

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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George Reed age 83 or 85

"How do you do, I'll bet you are Mr. Reed, --Uncle George Reed." I hailed the powerful old darky dozing in the tempered heat of the gallery of his staunch cottage facing Railroad Street. Contrary to the dictum of southern usage I often slipped in a "Mr." or "Mrs." in addressing colored church folk; as an approach in seeking their cooperation it rarely failed.

"Deed I's one ob dem. An' I am Uncle George. What kin I do for you?" His aged but powerful frame roused up quickly and a kindly interest lit up his ebony face.

"Uncle George, Rev. Hopkins tells me you are the one person of all his flock that can tell me how old this church is and all about its earley history. You've been here a long time, I guess."

"Deed I have," Uncle George answered, smiling with genuine pride and pleasure. "I was married right here in '78 an' the church wus built some time before, 'bout '69 or '70. I hauled the first timbers here for it. --Those were good ol' days; men kept their word in those days." He drowsed in meditation but started up soon:

"Them timbers were stole--but we built the church jes' the same. Got us some more timbers," he explained.

"Great Scott, Uncle, how old are you!" I smiled in admiration for he presented a fine picture of health and strength, though only a stump remained of one arm that had been crudely amputated.

"Don't ezactly know; between 83 or 85 maybe. I wus here when Jim Copeland wus hung at Augusta. That wus in '55. All us niggers, white folks too, talked about nothing else. Me an' some other boys wus tol' by my Pappy to kill a chicken that wus ailin'. We got us a string an' hung it, like Jim Copeland." Uncle George laughed outright at the ridiculous picture still clear in his memory.

"I knows all about the war; one ob de gin'ral that fought for my freedom wus killed by de Injuns. His name wus Custer. I remember I wus workin' wid a big gang of niggers in New Awleans that day;-- Custer an' all his men, forty of 'em, everyone wus killed. He wus a very brave gin'ral but headstrong. Yessir, he fought to make us free. Bud Thompson told me though, there wus four hundred men, not forty."

"Seems to me your friend was more nearly right as to the number of men," I said, trying to get Uncle George back to Mississippi and the church whose history I was seeking. "Didn't you say you lived here through those times?"

"Oh yes sur, here an' Hattiesburg an' New Awleans,--and all round here. Times wus mos' queer, all mixed up, in war days. White folks had plenty ob trouble. Worst mixed up you ebber saw. There wus Jim Hudson, short ways this way frum Hattiesburg. Jim wouldn't go to war, nor any uv his brothers. So they jined up wid de other white men in the woods that didn't want to go to war. They had their tick-tackin' signals an' the Confederate troops, sent to make 'em jine the army, never could catch 'em fur a long time. After a time, Lem Williams,--he had always been Jim's neighbor an' most first friend,--Lem got tired of hidin' out in them woods."

"'Les' jine up with the Confederate troops,' Lem says, 'then after the war is over we kin be somebody. This way we never kin.' But Jim wouldn't agree so Lem Williams snook away unbeknownst an' jined up wid de troops."

The aged negro paused, wrapped in his memories, but started up again.

"Them troopers made Lem lead a gang ob soldiers right back into de woods; he knowin' all de trails an' de tick-tackin' business. An' they soon surrounded Jim's house an' caught him to home. Jim's wife hid his gun so they wouldn't be no shootin' an' Jim hid in the tall weeds back a' the house. Bent over, Jim wus skootin' 'long, headin' fur de woods, when he runs smack into Lem, gun raised up ready to shoot."

"Lem, don't you shoot me' Jim says, but Lem shouts back 'Halt or I fires!' Jim kept on agoin' an' Lem pulled the trigger."

"Them buckshots made a patch uv little holes in Jim's back 'bout big's yo' hand, he wus that close. They toted Jim into de house an' he lived two, three hours, talkin' most de time dat he had never hurt no humans; that they must see after his wife an' chilrun."

Uncle George's eyes had grown intense and wild with the excitement and horror of his memories. But suddenly his manner changed and he laughed as though at a huge joke. He fairly shook with merriment as he continued:

"Long time afterwards, Jim's boy--he wus named Jim Hudson too---Jim grew up an' come to Gulfport to work. He wus in this an' that an' come to be considerable active 'round there. One uv de smartes' an' purtiest girls in de cote house in Gulfport wus Miss Betsy an' it got to be talked that he wus goin' to marry here. I wus there so I says to Jim, 'Jim, are you fixin' to marry Miss Betsy?' 'I mos' certainly am,' he tells me. Then I goes to Miss Betsy. 'Ain't your name Betsy Williams,' I says. 'So it is,' she says, but I knowed it all the time. An' Jim up an' marries the daughter ob de man dat had shot his Pa."

He laughed again, a pleasant, good-natured laugh as if he were a deathless, black Jupiter amused at the foibles of the fates. I could see that the old man was very tired. I would have to be content with the little he had told me about his church.

"Thank you for telling me all about the church and old times," I said as I arose. "I hope I may come again when we can talk longer."

"Yes indeed. Do come," he smiled back at me in the frank, fearless manner of the ex-slave.

I paused a moment in the shadow of the church;--to read an inscription and to look back. Uncle George had resumed his nap.