

November 1936

## **Interview, Louis Napoleon and James Johnson, Slave Interview, November 17, 1936**

Louis Napoleon

James Johnson

Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida

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FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT  
American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)  
Jacksonville, Florida

J. M. Johnson  
Field Worker  
Complete  
1,450 Words

Slave Interview  
November 17, 1936

Louis Napoleon

About three miles from South Jacksonville proper, down the old Saint Augustine Road lives one Louis Napoleon an ex-slave, born in Tallahassee, Florida about 1857, eight years prior to Emancipation.

His parents were Scipio and Edith Napoleon, being originally owned by Colonel John S. Sammis of Arlington, Florida and the Floyd family of Saint Marys, Georgia, respectively.

Scipio and Edith were sold to Arthur Randolph, a physician and large plantation owner of Fort Louis, about five miles from the capitol at Tallahassee. On this large plantation that covered an area of about eight miles and composed approximately of 90 slaves, is where Louis Napoleon first saw the light of day.

Louis' father was known as the wagoner. His duties were to haul the commodities raised on the plantation and other things that required a wagon. His mother Edith was known as a "breeder", and was kept in the palatial Randolph mansion to loom cloth for the Randolph family and slaves. The cloth was made from the cotton raised on the plantation's fertile fields. As Louis was so young, he had no

particular duties, only to look for hen nests, gather eggs and play with the master's three young boys. There were seven children in the Randolph family, three young boys, two "missey" girls and two grown sons. Louis would go fishing and hunting with the three younger boys and otherwise engage with them in their childish pranks.

He says that his master and mistress were very kind to the slaves and would never whip them nor would he allow the "driver" who was a white man named Barton to do so. Barton lived in a home especially built for him on the plantation. If the "driver" whipped any of them, all that was necessary for the slave who had been whipped was to report it to the master and the "driver" was dismissed as he was a salaried man.

Plantation Life. The slaves lived in log cabins especially built for them. They were coiled and arranged in such a manner as to retain the heat in winter from the large fireplaces constructed therein.

Just before the dawn of day, the slaves were aroused from their slumber by a loud blast from a cow-horn that was blown by the "driver" as a signal to prepare themselves for the fields. The plantation being so expansive, those who had to go a long distance to the area where they worked, were taken in wagons, those working nearby walked. They took their meals along with them and had their breakfast and dinner on the fields. An hour was allowed for this purpose. The slaves worked while they sang spirituals to break the monotony of long hours of work. At the setting of the sun, with their day's work all done, they returned to their cabins and prepared their evening's meal. Having finished this, the religious among them would gather at one of the cabin doors and give

thanks to God in the form of long supplications and old fashioned songs. Many of them being highly emotional would respond in shouts of hallelujahs sometimes causing the entire group to become "happy" concluding in shouting and praise to God. The wicked slaves expended their pent up emotions in song and dance. Gathering at one of the cabin doors they would sing and dance to the tunes of a fife, banjo or fiddle that was played by one of their number. Finished with this diversion they would retire to await the dawn of a new day which indicated more work. The various plantations had white men employed as "patrols" whose duties were to see that the slaves remained on their own plantations, and if they were caught going off without a permit from the master, they were whipped with a "raw hide" by the "driver." There was an exception to this rule, however, on Sundays the religious slaves were allowed to visit other plantations where religious services were being held without having to go through the matter of having a permit.

Religion. There was a free colored man who was called "Father James Page," owned by a family of Parkers of Tallahassee. He was freed by them to go and preach to his own people. He could read and write and would visit all the plantations in Tallahassee, preaching the gospel. Each plantation would get a visit from him one Sunday of each month. The slaves on the Randolph plantation would congregate in one of the cabins to receive him where he would read the Bible and preach and sing. Many times the services were punctuated by much shouting from the "happy ones." At these services the sacrament was served to those who had accepted Christ, those who had not, and were willing to accept Him were received and prepared for baptism on the next visit of "Father Page."

On the day of baptism, the candidates were attired in long white flowing robes, which had been made by one of the slaves. Amidst singing and praises they marched, being flanked on each side by other believers, to a pond or lake on the plantation and after the usual ceremony they were "ducked" into the water. This was a day of much shouting and praying.

Education. The two "missey" girls of the Randolph family were dutiful each Sunday morning to teach the slaves their catechism or Sunday School lesson. Aside from this there was no other training.

The War and Freedom. Mr. Napoleon relates that the doctor's two oldest sons went to the war with the Confederate army, also the white "driver" Barton. His place was filled by one of the slaves, named Peter Parker.

At the closing of the war, word was sent around among the slaves that if they heard the report of a gun, it was the Yankees and that they were free.

It was in May, in the middle of the day, cotton and corn being planted, plowing going on, and slaves busily engaged in their usual activities, when suddenly the loud report of a gun resounded, then could be heard the slaves crying almost en-masse, "dems de Yankees." Straightway they dropped the plows, hoes and other farm implements and hurried to their cabins. They put on their best clothes "to go see the Yankees." Through the countryside to the town of Tallahassee they went. The roads were quickly filled with these happy souls. The streets of Tallahassee were clustered with these jubilant people going

here and there to get a glimpse of the Yankees, their liberators. Napoleon says it was a joyous and un-forgettable occasion.

When the Randolph slaves returned to their plantation, Dr. Randolph told them that they were free, and if they wanted to go away, they could, and if not, they could remain with him and he would give them half of what was raised on the farms. Some of them left, however, some remained, having no place to go, they decided it was best to remain until the crops came off, thus earning enough to help them in their new venture in home seeking. Those slaves who were too old and not physically able to work, remained on the plantation and were cared for by Dr. Randolph until their death.

Napoleon's father, Scipio, got a transfer from the government to his former master, Colonel Summis of Arlington, and there he lived for awhile. He soon got employment with a Mr. Hatee of the town and after earning enough money, bought a tract of land from him there and farmed. There his family lived and increased. Louis being the eldest of the children obtained odd jobs with the various settlers among them being Governor Reid of Florida who lived in South Jacksonville. Governor Reid raised cattle for market and Napoleon's job was to bring them across the Saint Johns River on a lighter to Jacksonville, where they were sold.

Louis Napoleon is now aged and infirm, his father and mother having died many years ago. He now lives with one of his younger brothers who has a fair sized orange grove on the south side of Jacksonville. He retains the property that his father first bought after freedom and on which they lived in Arlington. His hair is white and he is bent with

age and ill health, but his mental faculties are exceptionally keen for one of his age. He proudly tells you that his master was good to his "niggers" and cannot recall but one time that he saw him whip one of them and that, when one tried to run away to the Yankees. Only memories of a kind master in his days of servitude remain with him as he recalls the dark days of slavery.

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REFERENCES

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