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Interview, Samson Forrester and Jules A. Frost, Slave Story, September 12, 1936

Samson Forrester

Jules A. Frost

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

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J. A. Frost
Sept. 12, 1938

Samson

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SAMSON FORRESTER

- Slave Story

Born in slavery, stolen by the Indians, recaptured and restored to his master, bought and held as a slave by the Government, manumitted and employed by Uncle Sam at a good salary, these are only a few excerpts from the unusual experiences of Samson Forrester, legendary character and black Daniel Boone of his time.

According to a news story in the Tampa Tribune of August 11, 1883, Samson was a slave belonging to a man named Forrester. Some few years before the first Seminole War of 1835, when he was a small child, he was stolen by the Indians. His native English was soon forgotten, and when recaptured and restored to his master several years later, he was a tall, well built youth, skilled in all the secrets of woodcraft, and familiar with the haunts of the Seminole.

His mother tongue quickly returned to him, and the officers at Fort Brooks, military reservation of Tampa, recognizing his potential usefulness, purchased him from his master for \$1,500 and placed him at the disposal of the local commanding officer at Fort Brooks, from which point he operated as a slave of the Government, performing useful service as scout and interpreter.

At the close of the second Seminole war in 1842 he was given his freedom, but retained by the government at a good salary. As official ambassador to the Seminoles, he rendered indispensable service in helping to round up the Indians for deportation to Louisiana and Arkansas. Instead of drawing and spending his money, he allowed it to accumulate in the hands of Major McKinstry, quartermaster at Fort Brooks, and these savings proved useful some time later.

As the last stragglers were being brought in and transported to the western reservations, Samson found time for romance. Tropical moonlight and the philoprogenitive urge began to serenade the stout heart of the young adventurer, and a strong attraction drew him to the home of Captain William H. Kendrick, where he lingered under the delicious influence of a pair of languorous dark eyes, owned and operated by Rose, unusually attractive maid belonging to Mrs. Kendrick.

Here was the setting for a true-life story as captivating as fiction, involving a tall, browned, athletic youth, unpolluted by the taint of modern civilization, tempered in the furnace of adventure from earliest recollection; and a young girl, swarthy of skin, but with the features and figure of a Venus in bronze, who, according to her master, was the most beautiful colored girl he had ever seen.

In a newspaper interview in 1883, some forty years later, Captain Kendrick told interestingly of events leading up the unusual courtship. When Samson became convinced that possession rather than pursuit of happiness in all-important, he went to Captain Kendrick and offered to buy the girl who had brought about such strange performance of a previously normal heart.

The captain, unacquainted with Samson's thrifty habits, replied that the slave had cost him \$1,400, and that even if he should sell her at cost, she would still be out of Samson's reach. The dusky Romeo answered that such transaction might be arranged, since he was able and willing to produce the cash.

Surprised by this prompt acceptance, the captain remembered that his wife might have something to say about the matter, for she and the children were genuinely fond of the useful and attractive girl; so he countered with the declaration that he would not sell the maid without her own consent.

When told of the offer she burst into tears, and much to her master's surprise, said that she was willing to be sold, but only to her husband, Samson joyfully made his mark to an order on Major McKinstry, who handed over the full amount in gold, and the joyful pair left for their new home in Fort Brooks.

When the military post was abandoned, Samson selected a government homestead on Hailoman's Branch, near Lake Thonotosassa. At this place, which he named Samsonville, they lived with an adopted daughter until nearly the turn of the century, when the old scout died at an advanced age. His widow lived there until her death, many years later.

The article in the old newspaper file stated that one incident in Samson's career reflected rather unfavorably upon him. In 1839, when General William S. Harney was encamped on the Caloosahatchee River six miles west of Fort Myers, in command of a detachment of 30 men engaged in building a trading post, Samson Forrester was in charge of the scouting operations, spending a large part of his time with the Seminoles in their Big Cypress camp.

After the men had performed a particularly hard day's work in camp, Samson returned from the Indians' stronghold with the reassuring news that the warriors were in a friendly mood. Relying upon this information, General Harney decided not to post the usual guard, and the men were soon sleeping soundly. Toward morning the Indians under the command of Cheekiki and Billy Bowlegs attacked the little force, killing eighteen men. General Harney who was already awake and was preparing maps and plans for the coming day heard the commotion, and cutting an opening in the back of his tent he swam across the river, hid under a boat, and finally reached Fort Myers.

