

Monuments & milestones

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Sally Thomas (1787-1850)

by Jim Hoobler, Nashville City Cemetery Board member

Born into slavery in Charlottesville, Virginia, Sally Thomas, the slave of Charles Thomas, bore two sons to John, her owner's brother – John, born in 1808, and Henry, born a year later. Around 1817 Sally and her children were sent over 550 miles to Thomas family land near Nashville. Here her owner allowed her to take in laundry if she gave him some of the profits. Ceding control over her, he made her a "quasi-slave," who could rent her own house, move about freely, buy, sell, and negotiate her own business contracts. Although in time her owner even stopped requiring her to share her earnings with him, Sally was still legally considered his property.

In 1827 attorney John C. Catron fathered Sally's third son, James P. Thomas. Sally and her children lived then at the corner of Cherry (4th) and Deaderick Streets, a block from the Davidson County

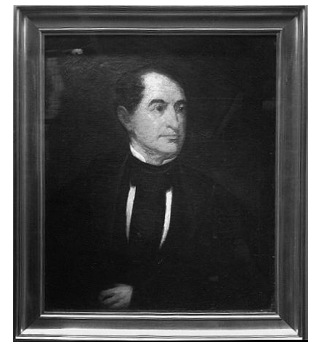


John C. Catron by Chester Harding, Tennessee State Museum Collection

Courthouse. There she ran her laundry business, saving money to purchase the freedom of her children. Sally's oldest son, John, worked for a Nashville barge captain, even taking his last name. Captain Rapier, who had taught the young man to read and write, saved his own money to free John, and in 1829 his executors obtained permission from the Alabama General Assembly to use estate funds to purchase John's freedom.

In 1834 Sally learned that she, Henry, and James were being returned to Virginia to settle her owner's estate. Fearing they would be sold separately, she urged Henry to escape. Hiding by day, avoiding farms where he might

be spotted, Henry fled north to Louisville, Kentucky, only to be caught and jailed. Still chained, he miraculously escaped the first night in a stolen boat. Surviving a plunge over the Falls of The Ohio, he crossed into Indiana, where a sympathetic individual removed his chains. Henry eventually arrived in Buffalo, New York, where he worked as a barber; he later moved to Canada.



Ephraim Hubbard Foster by Washington Cooper, Tennessee State Museum Collection

Meanwhile, to keep James from being sold away from her, Sally persuaded attorney Ephraim Hubbard Foster to help her buy the child from John Martin, the Thomas relative who owned him. Martin wanted \$400 for the seven-year-old, but Sally had saved only \$350. Foster agreed to lend her the other \$50 and arranged the sale with Martin. Although Sally soon paid off her debt to Ephraim Foster and held James's bill of sale and "free papers," under Tennessee law James was still considered Foster's slave. Since the 1834 state Constitution required free blacks to leave Tennessee immediately or return to slavery, James had to appear to be someone's property in order to remain in Nashville.

Sally purchased her own freedom with the assistance of Godfrey M. Fogg (nephew of educator Francis B. Fogg, and law partner of Ephraim Foster), who loaned her part of the money. Deeds in the Davidson County Courthouse list Sally as the property of G. M. Fogg, and James as the property of Ephraim Foster — legally Sally and James would remain slaves until the courts ruled them free and permitted them

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to remain in Tennessee as free persons. Regrettably, Sally died in 1850, before such a ruling was made. James, now running a barbershop in the house Sally had rented at Deaderick and Cherry, purchased a grave site for her in City Cemetery, erecting a tombstone inscribed, "Sally Thomas 1787-1850." On March 6, 1851, Ephraim Foster petitioned the Davidson County Court to allow him to free James. The court found in favor of the petition, Foster posted a bond, and James was free. James's own petition to be permitted

to remain in Nashville was also approved, with the posting of a good character bond.

Ironically, James was the natural son of Tennessee's Chief Justice, John C. Catron, whom Andrew Jackson had appointed to the U. S. Supreme Court during his last days in office, when the court was expanded to nine members. Thus Catron's Dred Scott ruling that African Americans were property and had no citizenship rights applied to his own son.

THEN & NOW

From the Nashville Room photo archives at the Nashville Public Library, a glimpse of the City Cemetery from the past and how it appears today.



The early 19th century markers for Mary Mackenzie (left) and Hester Jefferson (right). (Photo courtesy of the Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room.) The same markers fifty-three years later. An example of how quickly history can be lost to the elements. (Photo by Jeff Thomeycroft)

Master Gardeners Demonstration

by Robert Mather, Nashville City Cemetery Board member

The Davidson County Master Gardeners held their fourth annual BOXWOOD TRIMMING demonstration at the Nashville City Cemetery on Saturday, February 14, 2009. Over twenty Master Gardeners and "Interns" shared



Lou Anne Sandlin (second from right) instructs volunteers on proper Boxwood trimming techniques.

a hands-on lesson in the proper way to trim boxwood. **LouAnne Sandlin** and **Robert Mather**, project co-chairs for the City Cemetery Project, provided instructions for "clouding," a method of pruning up to five inches from a limb on the outside of the plant in order to allow light to get to the center. Following this process with the entire plant allows the gardener to trim and shape the boxwood. Since only a little trimming is done each year (in February and March), it may take several years to get and keep boxwood in the desired shape and size.

The day of the demonstration was sunny and cool but just right for working outside. Boxwood plantings in front of the Keeble building, the Robinson family plot, and two other areas were given the proper attention and are looking neat and elegant. As usual, those participating in the event learned a little of the history of the City Cemetery as they were working, and there were many questions. Everyone was invited to return on **Saturday, April 18, at 10:00 a.m., for the SPECIAL SATURDAY TOUR** that Sandlin and Mather will be leading at the Cemetery that day. Some of those attending this workshop had never visited the Historic Nashville City Cemetery before and expressed great interest in returning and learning more about its history and its recent restoration. We can expect to see many of these Master Gardeners helping with the annual Living History Tour later this year.