

A Negro Sojourner in Antebellum New Orleans

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"Could it be possible that I was thousands of miles from home—that I had been driven through the streets like a dumb beast—that I had been chained and beaten without any mercy—that I was even herded with a drove of slaves, a slave myself?"¹ These plaintive queries were made by the famous black bondsman Solomon Northup shortly after his arrival in New Orleans. Such feelings of anguish and despair were probably shared by a great many blacks arriving for the first time in the Crescent City. It seems that most Negroes feared being "sold down the river" as a fate worse than death.

Yet many blacks, slave and free, considered the slave trading capital of the South in quite a different light—as a place of enjoyment, excitement, and delectation, even, ironically, as a refuge from the brutalities of the South's "peculiar institution." They rejoiced at the city's heterogeneous mixture of peoples, its thriving river front, its delightful shops, cafés, restaurants, and hotels, its numerous theatres, amusements, and sporting events.² Though the experiences of one slave and free Negro, James P. Thomas, are, in a limited sense, only those of a single (and in many respects privileged) black man, perhaps in broader perspective they reflect the attitudes and activities of other blacks who found New Orleans a refreshing oasis in an otherwise stifling desert of bondage.

The son of a Nashville slave, Sally, and a well-known Tennessee judge, John Catron, James had been born in bondage (according to the law requiring progeny to assume the status of the mother). As a young boy he assisted his mother with a cleaning business and acquired a rudimentary education at a local Negro school. When he was only twelve (1839), however, he confessed that he had "played the part of a washerwoman long enough" and had decided to "see something of this great world." Securing a counterfeit certificate of freedom, he booked passage on the steamer Nashville for New Orleans.³

¹ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, 1968), p. 50.

² A number of historians have examined the unique social and cultural milieu of the Crescent City. See: John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago, 1973), chapter 1; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), pp. 172, 231, 262, 367; Roger A. Fischer, *The Segregation Struggle in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Urbana, III., 1974), chapter 1; Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York, 1964), pp. 5, 85, 86-88, 150-58; John Hebron Moore, "Simon Gray, Riverman: A Slave Who Was Almost Free," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIX (December, 1962), 471-84; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), pp. 416-17, 430-31. An older but still useful study is Wendell H. Stephenson, "Ante-Bellum New Orleans as an Agricultural Focus," *Agricultural History*, XV (October, 1941), 161-74.

³ "The Autobiography of James P. Thomas: A Slave and Free Negro in the Antebellum South," chapter 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D. C., hereafter referred to as Thomas Autobiography.

The trip down the Cumberland-Ohio-Mississippi proved uneventful, but his first glimpse of the Crescent City remained one of the most vivid memories of his life. More than seventy years later he recalled the "wilderness of masts" stretching as far as the eye could see, hundreds of multicolored flags atop vessels from every corner of the globe, and sweating black dockworkers loading and unloading cargo.⁴ Climbing over a pile of freight boxes, crossing the levee, he began wending his way through the city, past the small curio shops, the busy French Market, colorful sidewalk cafes, and tile-roofed Spanish houses, past streets teeming with drays and pedestrians. The city was well drained, he later wrote, and everyone seemed neatly dressed, polite, and affable. Toward evening he found accommodations at a Negro boarding house, wearily admitting that "the first day's tramp" had furnished him with enough material to talk about for years.⁵

But as twilight descended into darkness, Thomas set out to see more of the city. Visiting the American section, he took in the hotels, theatres, saloons, and gambling establishments; at nine o'clock he heard a shot ring out—a signal, he later recalled, for all slaves to be off the streets. Clutching the document that ostensibly proved his free status, he continued his evening excursion, soon passing several more gambling houses. Inside one he espied four well-dressed black waiters serving an elegant supper of fish and game to a table of distinguished-looking white gentlemen, probably governors or United States senators.⁶ It was well past midnight when the youthful slave finally made his way back to his room, but even then he could not fall asleep as the sights and sounds of that first day in New Orleans throbbed in his mind.

