Former slave lived to be one of oldest people in Vermilion Parish

BY WILLIAM THIBODAUX
Special to Magazine

I recently found an interesting article from a local newspaper dated September 1945. The article said James Robinson, Jr. originally from Sumter County, Alabama, and a former slave, had returned to Abbeville to live at the home of his daughter-in-law. At the time of the article, James Robinson was 102 years old. He was the oldest living former slave in Abbeville, and probably one of the oldest living persons in all of Vermilion and surrounding parishes. He and his wife were both former slaves of Lastie Broussard. After their emancipation, the Robinson family stayed and continued to work for the Broussard family, which wasn’t uncommon during that era.

I learned from Alyce Robinson and Patricia Robinson Plowden, Robinson's great-granddaughters, that Robinson's father was a slave-master of German-Jewish and British ancestry. It's reported that James served as his father's valet while they traveled throughout the South and into Mexico. Prior to the end of the War Between the States, James Robinson was sold to the Broussard family of Abbeville. James Robinson's wife was Rose Joiner. According to Alyce and Patricia's genealogy report, Rose's mother was Mary Nunes and her father was Andre Nunes, a French slave master from Louisiana. James Robinson and his wife had 15 children, nine of whom were living in 1945. They also had 35 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren and several great, great-grandchildren. Robinson's wife died in 1920, and that is probably when James Robinson moved to Houston.

In September of 1945, 20 years after his wife's death, Robinson returned to Abbeville and lived at the home of his daughter-in-law Camellia. Despite his age, Robinson could see and hear well, and possessed a great memory. He had traveled alone by rail and bus to arrive in Abbeville—no small feat for a centenarian.

The Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on Jan. 1, 1863, while the War Between the States was still raging. Many historians feel Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure, because it granted freedom only to the slaves in the seceded states which were still under Confederate control. It did not free the slaves in the border states like Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland or Delaware, which had never declared secession from the union. In other words, the document freed all slaves held by any state or part of a state that was at war with or in rebellion against the federal government. The proclamation did not apply to slaves in the states controlled by Union forces. The Confederate states ignored Abraham Lincoln's proclamation; however, all slaves were finally freed after the close of war.

According to Gary Theall's book, extraordinary website http://www.vermilionhistorical.com, Lastie Broussard was an attorney, admitted to the bar in 1879 while he was clerk of court in Vermilion Parish. Broussard was extremely popular, holding the clerk's position from 1865 to 1888 when he was succeeded by Alcide LeBlanc. And according to Ken Dupuy's excellent and very informative book, Journeys Into The Past, Lastie was alderman and mayor of Abbeville, he was also state senator. One interesting bit of information I found in Dupuy's book is the fact that Lastie's 15 children's names, in either their first or middle name, began with the letter "O." It was so unique; it made Ripley's Believe It or Not.

Alyce Robinson and Patricia Robinson Plowden remembered seeing James Robinson, their great-grandfather, at a family reunion in Abbeville. "He seemed to be very tall and thin," said Patricia, the family historian. She also informed me that Robinson's daughter Josephine married James A. Herod, the first black educator in Vermilion Parish. He was instrumental in building the first African-American school in Abbeville. A school was named in his honor in Abbeville.

According to Patricia, her great-grandfather moved back to Houston sometime later, living at the home of his daughter Gladys Robinson Sharp. James Robinson died in 1953 at the age of 110. And at the time of his death, according to the Houston Post, Robinson was the oldest living person in Houston. Imagine what stories he could tell.

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