

## THRIVING WITHIN THE LOWEST CASTE: THE FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES OF JAMES P. THOMAS IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH

By: Loren Schweningen\*

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**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

A few days before Christmas, 1913, a hearse and six horse-drawn carriages moved slowly through the streets of St. Louis to St. Vincent de Paul's Catholic church.<sup>1</sup> A casket was carried up the steps, placed in the vestibule draped with a black pall, and candles were lit and set on both sides of the bier. "Suscipiat te Christus, qui vocavit te,"<sup>†</sup> the well-known pastor, F. J. Moser, C. M., chanted softly as he sprinkled the coffin with holy water.<sup>2</sup> Then, followed by six pallbearers and several hundred mourners, including some of the wealthiest people in St. Louis, Father Moser walked slowly behind a cross-bearer to the altar where he offered a homily for the deceased. They had gathered together to pay their final respects to James P. Thomas, a man of wealth, a devout Catholic, and a member of St. Vincent's church for fifty years. During that time he had contributed large sums to the church hospital, orphanage, and insane asylum, as well as for the construction of the rectory, convent, and church school. Though one of the richest men in the entire state, he had always remained a humble servant of God.<sup>3</sup>

At the conclusion of the two-hour funeral mass, the remains of the deceased were taken to Calvary Cemetery; the priest solemnized the final rites in prayer; the pallbearers lowered the casket into a grave in the Thomas family plot.<sup>4</sup> "JAMES P. THOMAS, 87, DIES," read the caption of a front-page article in the conservative St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*. "ST. LOUIS RESIDENT SIXTY-SIX YEARS. KNEW PRESIDENT POLK."<sup>5</sup> The *Globe* continued: He had contributed thousands of dollars to church and civic associations; he had donated his time to various philanthropic organizations; and he had given free violin lessons to children of the city's poor.<sup>6</sup> Retiring in 1890, he had written his personal memoirs, mentioning a long list of prominent Americans he had known or met, including: Ephraim Foster (United States Senator), John Catron (Supreme Court Justice), Joseph Pulitzer (publisher), and besides James Knox Polk, Presidents Andrew Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>7</sup> But he passed away, the St. Louis Times noted, controlling only a small fraction of his once great estate; indeed, his personal property included only six broken pieces of furniture valued at \$1.45.<sup>8</sup> It was ironic that he had died in such poverty, having once controlled entire blocks of downtown St. Louis, having established the highly successful Thomas and Company real estate agency, and having managed a string of popular barber shops and bath houses in the city.<sup>9</sup> But if he ended life with virtually nothing, he had begun it the same way, for James Thomas had been born a slave.<sup>10</sup>

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\* Loren Schweningen is Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

† May Christ who called thee, receive thee.

Yet, even in slavery he had laid the foundation for his later financial success, learning the values of frugality, hard work, and business enterprise. At the age of fourteen, in Nashville, Tennessee, he was hired out as an apprentice barber, working for Frank Parrish, a slave who had earlier established a barber shop on the public square.<sup>11</sup> He quickly learned the trade. "James has the character of a good barber, so a Gentleman told me," a free Negro observer wrote in 1843. Well thought of by members of the upper class, "James has manners to please almost anyone who do not let their prejudice go far on account of color."<sup>12</sup> Earning \$12 a month, he worked for Parrish until 1846, when he opened his own barber shop in a house on the corner of Deaderick and Cherry streets in the downtown business district.<sup>13</sup> The location proved ideal.<sup>14</sup> Within a few steps of several banking houses, newspaper buildings, and law firms, as well as the county court house, Market Square, and the Capitol, "the place on Deaderick," he explained, "[is] convenient to bankers, merchants, editors, lawyers, politicians, and other professional men."<sup>15</sup> Soon he boasted a prosperous trade, counting among his customers ex-governor William Carroll, future governor William (Parson) Brownlow, and Whig politician Ephraim Foster, who was Thomas' legal owner.<sup>16</sup>