Early the next morning he visited the Louisiana Cockpit on Dumaine Street. Among those in the audience he observed Creoles, mulattoes, and blacks, Spaniards and Frenchmen, aristocrats and poor whites, who were all attentively watching the furious battles between pairs of Irishbred cocks. Thomas expressed surprise at the lack of racial decorum: Negro and white, slave and free, rich and poor bet against one another simply by shouting "Five Dollars," "Ten Dollars," or some larger amount.⁷ The wagers were made in an orderly fashion despite a good deal of excitement and commotion, but if a loser failed to honor his debt he was forcibly ejected. Thomas decided to make a bet and though he lost, he yelled out another, then another, but each time with the same result. After the final contest he immediately went to a gambling house to recoup some of his losses. The youthful slave put down a two dollar bet against "an old man's 'chuck-a-luck' bank"; again he was unsuccessful.⁸ He was about to place another wager when an experienced gambler took him aside and told him to quit while he had a few dollars in his pocket. Then and there "I gave up the Idea of [ever] trying to win."⁹ Despite his losses, or perhaps because of them,

Written between 1902 and 1910, the original manuscript has many unnumbered pages. As a consequence, I have cited only the chapter.

⁴ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* Among the best contemporary accounts by a northern visitor to the Crescent City is the 1843-44 diary of Henry Benjamin Whipple, who described a gambling establishment in the following manner: "Every grade of gambler might there be seen from the hardened player of fifty to the [youngster] who is just learning the catalogue of sin. Miserable shabby gamblers & jewelled gamblers. Men whose faces were lit up with a fiendish smile & those on whose brow was imprinted the ineffacable characters of grim despair." Lester B. Shippee, editor, *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary, 1843-44* (Minneapolis, 1937), pp. 101, 102.

⁹ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

Thomas's first sojourn in the Crescent City had been exhilarating, and, as he prepared to leave, he vowed someday to return.

As a young man in Nashville he hired out as an apprentice barber, working for a slave, Frank Parrish, who had established a shop on the public square. He rapidly learned the trade. "James has the character of a good barber," a free Negro observed in 1843. He had manners to please almost anyone "who do not let their prejudice go far on account of color."¹⁰ Earning twelve dollars a month, he worked for Parrish until 1846 when he opened his own barber shop on the corner of Deaderick and Cherry streets in the downtown business section.¹¹ Soon he had built up a thriving trade, counting among his customers several prominent Tennesseans, including United States Senator Ephraim Foster, who had become his legal owner.¹²

His reputation as an excellent barber spread even beyond Nashville. In 1848 he received an invitation from Maury County plantation owner Andrew Jackson Polk to serve as a personal barber on a trip to the North. Journeying with Polk to Louisville, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Albany, New York City, and Philadelphia, he was greeted nearly everywhere with jeers, hoots, and derisive slurs such as "BLACK CLOUD RISIN'." In addition he was told to leave an omnibus, asked to return his ticket at a theatre, and refused admission to a museum. "Such things never occurred in the South," he admitted, recalling his pleasant visit to New Orleans as a youngster. "In fact, the southern people never laugh[ed] at the Negro because he was a Negro, but would laugh at his pranks and foolishness."¹³

Still he was not unrealistic about conditions in the South. Returning to Tennessee via Alexandria, Virginia, he lamented the sale of black children on the auction block and recalled that "about every five minutes on the train some ugly, loudly-dressed fellow would ask me 'Who do you belong to boy?'" Remaining unperturbed, he calmly pointed to the aristocratic Polk, the brother of Leonidas L. Polk, and a distant cousin of the president. Though it was not true, he would thus "end the conversation." It was not long afterwards (1851) that he accompanied Polk on another northern trip, travelling this time to Saratoga, Boston, Newport, and returning through Raleigh, North Carolina. The two trips were remarkable experiences for Thomas, who was still a bondsman, but he never forgot the hostility of northern whites toward Negroes. It seemed ironic that blacks illicit such feelings of resentment in the land of abolitionism and universal freedom.¹⁴

Well compensated for his services and with a prosperous business, Thomas had soon saved enough money to purchase his freedom. As a free Negro of means he decided to return to New Orleans. "It was necessary in those days," he later wrote, "when about to travel, particularly in

¹⁰ John H. Rapier, Sr., to Henry K. Thomas, February 28, 1843, Rapier Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D. C.