The general believed for a long time that Samson had betrayed him, but it is thought that he finally changed his mind. Samson stoutly denied the charge, but his innocence was never definitely established.

In a recent interview with David Taylor, an ex-slave now living in Tampa, it was learned that Samson Forrester had become his godfather when he was christened in Key West more than eighty years ago. Some years later Forrester left Key West for Tampa, taking his young charge with him. The boy lived at Samsonville with his foster parents for about two years, but because of the harsh treatment of Forrester, he finally ran away. The old man speaks affectionately of "Aunt Rose," Forrester's wife, and says that he visited her at Samsonville long after her husband's death.

Questioned as to the probability of Forrester's betrayal of General Harney, Uncle Dave admitted, after mature thought, that such act would not have been unusual for a man of that type, and said that he recalled having heard Forrester boast of having given wrong information both to whites and to Indians.

Musing over recollections of Forrester's peculiar habits, old Dave told of certain savage traits seeming to prove that environment often exerts an unusual force upon an individual who, under different circumstances, might have become the most docile of servants.

During Taylor's rather brief stay at Samsonville, when only an immature youth, he went out to the open well to draw a pail of water. A loose board on the curb caused him to spill a part of the contents of the bucket, and Forrester, who was standing nearby, ordered the boy to bring him the board. When he did so, the man struck him in the side with the edge of the board, with such force that young Taylor was rendered almost unconscious. When he was able to move he ran most of the way to Tampa, caught an outbound boat and returned to his old home in Key West.

In spite of the memory of this unpleasant exodus, Taylor recalls the prowess of his powerful foster parent and tells with an amused smile of the only time the invincible scout was ever knocked down without quick and effective retaliation.

During the roundup of the last shipment of Indians, a band of women and children were waiting on the dock at Tampa for the gang plank to be lowered from the boat that would carry them from their beloved Land of Flowers. Forrester had fluently described the attractive features of the Louisiana reservation, and had been largely instrumental in influencing the Indians to come in voluntarily.

As he came riding in on his horse an old squaw motioned for him to come nearer. "Samson," she said in her native tongue, "we nursed you when a baby. We trusted you with all our secrets, and loved you as one of our own. Now, when we need your protection, you turn against us, and round us up like cattle."

Before the man realized the depth of her feelings she swung a sturdy fist to his jaw with such force that he was knocked bodily out of the saddle. "An' dat be de onliest time," Unole Dave chuckled, "that anybody, white, black or Injun, evah knock him down 'thout gittin' bad hurt."

In a recent interview with David Taylor, an ex-slave now living in Tampa, it was learned that Samson Forrester had become his godfather when he was christened in Key West more than eighty years ago. When the old newspaper account was brought to light, another visit was made to Unole Dave to get further particulars.

"Hit was lak dis," the old man explained. "Marse Pinkney was a Catholic, an' he had all his slaves christened by a priest. W'en my mammy j'ined de Methodists, she want dat I be christened over ag'in, an'

He listened attentively while the transcript of the old news story was read to him.

"Well, dat's mos'ly right, I reckon," he agreed; "He sho was what you'd oall a fine-lookin' man, tall and straight, wid shouldahs 'bout dat broad; but I wouldn't say he evah did learn to talk right good. I know -- I lived wid 'Im quite a spell an' he allus talked like a Injun; nevah could say my name--allus oalled me 'Dave.'"

"I was a pretty good chunk of a boy w'en he brung me here t' Tampa wid 'im f'm Key West. He oalled his place 'Samsonville' -- it was 'bout two mile and a hahf otha side o' Lake Thonotosassa, on Holloman's Branch, right 'crost f'm ol' man Adam Holloman's place. I lived wid um tell I got a mess of his oussedness; den I run away."