His reputation as an excellent barber soon spread even beyond Nashville. In 1848 he received an offer from Maury county plantation owner Andrew Jackson Polk to serve as a barber on a trip to New York. "I told the Col. that I had just bought a business and I didn't think I could go." But the reply came, "Don't tell me about your business. I'll buy it and shut it up."<sup>17</sup> So he made arrangements to leave, journeying with Polk by stage coach, river-packet, canal-barge, railroad, and steamboat, 1,100 miles, to Louisville, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Albany, and New York City. At almost every stop he was asked, "Are you a slave?" "Who is your master?" "Is he any relation to the President?"<sup>18</sup> Admitting he was a bondsman, he explained that he ran his own affairs, managed a business, and negotiated his own contracts, including one with his companion, A. J. Polk—the brother of Bishop Leonidas L. Polk, a distant cousin of the President, and the owner of 300 slaves. "Several advised me to leave Mr. Polk," he said, "showing that they didn't believe what I had said as to being [nearly] free."<sup>19</sup> But Thomas stayed with Polk, and upon their return to Nashville, he received a handsome remuneration. "I [also] had a few pictures to hang up, some New York clothes, and had to answer many questions about the people of the north."<sup>20</sup>

Soon he had saved enough to purchase freedom papers, though his mother, Sally, a Nashville slave belonging to Charles S. Thomas of Albermarle County, Virginia, had previously paid a portion of the amount necessary.<sup>21</sup> In 1851 he asked his owner to present a petition to the Davidson county court for his emancipation.<sup>22</sup> "James has always maintained an exemplary character," Foster told the nine-judge panel hearing the case. Industrious, honest, and polite, he had always earned a good living and had always conducted himself in a manner to gain the confidence and respect of whites.<sup>23</sup> Swayed by the testimony of such an eminent Tennessean, the judges, after a short deliberation, decreed "the slave James, otherwise called James Thomas, be emancipated and forever set free."<sup>24</sup>

As a freedman, he continued to operate his barber shop much as he had done as a slave; cutting hair, trimming beards, and shaving his wealthy white clientele. The convenient location of his shop and his growing reputation for superior service attracted many faithful customers.<sup>25</sup> Though charging only 150 for a hair cut, 200 for a shave, and \$1 for occasionally extracting a tooth, he managed to save \$500 during the first year following his emancipation.<sup>26</sup> Cautious, if not

conservative, about money matters, he invested this money in city real estate.<sup>27</sup> Within only two years after securing "freedom papers," he operated one of the most prosperous "tonsorial establishments" in the city, advertising on a display-page in Nashville's first business directory (along with only seven of the more than two- dozen barbers): "JAS. THOMAS. BARBER SHOP. 10 Deaderick St."<sup>28</sup> By 1855, boasting a net worth of some \$3,500, he had become one of the city's leading small businessmen.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this, in November 1856, he abruptly left Nashville, pushed through Kentucky, crossed the Ohio river, and moved into free territory. "I came off very suddenly," he wrote from Illinois, "as a result of a rumor (false I have no doubt) that the Negroes had an Insurrection on foot to be carried into the effect Christmas."<sup>31</sup> With only a few dollars in his pocket, he continued his journey northward into Wisconsin. Though genuinely impressed with the rugged, rolling, snow-covered countryside, he decided that perhaps a growing town out West, or along the Mississippi, would be suitable for putting down roots. He thus turned southward, into Iowa, and on to Kansas. "I am going towards Pikes Peak. I may stop at Leavenworth to pick up the money sprinkled along the road," he later exclaimed, noting that he had joined the Colorado gold rush.<sup>31</sup> But better judgment prevailed, and after concluding that "getting gold is too much of a wild goose chase," he secured a position as a barber-companion of a wealthy Kentucky plantation owner, Colonel Benjamin Clark.<sup>32</sup>

In the company of a well-known white man, Thomas returned to the South for the first time since the slave insurrection panic. "I have spent several weeks in this city of fires," he wrote from an elegant suite in Louisville's *Gulf House* hotel, "with a young Gentleman who has more money than he wants and is anxious for me to help him use it."<sup>33</sup> What was the nature of his new-found employment? In the absence of opera, he took in the theatre, but most of the time he simply lounged around one room or another, watching the chambermaids "beat in with dusting brushes."<sup>34</sup> Despite such easy living, he somehow "earned" \$1,500. "With the aid of Kind Providence we will leave tomorrow for [Chicago]," he said with tongue-in-cheek, having probably flimflammed the colonel out of the money. "There, I think I will Jump the game and begin to make investigations."<sup>35</sup>

