



## Mancala: A Favorite Game of the Robinson Family

### ***Who were the Robinsons?***

James Robinson was a free person of color living near Manassas who would witness battle firsthand. His home sat near the Warrenton Turnpike and Henry Hill, both of which were significant to the Battles of Manassas in 1861 and 1862.

Born in 1799, James Robinson had married an enslaved woman, Susan Gaskins; and they had already raised several children together by the time the war began in 1861. However, their life story was not an easy one.

Virginia law stated that not only was his wife enslaved, but the children they had were also enslaved. Robinson had constantly strived to keep his family together and safe. One way he did this was by buying or hiring out his children from their enslavers. He hired out and later bought his son Tasco. He also arranged for his daughter Jemima to be hired out by men that he trusted.

In 1848, planter John Lee died, and in his will, freed Robinson's wife Susan, his daughters, Henrietta and Jemima, and two of his grandchildren, Diannah and Pendleton. With his newly freed family members, along with sons Tasco and Bladen, Robinson built a one and a half story log home on his property. Unfortunately, Robinson wasn't able to protect all of his family. His two older sons, James and Alfred, were sold by their enslaver to a sugarcane plantation in New Orleans. Robinson would never see them again.

When war came to Robinson's front yard on July 21, 1861, his family hid in a neighbor's cellar. Unable to join them, Robinson himself hid under a nearby bridge. When the battle, known as the First Battle of Manassas (or Bull Run), was over, he returned to find 13 dead Confederate soldiers laying in his yard. When the Second Battle came around in 1862, Robinson's house was used as the



*The Robinson house as it stood in 1862 at the time of the Second Battle of Manassas (Library of Congress)*

headquarters of a Union General named Franz Sigel, and later as a hospital for wounded soldiers. When the war was over, Robinson would never again have to worry about his family being enslaved. Through hard work and perseverance, the Robinson family would create a prosperous farm, making James Robinson one of the wealthiest African Americans in the Manassas area in the late 1800s.

Throughout their time in Manassas, James and his family struggled to overcome prejudices and create an identity that was both African and American. Many families worked hard to preserve their African roots and traditions. The Robinson family continued to play a traditional African game they liked called Mancala.

*What are some traditions that your family continues to follow?*

*Where did your family's traditions come from?*

*What kind of games do you play with your family at home?*

*Do any of them connect to your roots (where your family is from)?*

**Now, it's your turn to try playing Mancala!**

**You will find directions on the next page!**



## Activity - Let's Play Mancala!

**Directions:** This game requires two players, the board below, and 48 small place holders. These can be seeds, coins, buttons, beans, or small pieces of paper. In the directions these place holders will be called seeds but feel free to use whatever you have around the house! The two players should sit facing each other with the board between them. Each player will be assigned one half of the board consisting of six circular holes called 'houses' and one large hole on the side called the 'treasury.' The treasury to the player's left is their individual treasury. Begin by placing four seeds in each house, leaving the treasuries empty. (The Robinsons would have used seeds in this game, but don't forget you can use any small objects. See suggestions above.) The goal of this game is to buy up all of the other player's houses.

Begin by player 1 taking all four seeds from any house on their side of the board. Place one seed in each house moving counter-clockwise from the empty house, including the treasury. If the last seed falls in a house which has seeds in it, pick up all of those seeds and repeat the process until you drop your last seed into an empty house. Then it is the next player's turn and they repeat the process.

When the last seed from your hand makes four in any of your opponent's houses, you win those houses and move the seeds to your treasury. Your opponent can win back their houses if they have enough seeds in their treasury to replace all four seeds in the house. The player to buy all of their opponent's houses wins!

