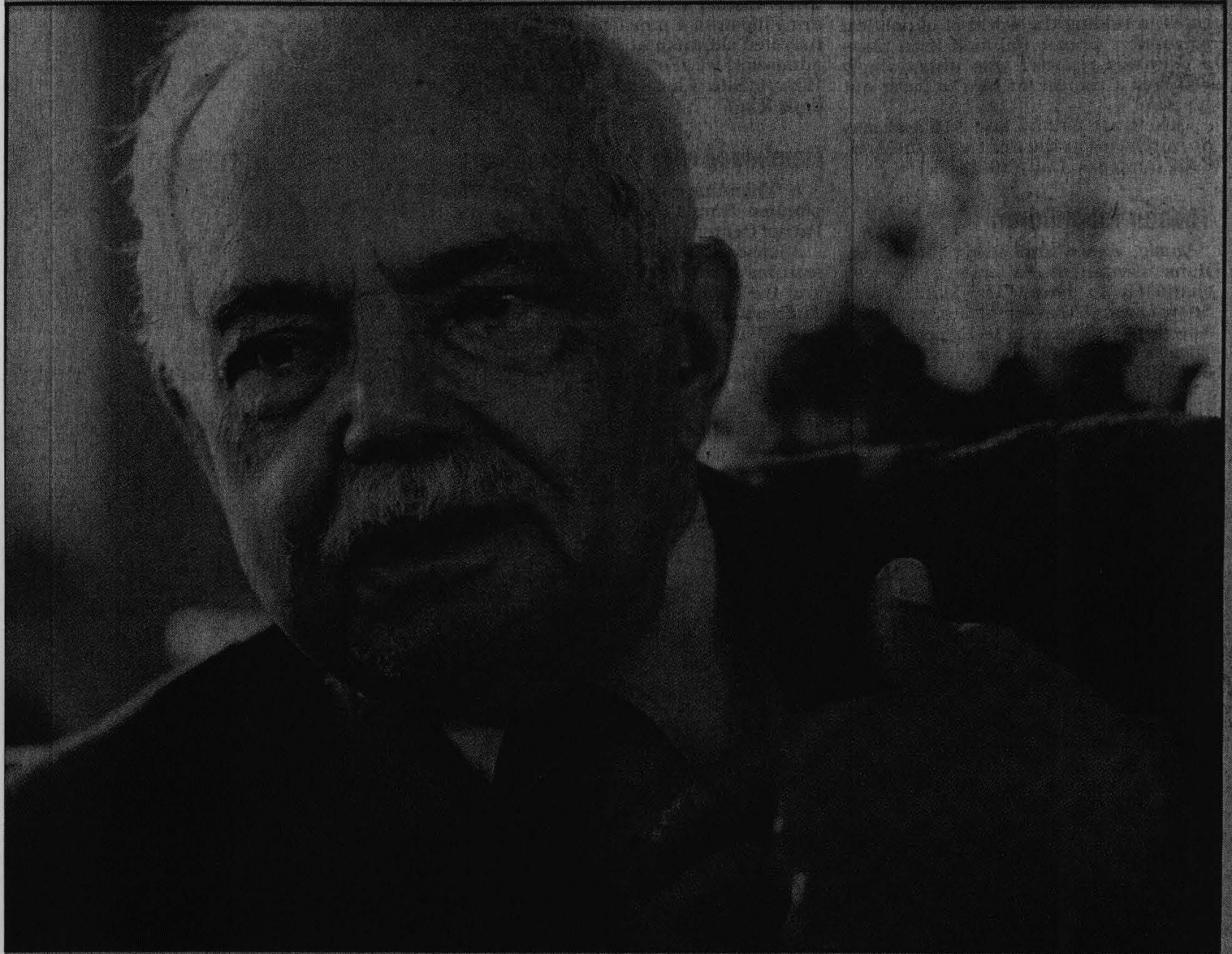


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Potomac News

Prince William County • Manassas • Manassas Park • Stafford County

'Talk about cruel — that was the system'



By Rick Bethem-Potomac News

Bladen Oswald Robinson talks about his family, among the first to make a life in Prince William County as freed slaves.

Slavery, war links Robinson to family

By PAMELA GOULD
Manassas Bureau

Bladen Oswald Robinson recalls as a child watching his two great aunts smoking long clay pipes in front of the hearth of the family home.

It was a habit they started after the Battle of Second Manassas to smother the stench of bodies and amputated limbs rotting outside the windows of the log house they shared with their parents on what is now part of the Manassas National Battlefield park.

The home served as a Union field hospital during that battle. And it was the head-

quarters for Union Gen. Franz Sigel during the Battle of First Manassas.

Robinson said one day he and one of his six brothers picked up the pipes and decided to give them a try.

It was the first and last time he ever smoked.

Not only was he woozy and nauseous, he took quite a licking from his mother for the adventure.