He was referring to investigations about real estate prices in the West. In April 1857 he succeeded in jumping "the game," journeying to Keokuk, Iowa, where he met an old Tennessee acquaintance, Jerome S. Ridley, who had accumulated a small fortune (\$75,000) speculating in land along the Mississippi river.<sup>36</sup> Guided by Ridley's advice, Thomas purchased a downtown lot in Keokuk for \$650, boasting that the property would probably turn a 100% profit within six months. "If I exercise my wits a little I will make big money."<sup>37</sup> But further investigations revealed that even better opportunities for profit lay in the Kansas Territory.<sup>38</sup> Once again he was on the move, journeying to Topeka and Tecumseh, purchasing thirty-one lots for \$891 and again bragging that the property would bring a quick profit.<sup>39</sup> "Ridley told me to go right to Kansas and put every dollar in cheap property," he confided, "which I did."<sup>40</sup> Though planning to settle in Kansas, he changed his mind after being accosted by some pro-slavery ruffians;<sup>41</sup> and in July 1857, he continued his odyssey across Missouri. Arriving in St. Louis, he found a thriving black community, and, with a sigh of relief, he concluded, "I expect to be here for some time."<sup>42</sup>

Thomas had little difficulty finding a job. In fact, he secured two positions: The first, as a barber in the downtown shop (4th and Pine) of Henry Clamorgan;<sup>43</sup> the second, as a steward on the Mississippi River steamer *William Morrison*, running monthly from the Gate City to New Orleans.<sup>44</sup> Working in this dual capacity for the next three years, he waited tables, carried luggage, tended bar, and operated the Morrison's barber shop, serving at Clamorgan's during layovers. In both capacities he was paid well for his services. White southerners, he explained, would often call up the steward at the end of a trip and "press a piece of currency, or gold piece, in his hand."<sup>45</sup> Building a lucrative trade, he quickly saved several thousand dollars,<sup>46</sup> receiving adulation from blacks as well as whites as a man of unusual talent, enterprise, and business acumen.<sup>47</sup>

"James Thomas is a man of mark," wrote free Negro Cyprian Clamorgan (Henry's uncle) in a book titled *The Colored Aristocracy* of St. Louis. "He is one of the most popular men on the river," very genteel in his manners, and extremely attentive to business.<sup>48</sup> He was worth \$15,000. Such wealth and ambition had gained him the praise of the most prominent statesman in the West, Clamorgan asserted. "The only thing preventing him from becoming one of the greatest men of the age (the unnamed political leader had said) is his color."<sup>49</sup> The author agreed: "His character, moral and intellectual, would do honor to the proudest white man in the land."<sup>50</sup>

At the outbreak of the Civil War, he terminated his job on the Morrison, but received an appointment as head-barber at Clamorgan's and was now responsible for hiring and firing, keeping the books, making out pay-vouchers, and overseeing the shop's general operations.<sup>51</sup> Continuing to put aside a few thousand dollars each year, in 1863, when the Morrison opened above Vicksburg, he returned to working two jobs, serving as a steward-barber on the steamer Ruth.<sup>52</sup> It was not long, however, before he accepted an offer from Clamorgan to be a full partner. With short hair the fashion, with the price of a haircut inflated to 300, he once again, as he had as a slave in Nashville, became the manager of an extremely prosperous business. Profits were so great that within a year after the war the partners opened a second shop. "Thomas and Clamorgan," an entry in St. Louis' business directory said, "BARBERSHOPS AND BATH HOUSES. TWO- LOCATIONS FOR CONVENIENT ACCOMMODATION."<sup>53</sup>

But like other antebellum free Negroes who had achieved a degree of financial success, Thomas was also concerned about the economic plight of the recently emancipated. Hoping that ex-slaves would acquire habits of thrift, he accepted a position (as finance advisor) at the St. Louis Freedmen's Savings and Trust Bank, one of thirty-four institutions chartered by Congress, but under the aegis of a private board of directors.<sup>54</sup> He urged blacks to save their money, even if it meant only a few pennies a day; he counselled bank officials to put funds in sound, well-established, companies; and he advocated a cautious banking policy.<sup>55</sup> A quarter-century of entrepreneurial experience had taught him to be wary of quick-money schemes. Unfortunately, however, his advice was disregarded, and, as the nation slumped into a depression (1873-74), the St. Louis branch closed its doors, as did the other savings institutions for freedmen across the South. "The colored people were led into the scheme all over the country, until something like [3.5] million dollars was gathered," he bitterly charged. "When the confidence game, otherwise called the Bank, closed with all the people's money, some had but little."<sup>56</sup> The most needy group in the nation had thus been cheated out of their hard-earned money, Thomas lamented; many blacks simply "gave up the Idea of ever saving money."<sup>57</sup>