Pressed for details of Samson's treatment, old Dave's wrinkled features became tense at the recollection of the occurrence. "Tried t' kill me--dat's what he done. One day I was drawin' watah f'm open well. Stid of a rope, we had what you oall a sweep, a pole fastened to de bucket. Dey was a loose bo'd on de curb, an' hit slipped an' made me spill de watah. Samson was stahndin' off a piece watchin' me, an' he say 'Fotuh me dat bo'd.' W'en I give it to 'im he hit me in de side wid de edge of it an' knooked me down. W'en I o'd git my bref I run into de house an' told Rosella--dat was his 'dopted daughter, I gwine run away. She jes lahf an' say she reckon I wouldn't."

"'Ef you see me come into dis house ag'in,' I tells 'er, 'you kin soald me wid dat kittle o' hot watah.'"

"Pretty soon I went in to git my things, an' she say 'You min' what you done tol' me? I'se gwine do what you tell me to,' an' she retch for de kittle. Out I goes, an' nevah stopped runnin' tell I got to Cyrus Charles' place in Tampa."

"He was de cullud fireman at Haygood's mill. Dat was 'bout where de Southern Lumber Company is now, at de foot o' Harrison Street, on de river. Cyrus lived in a big two-story house on 'de southwest corner o' Tampa an' Harrison. At dat time de river come right up to his back yahd. All dat land what's dere now, clean down to de river was filled in, mos'ly wid sawdust an' stuff dumped in f'm de mill.

"Well, I stayed at his house till I got a job wid Cap'n James McKay on one o' his boats goin' to Key West. W'en I got dere, I lit out an' ^xayed hid till de boat done lef'."

"From what you know of Forrester," the old man was asked, "do you think that he might have aoted as traitor--that he caused the Harney massaore?"

"I 'member hearin' 'bout dat massaoree, an' I wouldn't put hit past 'im. He'd be mighty apt to do a trick lak dat. I've heared 'im say he done betrayed befe white folks an' Injuns. He useta brag about it. But I reckon dey be'n lotsa otha' folk done de same thing. W'en de Injuns save out a white f'm a party dey be killin' dat man gwine mek 'em think he willin' to he'p 'em out; but no sooner 'n he gits wid some white folks, he tells 'em all 'bout de Injuns, an' how t' ketch up wid 'em.

Samson Forrester was a sly one, all right. Once he was scoutin' for de sojers an' dey come to some Injun tracks all gwine de same way. De sojers stahts off de way de tracks gwine, an' Samson he say 'Hol' on, dere! Y'all gwine de wrong way.' An' sho nuff, dem Injuns be'n walkin' back' ards. So de sojers tu'n an' go de otha way, and pretty soon dem tracks all be tu'ned de otha way and dem Injuns be'n runnin' lickety-split an' got

away."

The old man was asked if he remembered Forrester's wife.

"Ahnt Rose? I reckon I do. I useta go an' see 'er long ahftah he be'n daid, W'en she was visitin' at de Armwood's. Levin Armwood, he was a ouliud p'lioeman. His place was on de corner o' guv'ner an Scott, where de oullud Episcopal church is now. He's got a daughter, Blanch, still livin'. Her mother was a Holloman. Mis' Pughsley, at de funeral home, she o'n tell you all about de Armwoods."

"Did Samson Forrester and his wife have any children?"

The old man smiled. "He had plenty of 'em, but none of 'em b'longed to Ahnt Rose. Nellie Forrester, a granddaughter o' his, lives som'eres in West Tampa now. Dat piece you done read sounds lak Ahnt Rose be his fust wife; she wasn't, though. His fust wife was killed by de Injuns. Ahnt Rose lived on de old place at Samsonville until she died. She useta visit a right smart wid de Armwoods, but she allus wanted t' be baak at bed-time."

Q U E S T I O N N A I R E

Who was Samson Forrester's master?

Where did he live?

Where did Samson and his wife first live here in Tampa?

About when did they move to Samsonville?

Just where is Samsonville?

Where is the old Adam Holloman place?

Was Armwood's wife a Holloman? Did she belong to the Adam Holloman family?

Did you ever see a picture of Samson Forrester?

Did you know Rosella, his adopted daughter? What became of her?

Where is Samson buried? Where is Rose buried?

About how old was Samson when stolen by the Indians? When recaptured?

Do you know anything about his first wife? Her name?

Where was she killed by the Indians?

Do you know Blanche Armwood? Is she a lawyer in Washington?