

James Johnson

Interview with James Johnson, 79 years old

—Henry Grant, Columbia, S.C.

THE COTTON MAN

James Johnson lives with a sister at 1045 Barron Street, College Place, [HW: Columbia], S.C. He is incapable of self support on account of age, ill health, and impaired feet. One of his feet was mashed off and the other badly damaged by handling bales of cotton several years ago. He subsists on what his sister and other people are able to give him.

"I has been livin' right here in Columbia for the past thirty-six years. I has worked in de cotton business, first as ginner and then wid cotton buyers, ever since I has been here. I knows all de grades of lint cotton and can name them right now. (He ran through the different grades fairly correctly.)

"I learned all I knows 'bout cotton and de grades from Mr. M.C. Heath and Mr. W.E. Smith, cotton buyers in Columbia for thirty years or more. They thought so much of my knowledge of cotton, dat they sent me many times to settle claims wid big men and big buyers.¹

"It ain't what a nigger knows dat keeps him down. No, sir. It is what he don't know, dat keeps de black man in de background. White folks dat is business folks, pays no 'tention to our color as much as they does to dat money makin' power us has. Of course, de white man sticks to his color and you can't blame him for dat. If de nigger shows dat he is willin' to work and to learn to be business lak, make money and walk straight wid his boss and fellowman, de better class of de white people is gwine to treat him right. I knows what I's tellin' you is so, from my own 'sperience wid Mr. Heath and Mr. Smith. They always treated me better than I deserved and even now in my old age, deir folks and deir friends gives me money, dat keeps me out de poorhouse.

"No, sir, I don't 'member de Civil War a-tall myself but I has heard all 'bout it from my own folks and de white folks I has worked wid. It seems lak I knows too much 'bout them awful times. I sho' am glad I didn't come 'long then. I feels and knows dat de years after de war was worsen than befo'. Befo' de war, niggers did have a place to lie down at night and somewhere to eat, when they got hungry in slavery time. Since them times, a many a nigger has had it tough to make a livin'. I knows dat is so, too, 'cause I has been all 'long dere.

"Many niggers have gone north to live, since freedom, but de most of them either comes back south again or they wants to come back. De north don't suit de nigger. Cold climate lak they has up dere is too hard on him. He has thin blood and you knows dat a thin pan gwine to git hot quicker than a thick one and cold de same way. You see a heap of niggers is lak wild animals, in a way. He laks to eat a heap, sleep a heap, and move 'bout slow. When he goes up north he has to step 'round fas', 'cause if he don't, he gits in de way of them Yankees dat move 'bout quick.

"De black man is natchally lazy, you knows dat. De reason he talks lak he does, is 'cause he don't want to go to de trouble to 'nounce his words lak they ought to be. When he says 'dat' he saves a letter, same way wid 'dis' and nearly all other words. It ain't after savin' so much; he is just too careless and lazy to care 'bout it. A nigger wants what is in sight and not dat what he can't see; it can look out for itself. I is sorry I has to say all dis 'bout my own color but it is de truth. De truth makes you free and runs de devil. I is a nigger myself and I knows what they is and what they does.

"Is de nigger 'ligious? Yes, sir, many of them is very 'ligious widout 'ligion. He takes all dat from white folks. So many think 'ligion is gwine to git them somethin' widout workin' for it and fool people by makin' them think they is good and can be trusted and all dat. But I 'spects some of them is right, even at dat, 'cause if they ain't got 'ligion they sho' ain't got nothin' in dis world. I pays no 'tention to all dis 'gwine on' lak I see some 'ligious folks does. Maybe I wouldn't be in de fix I is, if I paid more 'tention to all dis churches and all dat. I believes in churches and good folks but I don't practice them good things lak I ought to. Boss, if you take de dollar out of 'ligion and de churches, you sho' would have to hunt for them. I believes dat. I don't see no 'ciples gwine 'bout a preachin' and doin' good, lak I has heard they once done, barefooted and askin' no pay. De preachers dese days is a ridin' in de finest automobiles and you sho' better look out for yourself, if you don't, you is gwine to git run over.

"I has been a good man, in body, all de time since I got grown. For many years I didn't know my own strength. I never seen a bale of cotton I couldn't pick up and tote where I wanted to, by myself. You see dese foots of mine? They was mashed off, from drappin' bales of cotton on them, back yonder many years ago.

"I 'members mighty well, when de fust skyscraper was built in Columbia. My bosses was one of de fust to have a office in dere. Dat was de Loan and Exchange Bank Building, on de corner of Washington and Main streets. I has been here and seen dis city grow from a small place to what you see 'tis now.

"My mammy and daddy b'long to Mr. Andrew Johnson of Orangeburg County, of dis State. They said dat they was treated mighty good by deir marster all de time they was slaves. My daddy took his old marster's name. I was born a slave but all I knows is what I has heard. Some of it might be right and some might be wrong."