James were sent to live with a distant Thomas relative in Nashville named Martin. Sally became increasingly concerned about the future of her sons. Even though there was great risk, it was decided that Henry should attempt to flee. He escaped to Indiana and Sally never saw him again. She remained worried about James. She asked help from Ephraim H. Foster, a prominent Nashville lawyer. Foster learned that Martin wanted to sell James for \$400.00. Sally had \$350, and Foster lent her the rest. Foster arranged the purchase. Later Sally, with help from Godfrey Fogg, purchased her own freedom. Neither Sally nor James could leave the state because, by law, they were the property of Foster and Fogg.

When James was 14 years old, Sally arranged for him to learn a trade with Frank Parrish who was a former slave. Parrish operated successful barber shops and bath houses in Nashville. After five years of apprenticeship, James opened his own barber shop in the same building on Deaderick Street, near the Courthouse, where his mother ran her laundry. In 1851, Foster petitioned the court and James became a free man.

Sally died during the Cholera Epidemic in Nashville in 1850. She was buried at City Cemetery. In 1908 her tombstone was still standing and the inscription was legible during the first survey of City Cemetery. By 2005 her tombstone no longer existed.

In 2009 a Replacement Tombstone was dedicated for Sally Thomas at City Cemetery.

Sources

In Search of the Promised Land. John Hope Franklin. 2006

Tennessee4Me. Tennessee State Museum website

Nashville City Cemetery Association Newsletter. Spring/Summer 2009. City Cemetery website

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