



Resource #1: Biography of James Robinson

James Robinson was born near Manassas, Virginia in 1799, to an African American mother and a white father. According to family oral history, Robinson's father was a member of the large influential Carter family, who were planters and slaveholders in northern Virginia.

James Robinson would have been born free or slave depending on the legal status of his mother. At that time in Virginia and in other slave states, children inherited the legal status of their mother. If Robinson's mother was free, he would have been born free. If Robinson's mother was a slave, Robinson may have been freed soon after his birth. In either case, by the time James Robinson reached 25 years of age, he was living and working in the Manassas area as a free black man. Virginia law at the time required all free black people to register with the County Court. This is an excerpt from the record of the County Court:

James Robinson ... a bright mulatto man about twenty four years of age, five feet five and a quarter inches high, has no visible mark or scar,...it appears that he was born free in ... the County of Prince William.

Just like any individual who is trying to make a life for himself, Robinson had several concerns in his life. He wanted to make sure that he could provide for himself economically, and he wanted to establish and care for a family. To be able to do these things as a free black man in a slave state, he had to negotiate many potentially difficult circumstances.

Establishing Himself Economically

As was the case for many young, free African Americans, Robinson was "bound out," or hired out to work, from the time he was ten years old until he was twenty-one. As Robinson later explained, he was told that he would be taught a trade (a skill, such as blacksmithing), but this did not happen and instead he worked as a farm laborer.

Once Robinson's service was completed, he began the process of working and establishing his life in the Manassas area. As he had not been taught a trade, he had to seek out opportunities to earn money

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in occupations that would either not involve particular skills, or that would train him for the work as he went. Based on a written contract that he entered in to with a man named Thomas R. Hampton, who owned a tavern in the Manassas area, we know that one of the jobs he took was working as a waiter in Hampton's tavern. The contract he signed read:

James Robinson is to serve the said Thomas R. Hampton till the 1st January 1829 at the option of the said Hampton as a waiter in his house of entertainment."

While Robinson was able to negotiate this contract with Hampton, he was not able to read. We know that he was illiterate, unable to sign his own name, because he signed the contract with an X, which was used at that time as a mark to substitute for a signature.

(Why do you think Robinson wanted to have a written contract with Hampton? Many workers simply worked on a week-to-week basis? How would this have been helpful to Robinson?)

Robinson continued to work for Hampton for several years. We know this because there are receipts for payment to Robinson from Hampton, including one in 1839 for \$45.42.

Through his work for Hampton, and possibly other enterprises that he was involved in, Robinson was able to save enough money to make a purchase of land in 1840. He bought 170 acres from John Lee, for \$484.94. (One reason that Lee might have wanted to sell his land to Robinson was that the fortunes of many families like the Lees and the Carters were declining. They had once made great sums of money in crops like tobacco, but the soil was becoming exhausted and therefore less valuable to them.) In the next ten years, Robinson made several additional business deals or improvements to his property. He sold a part of his land, and built a one-and-a-half story house on his property. He also rented land from another landowner to use in growing grain. While he was expanding his holdings of land and building a small farm, he continued to do other kinds of business in the community. There are many receipts that show that Robinson often purchased large quantities of whiskey, possibly for sale in a tavern. Robinson may also have made money by taking care of cattle and other animals that belonged to people who were traveling on the Warrenton Turnpike – the main road that cut through the Manassas

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area – and stopping at the Stone House Tavern, which was very close to Robinson's property.

(Why do you think white planters like John Lee were willing to sell land to Robinson?)

(What are the kinds of skills that Robinson must have had to be able to go into these kinds of businesses successfully? What kinds of relationships had he developed with white people in the Manassas community?)

The 1850 census shows that Robinson owned over \$1,000 in property, and was living with eight other people in his household. In later years, he continued to purchase more property in the area. While Robinson worked to establish himself economically, he was also establishing a family.

