

## Rev. James H. Johnson

### Interview with James H. Johnson, 82 years old

—*Stiles M. Scruggs, Columbia, S.C.*

"My name is James H. Johnson. I was born December 20, 1855, at the town servants' quarters of Alfred Brevort at Camden, South Carolina, and that was home until I was turning into twelve years of age. I was nearly ten years old, when the army of General Sherman came to Camden. I talked to some of the soldiers, soon after they arrived."

Such was the greeting of the Rev. James H. Johnson; a retired, and well educated Methodist Episcopal minister, when a WPA reporter called at his residence, 2029 Marion Street, Columbia, South Carolina, and asked for an interview. He sat in his study, furnished for comfort and equipped about as well as any study, of this kind, in Columbia.

"My mother," he explained, "was one of the maids at the Brevort home, and my father was one of the overseers of the plantation. We did not hear about President Lincoln's freedom proclamation in 1863, but the status quo of slavery kept right on as it had been until Sherman's army came through. You know General Lee surrendered the same spring, and we learned we were free.

"In 1866 my father bought four acres in the vicinity of Camden and improved it with a house and barn, and we lived there for several years. My father went into the mercantile business in Camden and prospered. There I went to the public schools. We had teachers from the North, and I finished all the grades. There were no high schools in the state at that time.

"We had our own home-raised hams and plenty of food products in our quarters, when my mother and I heard shooting nearby. We stepped into the yard and saw a big number of soldiers shooting at a running white man of the community. They did not hit him. In a moment or two five soldiers strode into our yard and we were scared at first, but they told us they were friends, and one of them spied the hams and asked if they belonged to the big house. When told that they were ours, they said they were hungry, and mother fixed them a dinner of ham and eggs and plenty of other things. They thanked us and left, doing no harm.

"Before they left, I noticed a crowd of soldiers at the Brevort home. I ran there, and told the troops, please, to do no damage to the premises, as the mistress, then in charge, was the best friend my mother and I had ever had. They left soon afterward, showing no animus toward the Brevort family and taking nothing away.

"We never received any aid from the Freedmen's bureau, for we did not need it. After I finished the public school work at Camden and helped my father in his store for a time, I entered the University of South Carolina, in October, 1874 and stayed there until 1877. You know there was a change in government in 1876, and Negroes were excluded from the university in 1877. I was in my junior year, when I left.

"I returned to Camden and taught school in Kershaw County for ten years. During that time I opened school in the Browning Home, which still stands in Camden. In the meantime, I had been an interested member of the Methodist Episcopal Church since my early years, and I was made an elder in that denomination in 1888, and sent to Columbia as pastor of the Wesley Methodist Church.

"When I came here as pastor, that church stood on the corner of Sumter and Gervais streets, on the site where the United States post-office now stands. The congregation sold that corner in 1910 and built the brick church at Barnwell and Gervais streets. I was the pastor all that time, retiring in 1930 due to physical feebleness. The congregation of that church has always been rather small. This accounts for my doing other work. I was a clerk in the internal revenue office in Columbia for eighteen years.

"Now, I am a notary public and make some income from that. The church gives me a small pension, and I advise and do literary work for a large number of Negro residents. In that way, I keep fairly busy and my family has never gone hungry. I did preach some, a few years ago. I am now too feeble to undertake that task, and have to be content, mostly at home."

(Reporter's Note: The Rev. James H. Johnson speaks no dialect. He speaks choice, grammatical diction and has a most pleasing personality. His is one of the very few Methodist Episcopal Churches in South Carolina for Negroes. He says he is glad the church is now seeking to void the split over slavery in 1860. He resides in a comfortable home at 2029 Marion Street, Columbia, S.C.)