Shortly after his arrival in St. Louis, Thomas had met and fallen in love with Antoinette Rutgers, a wealthy free mulatto, whose father, Louis, had accumulated a substantial amount of city real estate.<sup>58</sup> Though Thomas had proposed as early as 1859, it was not until nine years later in 1868—after the death of Antoinette's mother, who vigorously opposed her daughter's marrying a former slave—that the two were married.<sup>59</sup> "It was an imposing affair," the St. Louis Dispatch admitted, apparently grudgingly, under the title: "RICH NIGS WED."<sup>60</sup> "Many of the elite of the city were present. The bride has property and money to the value of \$400,000. The husband is worth nearly the same amount."<sup>61</sup>

Such an estimate was excessive, but with the infusion of new capital, Thomas moved quickly to improve his financial standing. Securing a license to sell real estate, he opened a small brokerage firm. Now, though continuing to work as a barber, he began buying, selling, leasing, renting, and mortgaging property, some of it previously belonging to his late father-in-law, Louis Rutgers.<sup>62</sup> Using ingenious methods, he would, for example, make a down payment on a few lots, then swap one of them for shares in a railway company, then trade the railroad stock for certificates in a building company, then, using the certificates as collateral, finance the construction of a small rental unit. With the rental income, he would pay off the original mortgage.<sup>63</sup> In addition, he leased the new apartments to skilled workers (carpenters, masons, plasterers, plumbers), receiving labor rather than rent; and, as he had done years before in Iowa and Kansas, he began purchasing tracts of cheap land.<sup>64</sup> But now, recalling past experiences, he quickly resold the property when prices became inflated. In a single transaction, for instance, he bought thirteen acres for \$15,000, held the land for two years, then sold it to the city in 1872 for \$28,000.<sup>65</sup> Netting similarly large profits in other dealings, by 1873, he had established a small financial empire. Owning six apartment houses (twenty-four units), real estate in every section of the city, valuable stocks and bonds, and all or part of two profitable businesses, he oversaw an estate, including the old Rutgers property, valued in excess of \$250,000.<sup>66</sup> Such wealth was impressive by any standards, but for a former slave, who still spent his days cutting hair in a barber shop, it was spectacular.

Since slavery, he had dreamed of becoming the proprietor of a luxurious barber shop. Now, with the means to finance such a venture, he terminated his partnership with Clamorgan and signed a \$4,500 lease for three adjoining rooms in the basement of the New Lindell hotel—a recently completed six-story structure in the central business district.<sup>67</sup> He then personally supervised the installation of a steam-heating "pipe apparatus" and an electric massage bath as well as decorating the interior with leather-upholstered chairs, imported glass chandeliers, a German-silver showcase, three 10' high walnut display cases, intricately designed lace curtains, and a row of twelve marble-framed wall mirrors.<sup>68</sup> In September 1874, he held a grand opening, advertising that customers could be treated to "Russian, Turkish, and Cold Water Baths. Three Marble Slabs and Shampoo Brushes in the Bathing Department. Experienced Barbers on Duty."<sup>69</sup>

The new business was an immediate success. Not even the onset of a severe depression adversely affected operations, for within a year Thomas could depend on 600 regular customers, mostly business and professional men, who had already deposited their personal shaving mugs at the Lindell hotel shop.<sup>70</sup> Grossing between \$2,000 and \$2,500 a month, he used the profits to purchase more land and build more apartments.<sup>71</sup> By 1876, he owned nearly two entire blocks of

downtown property, rented forty-eight apartments (thirty-eight on Rutger Street, six on Jefferson Avenue, and four on Phoenix Street), boasted a monthly income of about \$1,000, and lived in a large mansion overlooking the Mississippi.<sup>72</sup>

As the nation's economy swung upward during the next few years, he expanded his holdings even more, purchasing a three-story summer home in the small town of Alton, Illinois (across the river and above St. Louis), buying real estate adjacent to the city, and accumulating property in cities as far away as Memphis, and Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>73</sup> In a single St. Louis city block, #301, as conservatively assessed by city tax officials in 1880, he controlled property valued at \$98,430.00; in another, #691, \$61,000; and his total wealth was by now correctly estimated at \$400,000.<sup>74</sup> Such an estate made him one of the wealthiest Negroes in America.

