

Black History Month: Spotty records provide blurry profiles of early Black residents

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The Maxim Block at Market Square in South Paris is where Maria Livingstone Johnson spent her final days. Johnson was the widow of former slave and Civil War veteran Harry Johnson. Harry's first appearance in Paris town records was in 1870. In 1879 he married Maria and the two lived at Trap Corner.
Paris Cape Historical Society photo

PARIS — Harry Johnson began his life as a slave, born about 1840 on a Louisiana plantation. It's unlikely that as a boy and young man he could have envisioned that he would find himself a free man, living in Paris and owning property.

But that became his fate after falling in with Union soldiers from Maine serving in the 10th and 29th Infantry Regiments during the Civil War. Johnson's acquaintance with Lt. Lorenzo D. Stacy of Porter would ultimately lead to him to being taken in as a member of the Stacy family. He learned to read and write and settled in Paris for the rest of his life.

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, Stacy enlisted with the 1st Maine Infantry Regiment. After three months of service in Washington, DC, volunteers enlisted with the 1st then joined the 10th Maine Regiment, which was eventually dissolved and became part of the 29th Maine Regiment and dispatched to the western theater.

It is likely then that Stacy met Johnson, either in Mississippi or in Louisiana, as the Union Army freed and fed slaves, many of whom enlisted at first as laborers and later as soldiers.

Following the war, Johnson accompanied his benefactor north and was invited to live in the family home in Porter. Dates associated with Johnson's life in Maine are inconsistent, even in census records. Archives of the Paris Cape Historical Society provide a vague picture of his life as a free man.

In William Teg's History of Porter, published in 1957, Harry Johnson is listed as one of 34 students enrolled in Porter's school during the 1868-1869 term. He is noted as being 17 years of age, meaning his birth date would have been 1850, not 1840. It is possible the Stacy family misled school officials about his age to make it possible for him to attend; it is possible he misled the Stacys about it on his own.

Stacy moved to Paris, Oxford County's shire town, about 1869 when he joined the Sheriff's Office. The clan settled in the Trap Corner neighborhood, where Johnson would spend his remaining years, even after Stacy relocated from Maine to Massachusetts.

Johnson married Ann "Maria" Livingstone of Washington, D.C. in Paris in 1879. The couple never had children. They are listed with inconsistent statistics in the town's census records between 1880 and 1910.

Johnson's first appearance on the Maine Census was in 1870, as a 19-year-old Black male from Louisiana. His occupation was listed as a "farmer," likely a day laborer.

In 1880 their ages were both recorded as 27, meaning their birth years would have been about 1853 instead of 1840. Harry was listed as a pressman. Maria's occupation is partially illegible; she may have been a printmaker, but she was a 'maker' of something starting with a 'P.'

In later census records, Johnson was employed as either a farmer or day laborer, with no jobs given for Maria. In their final census appearance their race is "Mu," presumably for mulatto, a person of mixed white and black ancestry, instead of B for Black.

"At one point both Harry and Maria worked as cooks at the boarding house at Snow's Falls," Ben Conant, curator at Paris Cape Historical Society, said. "And Harry was employed at the Paris Manufacturing Co. While working at a mill on Pioneer Street (in present-day West Paris), he was badly cut in an accident; some of Harry's white co-workers were surprised to learn that he, too, bled red."

In 1898 Harry was taxed \$2.85 for Paris' road tax.

"The couple loved children," Conant said. "But they never had any of their own, as they did not want them to grow up being ridiculed and made fun of."

Harry died on Nov. 15, 1915. His obituary retells the story of how he came to Maine with Lorenzo D. Stacy and their close friendship. Even years after the family left the area, Stacy's son and grandson returned to vacation at times with the Johnsons and to care for Harry

during his final illness.

Maria, unable to keep up with the taxes on her home, made her way from Trap Corner to the doorstep of Silas Sanger and Edith Maxim where she explained that God told her they would take her in, which they did. She lived out her final years in a room at Maxim Block in Market Square. She passed away on May 4, 1923.

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