

Thomas Price

James K. Polk Home

Curator

Today, we honor the life of “Aunt” Matilda Polk. Although we don’t know as much about her remarkably lengthy life as we would like, what we do know is remarkable. Matilda died in 1849, a victim of the cholera epidemic that was sweeping through the entire South. That same disease would claim the 11th President, and her “owner” James Knox Polk just days later. Census records show that at the time of her death, Matilda was 110 years old, making her birth year around 1739. She was probably born into slavery somewhere near the Eastern seaboard, and eventually became the servant of the Childress Family. She is first documented as a slave of Joel Childress, who was the father of future First Lady Sarah Childress. Joel Childress came from Virginia to Tennessee when Tennessee was still considered the Western frontier. Settling in the vicinity of Sumner then Rutherford Counties, Matilda remained with the Childress family near Murfreesboro, Tennessee until she was bequeathed to Sarah Polk at the time of her marriage to James K. Polk in 1824. She then moved to Columbia, Tennessee, where she remained until 1849, when the Polks left the White House and settled at “Polk Place” in Nashville. There, Matilda settled into the servants’ wing of the mansion until three months later when she was one of the hundreds of victims of the cholera outbreak. She was buried in City Cemetery in Nashville.

Today we should remember “Aunt” Matilda, who for her remarkably long life. A life of toil and subservience, she also helped the Childress and Polk families thrive and become influential on the state and national levels.