But despite this, he still spent most of his time as a barber, cutting hair much as he had done for over forty years. Gradually, though, he began to phase out his various business activities. He closed his real estate agency in 1888, sold his barber shop in 1889, and the following year he put the management of his apartments in the hands of a realtor, retiring permanently to Alton.<sup>75</sup>

No sooner had he become accustomed to the leisurely pace of small-town living, than the nation was jolted by another financial crisis—the stock market crash of 1893, which resulted in the failure of more than 10,000 businesses. And unlike in 1873, Thomas was caught by surprise, losing (through foreclosure) several lots in a St. Louis subdivision, defaulting on four \$1,000 promissory notes, and forfeiting railroad stock worth \$15,000.<sup>76</sup> In 1873 alone he incumbered his real estate with mortgages amounting to \$29,431, and in 1894-95 he increased this amount to \$51,931.<sup>77</sup> Even then, he was on the road to recovery when a second disaster struck.

"FIFTY IN ONE SMALL AREA. LATE ESTIMATE INCREASES THE HORROR OF THE SITUATION," read the headline of the St. Louis Globe, May 28, 1896. "A HURRICANE [sic] WIPED OUT . . . PERHAPS FIFTY LIVES IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF SEVENTH AND RUTGER STREET."<sup>78</sup> The newspaper then related the gruesome details of the worst natural disaster in the history of St. Louis. Entire residential districts had been razed to the ground, whole families had been killed, wreckage had been strewn for twenty miles, and Rutger Street, between 7th and 8th streets, had borne the brunt of the violent storm.<sup>79</sup> "The block consisted of a row of tenement houses and it is thought that fifteen families were buried in the mass of ruins."<sup>80</sup> The devastated row of tenement houses belonged to James Thomas and the list of dead included four families who had rented from him, along with thirteen others who had lived in his apartments—a total of twenty-five persons. Inadequately covered by insurance, Thomas was forced to take out a slew of new mortgages. He never recovered from the catastrophe.<sup>81</sup>

To make matters worse, as city dwellers began to clear away the debris, Antoinette became seriously ill, suffering from an infection of the kidney called Bright's Disease.<sup>82</sup> Enduring many months of pain, "she seemed in imminent danger of passing away several times," the Alton Telegraph noted, but "rallied each time."<sup>83</sup> Continuing to grow weaker, however she finally suffered a paralytic stroke, and on November 28, 1897, she died. "Mrs Antoinette Thomas Dead," The St. Louis Post-Dispatch informed its patrons. "The wealthiest colored woman in St. Louis."<sup>84</sup>

Following the funeral, Thomas left Alton, travelled to Chicago, and took up residence with his daughter Pelagio, and son-in-law, Jefferson Blair, a school teacher on the south side.<sup>85</sup> Without funds, he remained with them almost an entire year. Even as executor of Antoinette's will, he was unable to post bond, relinquishing the responsibility to his son-in-law's brother;<sup>86</sup> nor was he able to prevent creditors from auctioning off the Alton house, along with all of its contents, including a ninety-year-old rosewood piano (purchased by Louis Rutgers about 1835), mahogany furniture, and several family portraits.<sup>87</sup> It was a desperate time for Thomas, who, only a few years before, had been among the wealthiest men in Missouri.

But he did manage to salvage a reconstructed brick apartment complex (eight units) in St. Louis; and in the fall of 1898, he returned to the city, took up residence in one of the apartments, and leased the others for a total of \$210 a month.<sup>88</sup> The low rental fees (\$30 a unit) as well as the lease agreements suggested that the once fashionable neighborhood had begun to decline. He allowed his tenants the privilege of subletting, though expressly forbidding "subtenants of bad character [who might] contemplate improper use of the premises."<sup>89</sup> Subsisting on the small income from the apartments, Thomas, still vigorous at seventy-two years of age, passed the time quietly, reading, writing, walking to a nearby park, or down to the waterfront, or to St. Vincent's for Sunday mass.<sup>90</sup>

Early in the twentieth century he began work on an autobiography. Only then did he fully express the long-pent-up bitterness he felt concerning the condition of Afro-Americans in the United States. "The Negro has had uphill work from the start. His beginning in this country was an experiment with those who invested money in him, which fixed him as a piece of chattel, as any other piece of property."<sup>91</sup> The only way to cast off the yoke was to save enough to purchase free papers, but even then, blacks were continually beaten down. The cry had always been: "White man first. Ingun (sic) next. Dog next. Nigger last."<sup>92</sup> Yet, since human beings had nothing to do with the condition of their birth, surely blacks, who were born slaves, he averred introspectively, would have chosen a different beginning, had they only had a choice.<sup>93</sup> "Every colored man may or ought to know," he wrote, that although, at times, he could be treated by whites as a friend and companion, in the end he was looked upon as an inferior, even despicable, human being.<sup>94</sup> After working on the 400-page, holograph autobiography for nearly eight years, he set about organizing, transcribing, and typing a final draft.