Robinson, who turned 83 in January, enjoys telling his family history — a history primarily passed orally from generation to

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Distinguished lineage no shield from racist system

By PAMELA GOULD
Manassas Bureau

Day after day as a youngster, Bladen Oswald Robinson and two of his brothers would be trudging along their 3-mile route to school when the Model T Ford school bus would pass with many an empty seat.

And inevitably, the little cherubs aboard

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Young Robinson endured insults

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would hurl insults too painful for Robinson to repeat.

"What they would call us, normal human beings would not do," the 83-year-old said during a recent interview, more than seven decades later. "Sometimes we'd get over in the field just not to hear them."

Though descended from Virginia aristocracy, the trace of black in the Robinson line meant all were subjected to the insults associated with being black, a lower rung on the social ladder.

It didn't matter that none of the Robinsons had asked to come to this New World. It didn't matter that patriarch James Robinson had been a highly respected member of the Prince William community.

It didn't matter that his family was among the county's first free blacks, and was both hard-working and prosperous.

Anyone who was black, to any degree, went to separate schools, didn't get buses and rode in separate rail cars.

Robinson and his siblings attended the one-room Manly School, three miles from home, through seventh grade. And because his parents recognized the importance of education, they paid the tuition and sent them on to the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth to continue their training.

It didn't matter that it was a two-hour trip by foot each way.

"We would leave home in the dark and come back in the dark, regardless of weather," Robinson recalled.

The Manassas Industrial School was founded in 1893 by former slave Jennie Dean. The school trained young black men and women in various trades, including teaching. Blacks from throughout the East Coast came to Manassas to attend the highly regarded school.



Photos by Rick Belthem-Potomac News

Oswald Robinson points to a historical marker for the home of James Robinson, a freed slave.

Some recollections have dimmed over time, but the day Robinson saw his father cry shines ever brightly in his mind.

His parents were headed from their home on the grounds of present-day Manassas National Battlefield Park to the Manassas rail depot after getting word that their 8-year-old son, who had been at Johns-Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore for surgery, was dying.

James and Edna Robinson were riding in the horse-drawn buggy and Robinson, then 13, was following behind on horseback to return the wagon home.

When they arrived at the depot, with nothing but urgency on their minds, they were met by a white conductor who said the train would not move until Edna Robinson boarded the car for whites.

Though of mixed blood, Edna Robinson was of a fair complexion while her husband was of a more traditional brown hue.

"That was the first and only time I saw my father cry," Robinson said. "And you talk about cruel — that was the system."

But the Prince William area was a bit more advanced than farther south, Robinson conceded.

Had his parents appeared together in Mississippi, there would have been a lynching.

When anyone in the Robinson family needed dental work, they had to wait until after 4 p.m.

And if they needed a prescription filled, they had to wait outside for it — in all weather.

Robinson shies away from discussing race relations, preferring to avoid controversy. But he shared a few incidents to provide a glimpse into his family's world.

"Those were examples of cruelty and they extended into every walk of life."

Man traces roots to slavery

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generation, with little documentation available for verification.

The Robinson family bears a colorful history that includes slavery, an intermixing of the races, and the land where Confederate Gen. Thomas Jackson got his nickname.

It was on a sloping meadow owned by "Gentleman Jim" Robinson that Confederate Gen. Barnard E. Bee uttered the immortal line — "There stands Jackson like a stone wall" — in July 1861 during the Battle of First Manassas.

That homestead served as a landmark during two of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War — First and Second Manassas.

Two National Park Service markers near the second Robinson home lay out its history, as does a Virginia Department of Historic Resources roadside marker along U.S. 29.

The two-story white clapboard house standing today rests on the stone foundation of the first Robinson home. The original one-story house was taken down and replaced in 1924, Robinson said.

The roadside marker is one Bladen Oswald Robinson and his relatives spent several years working to get erected and one in which the octogenarian takes great pride.

It was installed in 1991 at the family's expense, and on both sides tells of the farmhouse of James Robinson, a freed slave, and the home's roles in the two battles.

'Gentleman Jim' Robinson

James Robinson, who was known in his day as "Gentleman Jim," was Robinson's great grandfather and patriarch of the Robinson clan.

Gentleman Jim's mother was a black slave and his father was believed to be Landon Carter Jr. — the grandson of Robert "King" Carter, a white man Robinson calls the nation's "first real developer."

King Carter at one time owned or controlled all of the land be-

tween the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers and the Blue Ridge Mountains — about 330,000 acres, Robinson said. As Carter's family grew, he gave chunks of land to them and sold other parcels to outsiders who could afford them.

By 1799, when James Robinson was born, his father owned Pittsylvania, a plantation spanning from Fairfax County into the northern section of Prince William.

Landon Carter freed his son around 1850, the family believes, based on oral history and land records.

No document exists recording the date individual slaves were freed in Prince William County, though other jurisdictions have such records, said Prince William Virginia librarian Don Wilson. Prince William's records haven't been seen since the Civil War, he said.

When he freed his son, Carter gave him four acres and permission to build a cabin on his land.