¹¹ *Nashville City and Business Directory* . . . (Nashville, 1853), pp. 20-22

¹² Records of the Davidson County Court, Minute Book E (March 6, 1851), p. 135. The famous free Negro barber William Johnson also built up a prosperous trade among whites and visited New Orleans for fun and relaxation. William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge, 1951), pp. 21, 22, 433-34, 441-42, 603-04.

¹³ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VII.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* For an examination of Thomas's second visit, see John Hope Franklin, *A Southern Odyssey: Travellers in the Antebellum North* (Baton Rouge, 1976), pp. 141-44.

the direction of free territory, on any railroad, steamship, or stage, to have some reputable [white] person vouch for you." Identified as a trustworthy black by several well-known whites, he departed.¹⁵

His delightful boyhood memories were rekindled when he again viewed the array of sailing vessels, schooners, and steamers, the levee teeming with drays and black workers, and the sprawling expanse of the city. And again, though perhaps more leisurely, he toured the French, Spanish, and American sections. This time, however, he could more fully enjoy the richness and excitement of the South's most cosmopolitan city. It was during this second visit that the twenty-eight-year-old Thomas heard his first opera. So notable was the performance of Gioacchino Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* at the Theatre d'Orléans that some fifty years later he described the audience in striking detail: handsome aristocrats in shiny black tuxedos, beautiful Southern ladies literally "ablaze with diamonds," dignified *Bens de couleur* occupying the gallery boxes, and more than three hundred gayly clad members of the servant class.

The same four groups, though in different attire, were present a few days later (April 14, 1855) when Thomas witnessed a second spectacular event: the four-mile race between Richard Ten Broeck's "Lexington" and Thomas Wells' "Lecomte." "Lexington" won in the unprecedented time of 7:23% and as a result was hailed across the nation as the world's fastest thoroughbred. Few observers noted as did Thomas, however, that both horses had been bred, trained, and ridden by black slaves. "The Boys loved those [animals] and guarded them affectionately and it broke their hearts when they failed to win."¹⁶

Following the race Thomas left New Orleans. Searching for a place to put down roots, he journeyed to Central America (Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica), the Caribbean (Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba), the North, Northwest, and West in the United States, and probably into Canada. But he failed to find an ideal location and finally secured a position as steward on the Mississippi river steamer William Morrison (1857), which ran from St. Louis to New Orleans. So once more he became a sojourner in the Crescent City. But now, instead of scrambling over freight boxes, wandering through the streets in wide-eyed amazement, or peering through windows, he secured luxurious accommodations, dined at elegant restaurants, and became a frequent visitor at the opera. "We had a verry [sic] pleasant time up and down," he explained to a nephew in 1858, "[I] saw two Operas."¹⁷ Each performance, each audience, seemed more impressive than the former: "No city that I have seen in the country," he observed, noting that he had visited New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, "approached near a New Orleans audience on Grand opera nights."¹⁸

Nor could any Northern city boast such a prosperous black community. Having visited hundreds of towns and cities in the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, Thomas asserted that blacks in New Orleans enjoyed a higher economic station than any group of Negroes in the

¹⁵ Thomas Autobiography, chapter, VII. The river trip from Nashville to New Orleans followed the Cumberland and Ohio north and west toward "free territory" before turning south on the Mississippi.

¹⁶ Ibid. Though completing his autobiography at the age of eighty-three, Thomas recalled the exact time of "Lexington's" victory. See Dale A. Somers's fine study *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1972), pp. 30-32. Other verifiable facts also suggest that Thomas had a remarkably accurate memory.

¹⁷ James P. Thomas to John H. Rapier, Jr., May 3, 1858, Rapier Papers; *Daily Missouri Democrat*, July 13, 1857.