An examination of Thomas' life, as revealed in his autobiography as well as in other sources, indicates the degree of upward economic mobility possible for Afro-Americans within the Southern caste system, and also the way such mobility could be achieved in spite of the deep-rooted frustrations created by such advancement. The vast majority of blacks, of course, toiled a lifetime, only to conclude, as did Nate Shaw: "I ain't [never] been able to save a penny."<sup>95</sup> Only a few, like Thomas, who secured white "protectors," who established businesses catering to the rich, and who always maintained cordial relations with whites, could become prosperous. Yet the bitterness Thomas expressed in later years illuminates the anxieties felt by other blacks, who, valuing hard work, frugality, and individual initiative, struggled for acceptance in a white-dominated society but were never able to achieve that goal. It seems that no amount of wealth could erase the pain and humiliation of being considered a member of the lowest caste.

A study of his financial ascendancy also suggests the unique complexities and incongruities, the strange inconsistencies and paradoxes of slavery and race relations in Nineteenth-Century America. It is not surprising that most Negroes lived in grinding poverty, nor even that Thomas died almost penniless. It is remarkable, though, that a former bondsman could, for however brief a period, compete with the titans of big business. Considering the barriers he faced as a Negro, perhaps the glowing praise he received from that unnamed statesman in 1858 was true: "The only thing preventing him from becoming one of the greatest men of the age is his color."

Toward the end of his life Thomas suffered from a number of maladies, including arthritis and frequent pulmonary infections, illnesses aggravated by his living conditions.<sup>96</sup> With the comforts of the past only a dim memory, he endured these last years in a small, dingy, two-room apartment, surrounded by a few scattered pieces of broken furniture, warming himself in the winter next to a small, leaky coal stove.<sup>97</sup> It was a sad, tragic time for a man who had led such a full and active life. It is not surprising, then, that his health deteriorated, and in the fall of 1913, he contracted a flu virus, which quickly developed into pneumonia.<sup>98</sup> Though securing one of his tenants (Clara Schoener) as a full-time nurse, he grew progressively worse, and on December 16, with virtually nothing left of his once great estate, James Thomas died.<sup>99</sup>

"*Corus Angelorum to suscepiat, et cum Lazaro quodam paupera,*" Father Moser had concluded the funeral mass at St. Vincent's church, though perhaps unconscious of the poignant meaning such words had for the recently departed former bondsman, "*aeternam habeas requiem.*"<sup>‡100</sup>

1. St. Louis Globe-Democrat, December 17, 1913.
2. Ibid.: Records of St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, Sacristy Mortuary Deeds (December 18, 1913), n.p.
3. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 17, 1913.
4. Ibid.: St. Louis Globe-Democrat, December 17, 1913; Records of the St. Louis Probate Court, Wills, #42967, Book 68 (January 30, 1914), p. 682, 683.
5. St. Louis Globe-Democrat, December 17, 1913.
6. Ibid.
7. "The Autobiography of James P. Thomas: A Slave and Free Negro in the Antebellum South," p. 2, passim, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D. C., hereafter, Thomas Autobiography. The list also included adventurer William Walker, Civil War General Cinton B. Fisk, and plantation owners William Giles Harding, Benjamin Clark and Andrew Jackson Polk. Ibid.
8. The St. Louis Times, April 28, 1914.
9. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1858), p. 18; *Tax Book for the Year 1879: State of Missouri* (St. Louis, 1880), 26-29, found in Records of the St. Louis City Court, St. Louis, Missouri.
10. Thomas Autobiography, p. 2.
11. John H. Rapier, Sr., Florence, Alabama, to Henry K. Thomas, Buffalo, New York, February 28, 1843, Rapier Papers, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard

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<sup>‡</sup> May the choir of angels receive thee, and with Lazarus, once a beggar, mayest thou have eternal rest.