Establishing a Family

James Robinson married a woman named Susan Gaskins, who was enslaved. That meant that she and Robinson were not able to live together. Robinson, however, made great efforts to see her. In his contract with Thomas Hampton, he arranged time to be able to visit his wife. They had eight children together.

Even though James Robinson was free, his children were born into slavery since their mother was a slave. Just as James Robinson had to work to establish himself economically, he had to make many decisions about how to try to protect and keep his family together given the fact that his children and his wife were enslaved. One way that he could try to do this was by using his status as a free man either to buy or hire out his own family members, or to arrange for them to be hired out by men he could trust. In 1846, he hired his son Tasco from his owner, John Lee. This arrangement allowed Tasco to live and work with his father, rather than with his slave master. Later, Robinson says that he was able to buy Tasco. In 1847 he arranged for two white men, John Dogan and Alfred Ball, to hire out his daughter, Jemima. He may have done this rather than risk that she face harsh conditions under another master or possibly be sold away to a slaveholder who did not live in the Manassas area.

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Other members of the Robinson family were able to live with James Robinson and achieve their freedom because of decisions made by their former owners. Slave owner John Lee left Susan Gaskins (called Sukey) and her daughter Hannah (called Henney) to James Robinson in Lee's will. At the same time, Lee also emancipated Jemima, another of Robinson's daughters, who had been Lee's "constant waiter attendant and servant."

While arrangements like this allowed Robinson to live with and provide for some members of his family, he was not able to protect other members of the family. Robinson had two older sons, James and Alfred, who were sold by their owner to a plantation in New Orleans. While Alfred returned to the Manassas area in 1888 and told of his experiences working on a sugarcane plantation, James was never heard from again.

The War Comes to James Robinson

By 1861, James Robinson had established himself as a successful member of the Manassas community. He had developed business relationships with many of the white families in the area that allowed him not only to accumulate property but also to use his inside knowledge of the slave labor system to protect his family. One business partner commented that he "did more business than most" in the area. Robinson overcame enormous personal, legal, and social obstacles to demonstrate that a free black man could succeed even in a slave state.

Robinson's house and farm may have been important to him and his family as a symbol of all that he had worked to accomplish. The battle at Manassas would make the Robinson home important for another reason. Once the battle began, it moved through the front yards and fields of several Manassas-area residents. As the battle progressed, James Robinson's house was right in the middle of the battlefield.

(As word spread about the coming war, what do you think James Robinson's thoughts were about it? Which side do you think he supported – Union or Confederacy? Why do you think this?)

(Once the fighting began in the Manassas area, what do you think James Robinson was concerned about? What do you think he could do to protect his family and his property during battle?)

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A Timeline of James Robinson's Life:

Year	Event
1799	Born in Prince William County, Virginia to a black mother and a white father.
1809-1820	"Bound out" to work for another landowner as a farm laborer. Was not trained in a trade.
1825	Registers as a free black resident of the county.
1828	Contracts to work as a waiter in the "house of entertainment" owned by Thomas Hampton. Is married to Susan Gaskins, a slave woman.
1839	Receives payment from Thomas R. Hampton for \$45.52
1840	Buys 170 acres of land from John Lee. Living alone.
1846	Hired son Tasco from his owner John Lee
1847	Arranges for daughter Jemima to be hired out to John Dogan and Alfred Ball
1847	John Lee leaves Robinson's wife Susan Gaskins and daughter Hannah to Robinson in Lee's will. Also frees daughter Jemima in his will.
1848-9	Built a one and one-half story house on his land.
1850	Owns property worth \$1000. Living with his wife Susan and six of their eight children.
1851	Purchases whiskey often, possibly for sale at the tavern. May have been earning money by keeping the horses and cattle of travelers who stayed at the Stone House, a tavern on the Warrenton Turnpike.
1861	First Battle of Manassas
1862	Second Battle of Manassas
	Robinson adds on to his house.
	Robinson files claim with Southern Claims Commission for \$. Receives payment of \$.
	James Robinson dies in Manassas