¹⁸ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

Americas. Many bondsmen and bonds- women hired their own time, earned their own living, came and went as they pleased, and lived outside the purview, sometimes the control, of their master. A few even managed their own businesses. "The owners of many allowed those people to go out, do the Job, and return to give [the] master his portion." Slaves operated barber shops, ran hacks, drove drays, and some even purchased real estate. Though always cognizant of their anomalous condition, these virtually free slaves achieved a large measure of spiritual, intellectual, and material independence. As a consequence, said Thomas, "large numbers of servants managed to buy themselves, their families, and had money and property besides."¹⁹

A few blacks, entering the merchant, business, and planter class, acquired substantial wealth. These Negroes not only boasted great estates, but regularly attended the opera, lived stylishly in tree-lined residential neighborhoods, vacationed during the summer in the North, and sent their children to school in Europe. They even gained a foothold in politics. It was an easy matter for a Negro apartment house owner, or tradesman, though disfranchised himself, to demand that his white patrons either vote for political candidates sympathetic to the aspirations of blacks or incur economic reprisals. The Negro nobility included those who had attained a high degree of respectability, who moved in a certain circle, who could claim blood ties with whites, and who, by virtue of wealth, ability, and influence, formed "a peculiar class—the elite of the colored race."²⁰

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Roger Fischer, "Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans," *American Historical Review*, LXXIV (February, 1969), 929. The ability of slaves to achieve virtually free status in New Orleans and other parts of the South has been analyzed by several authors, among them: Moore, "Simon Gray, Riverman," 471-84; Clement Eaton, "Slave Hiring in the Upper South: A Step Toward Freedom," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVI (1960), 663-78; Richard B. Morris, "The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States," in *ibid.*, XLI (1954), 219-240; Loren Schweningen, "The Free-Slave Phenomenon: James P. Thomas and the Black Community in Ante-Bellum Nashville," *Civil War History* 22 (1976), 293-307; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), pp. 99, 100, 107, 135. Discounting the significance of "quasi-freedom," which often resulted from the practice of self-hire (slaves hiring their own time), Starobin failed to stress the important ambiguity of slaves spending most of their lives away from their masters. He especially erred by using Simon Gray, a slave who was lumberman Andrew Brown's virtual business partner, as an example of a bondsman struggling the cast off the yoke of bondage and fleeing when the first opportunity arose. Handling hundreds of dollars, taking liberties during layovers in New Orleans, Gray had innumerable chances to escape, but remained in his capacity as a quasi-free bondsman until the fall of Vicksburg in 1863. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, pp. 108-9, 169, 172.

²⁰ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI; Carter Woodson, ed., "From Charles Gayarré's Unpublished Manuscript on the People of Color in Louisiana," *Journal of Negro History*, II (1917), 181-84.

The subject of wealthy Negroes, so vital to understanding the nature of antebellum society and race relations, has been given inadequate attention by historians. As Thomas indicates, New Orleans probably did have a larger number of well-to-do blacks than any other city in America, although little statistical information is available. According to the 1850 census (which to some extent is unreliable and listed only real property), 125 free blacks owned \$5000 or more worth of real estate; and several controlled more than \$50,000 worth. In 1860, 48 owned more than \$7000 worth of real and personal property and by 1870 this number had increased to 55. Manuscript Census, 1850, 1860, 1870, New Orleans, Louisiana, in Louisiana Papers (donated by John Blassingame), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. The New Orleans free Negro Joseph McNeil, who lived in splendor, owning eight slaves and valuable property throughout the city, accumulated an estate of \$141,144.78 by the time of his death in 1827. Records of the New Orleans City Court (May 4, 1837), in Carter G. Woodson papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Though McNeil was unusual, he had counterparts not only in the Crescent City, but throughout the antebellum South.

Thomas claimed further that the legal codes designed to curtail the activities of Negroes had little effect. One law, for example, prohibited bondsmen from owning or acquiring property; yet many blacks acquired real estate and several slaves even owned race horses.²¹ Another statute restricted the number of blacks who could congregate in a group; yet every Sunday hundreds of slaves gathered in Congo Square to sing, dance, and play musical instruments. "They used to make music by beating on a skin stretched over the head of a barrel," the ex-Nashville bondsman wrote. "I judged it was African music [as] the colored people looked as they (most of them) were the imported article."²² And a third act, called the contravention law, forbade free Negroes from entering the state; yet blacks overcame this barrier by securing illegal Louisiana birth certificates or gaining the assistance of a white benefactor. Following the arrest and conviction of an Ohio free Negro, Thomas explained, the well-known slave owner, H. R. W. Hill, declared to a city court: "You have no right to keep that man in prison because his mother is a white woman and the condition of the child follows its mother."²³ So it seemed, at least to Thomas, that neither the law nor slavery curtailed the activities of many black New Orleanians.