Gentleman Jim did just that and set himself up as the proprietor of what became a lucrative business — running a way-side tavern along what today is U.S. 29.

In the mid-1800s, U.S. 29 was known as the Warrenton Turnpike and was a heavily traveled route between Alexandria and Warrenton — a distance of 40 miles.

Gentleman Jim took in weary travelers for their overnight stays at his tavern, near the midway point along the route.

Though forbidden by law at the time, Landon Carter let his slave son attend the tutoring sessions he arranged for his two white daughters so Gentleman Jim was well-prepared to run a business, Robinson said.

When Carter freed Gentleman Jim, the former slave needed a surname and took that of his tutor.

"Most slaves, freed, did not know other than their master so they took their master's name. Jim was impressed with the tutor so he took the name Robinson," his great grandson explained during a recent interview in the living room of his home.

Gentleman Jim reaped the benefits of an education and that was a lesson passed down through the generations.

Bladen Oswald Robinson, who is known in the Prince William-

Manassas community as Oswald Robinson, became a teacher at age 18 after graduating from the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth.

He spent the next 40 years of his life in education — first teaching in a one-room school for blacks in Prince William, and later as principal of a Fairfax County elementary school.

He retired from the Fairfax County school system in 1970 after 22 years as principal of Louise Archer Elementary School in Vienna. He was the first minority principal in the school system when it integrated in 1965.

Robinson, two of his brothers and one sister walked the four-hour round trip to the Manassas Industrial School every day.

"It was cruel for us to walk, but my parents determined that we would have an education," he said. Robinson earned two bachelor's degrees, a master's degree and could have had a doctorate if he had been willing to learn a third language.

Many hard days' work

Gentleman Jim, though the son of a wealthy landowner, toiled long and hard to achieve happiness and success.

By the time he died in 1875, he had accumulated more than 1,500 acres in present-day Fairfax and Prince William counties, but more importantly he had raised the money to buy his wife and four of his six children out of slavery, Robinson said.

His two oldest boys, Alfred and James, were stone masons and were sold in a slave auction and then shipped to New Orleans.

The two were busy building a stone fence near present-day Coverstone Drive when a bell rang signalling they should be brought from their task and sold, Robinson said.

The family knows nothing of what happened to James, but Alfred returned to Prince William in 1888 and filled them in on his

previous whereabouts.

Alfred and James "were sold to a slave trader, chained together and walked to Alexandria and put in the slave pen," Robinson said. "They were purchased by a slave trader from New Orleans, shipped to New Orleans and sold to sugar cane plantation owners."

Alfred Robinson may have met a better fate than his two sisters.

They, according to Robinson, were "used as pawns" in gambling games at the Carter plantation. They had to spend the night with whomever won the evening's competition.



Oswald Robinson says a cannon ball was embedded in an outside wall of his 30-year-old house by a Civil War cannon.

It was embarrassing to them but not an uncommon practice among slave owners, Robinson said.

Mother's side of family

Bladen Oswald Robinson's grandfather was Bladen Robinson, third son of former slaves James (Gentleman Jim) and Susan Robinson. His father was named for the family patriarch — James Robinson.

Bladen Robinson worked for Confederate Capt. A.P. Hill after the Battle of First Manassas. When he returned from this duty, he married Bettie Ball,

who, like Gentleman Jim Robinson, was the daughter of a white plantation owner and a slave mother.

(Bettie's sister Lettie Ball, also a mulatto, married Bladen's brother — Tasco Robinson.)

The maternal half of Bladen Oswald Robinson's lineage also crossed racial lines.

His mother was the former Edna Mae Ratcliffe, granddaughter of an Irishman who sailed from England to the New World.

Richard Ratcliffe came to the colonies with a boatload of Irish linen and never returned to his

Robinson's parents, James Robinson and Edna Mae Ratcliffe Robinson, married in 1906 and the next year moved into the Robinson home that stood about ¼ mile from the original Robinson house.

Slavery

The entire Carter family participated in the practice of slavery and obviously saw blacks as a different class of life — having taken the women as mistresses and used the young girls as stakes in their gambling — but at least some of the family had scruples about the institution.

Landon Carter eventually freed Gentleman Jim and helped him get his start with both land and an education.

Robert "Councillor" Carter III, cousin to Landon Carter, wrestled with the issue of slavery and in the end decided the fairest plan was to free his slaves when they reached age 45, according to a document provided by Robinson.

A document produced by Councillor Carter III in August 1791 and recorded in the Westmoreland County court states his view on the issue.

Carter, in the document, says he has as "property" many "Negroes and mulatto slaves" and that after long deliberation his plan was to gradually free them — at age 45.

History maintained

The Robinson farm was among the first Prince William farms bought by the U.S. Department of the Interior when the government decided to establish Manassas National Battlefield Park in the 1930s.

From his glass-enclosed second-floor living room, Robinson can see black Civil War cannons and teases visitors that a cannon ball embedded in an outside wall of his 30-year-old house got stuck there during one of the battles.

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