Nor did he ever mention an unpleasant racial incident in the Crescent City. There were restrictions to be sure and most whites believed Negroes were members of an inferior race, but these regulations and anti-Negro attitudes seemed more pronounced in the North. Custom dictated a relaxed intermingling of the races in New Orleans, and if blacks could not enter the dress circle at the opera, no one seemed to care because the boxes set aside for wealthy Negroes in the balcony were perhaps as luxurious as the seats below. Thomas never remarked about being told to leave a theatre, or being demeaned because of his race, though he recalled such unpleasant incidents elsewhere, often bitterly assailing the hypocrisy of whites who professed to be the black man's best friend but denied him courteous treatment. The two races lived together in relative harmony in New Orleans, even co-mingling socially at such famous events as the "Quadroon Ball."²⁴

At the same time he was realistic about the plight of many less fortunate blacks. During his two dozen visits to the city between 1839 and 1861, he had often passed the St. Charles Hotel and observed the huge sign that read "Maryland and Virginia Negroes for Sale."²⁵ He had seen black women lined up in display fashion on the sidewalk, Negro men arranged like pieces of furniture in show windows, and boisterous, cigar-smoking, white slave brokers, scrutinizing, questioning, and handling the human merchandise. He had witnessed the sale of hundreds of slaves, who ranged in size and color from seven-foot purple-black Africans, to lithe, brown-colored Creoles,

²¹ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* For an analysis of the New Orleans black codes, see: Robert C. Reinders, "Slavery in New Orleans in the Decade Before the Civil War," *Mid-America*, XLIV (1962), 211-221.

²⁴ Thomas Autobiography, *passim*; James P. Thomas to John H. Rapier, Jr., October 7, 1857, Rapier Papers. Most recent historians tend to emphasize the indignities suffered by blacks and (to a lesser degree) the separation of the races in the Crescent City. While such an emphasis is certainly valid, Thomas's experiences, if at all representative, indicate that blacks and whites often intermingled, and that on occasion Negroes violated the segregation ordinances with impunity. When Thomas entered the gambling house and placed a bet in 1839, for instance, neither his age (twelve years) nor his color seemed to have been a deterrent. Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

²⁵ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI; Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), pp. 263, 264.

to shapely, blue-eyed mulattoes.²⁶ Such saddening scenes reminded him that only a few years before he, too, had been human chattel.

But even this failed to dampen his enthusiasm. He liked the wide range of social activities, the unique entertainment, exquisite cuisine, and superb opera; he enjoyed mingling with blacks who boasted great wealth, or who, though legally slaves, lived and worked apart from their owners; he relished not being interrogated at every corner—the freedom to move about unmolested; and he even found pleasure in the attitudes of many whites who seemed less harsh in their racial views than their brethren in the North.

During the tumultuous period prior to secession, Thomas expressed alarm at the "war like spirit" of many whites in the city, but even this made little difference as he continued to make periodic pilgrimages down the Mississippi for recreation and amusement.²⁷ "Unlike any other city," he proclaimed early in the twentieth century, following a grand tour of thirty-four cities in Europe, "New Orleans was a most desirable place to visit."²⁸ It was the only city he had ever known where no one seemed to care about tomorrow. So if many antebellum blacks, like Solomon Northup, could cry out in anguish upon entering the Crescent City, other Negroes, like Thomas, saw the city as a unique refuge from the harsh realities of bondage and racism in antebellum America.

²⁶ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.

²⁷ James P. Thomas to John H. Rapier, Jr., June 14, 1858, Rapier Papers.

²⁸ Thomas Autobiography, chapter VI.