- University, Washington, D. C.; John H. Rapier, Sr., Florence, Alabama, to Richard Rapier, Buffalo, New York, April 8, 1845, *ibid.*
12. John H. Rapier, Sr., Florence, Alabama, to Henry K. Thomas, Buffalo, New York, February 28, 1843, Rapier Papers. Rapier was Thomas' older brother. *Ibid.*
  13. Thomas Autobiography, 7-11, chapter IV.
  14. Nashville General Business Directory (Nashville, 1853), 1-22.
  15. Thomas Autobiography, chapter IV. In the original manuscript pages are frequently not numbered or are inconsistently numbered. Thus, I have cited only the chapter in some instances.
  16. *Ibid.*: Records of the Davidson County Court, Minute Book 1850-1853 (March 6, 1851), 135, 136.
  17. Thomas Autobiography, chapter VII.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 155
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
  21. *Ibid.*, 1-11; Records of the Albemarle County, [Virginia], Court, Deeds, Book XXXII (January 2, 1835), p. 89.
  22. Records of the Davidson County Court, Minute Book 1850-1853 (March 5, 1851), p. 136.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 136. It is not the purpose of this essay to examine the slave codes of Tennessee, though the law, of course, prohibited slaves from operating independent business, and in Nashville, even from hiring their own time. For a more complete view of Thomas' life in slavery, as well as an analysis of other Nashville slaves, who, like him, hired out, saved their money, opened businesses, and eventually secured their freedom, or lived as virtually free slaves, see: Loren Schweninger, "The Free-Slave Phenomenon: James P. Thomas and the Black Community in Antebellum Nashville," *Civil War History*, Vol. 22 (December, 1976), 293-307.
  25. Nashville General Business Directory (Nashville, 1853), 68, 69.
  26. Records of the Davidson County Court, Warranty Deeds, Book 18 (June 1, 1854), 366, 367.
  27. *Ibid.*; Thomas Autobiography, chapter VII.
  28. Nashville General Business Directory (Nashville, 1853), p. 69.
  29. James P. Thomas, Nashville, Tennessee, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, October 3, 1856, Rapier Papers.
  30. James P. Thomas, Chicago, Illinois, to John H. Rapier, Jr., St. Paul, Minnesota Territory, November 23, 1856, Rapier Papers. A good deal has been written about the 1856 panic. Harvey Wish, "Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History*, V (May, 1939), 206-222; and "American Slave Insurrections before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (July, 1937), 299-320; Charles B. Dew, "Black Ironworkers and the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History*, XLI (August, 1975), 321-338. Unlike the above historians, Thomas ascribed the cause of the panic to the political involvement of blacks. During the campaign of 1856, he said, Negroes openly discussed the free soil movement, the abolitionist crusade, and the platform of the Republican party; they attended political gatherings, listened attentively to the candidates, and generally supported John C. Fremont, who used the slogan: "Free Soil, Free Speech, and

Free Men." "At the outdoor meetings, the Negroes would attend and listen to what was said. The Watchmen tried to drive them off, but they would slip around and mix with the crowd somewhere else." According to Thomas such activity alarmed whites to the point of violent repression. Thomas Autobiography, p. 110.

31. James P. Thomas, Cairo, Illinois, to John H. Rapier, Jr., St. Paul, Minnesota Territory, January 21, 1859, Rapier Papers.
32. James P. Thomas, Louisville, Kentucky, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, March 1, 1857, *ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Records of the Lee County [Iowa] Court, Deeds, Book 19 (April 10, 1857), p. 456; James P. Thomas, Tecumseh, Kansas Territory, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, May 11, 1857, Rapier Papers. Thomas acknowledged his meeting with Ridley a month after its occurrence.
37. James P. Thomas Tecumseh, Kansas Territory, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, May 11, 1857, Rapier Papers.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Records of the Shawnee County [Kansas] Court, Deeds, Book B (May 12, 1857), p. 260.
40. James P. Thomas, Tecumseh, Kansas Territory, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, May 11, 1857, Rapier Papers.
41. Thomas Autobiography, 192, 200, 210, 211.
42. James P. Thomas, St. Louis, Missouri, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, July 27, 1857, Rapier Papers.
43. James P. Thomas, St. Louis, Missouri, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, October 7, 1857, *ibid.*
44. Thomas Autobiography, p. 213.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. James P. Thomas, St. Louis, Missouri, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Minnesota Territory, May 3, 1858, Rapier Papers; Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1858), p. 18.
48. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1858), p. 18.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. Thomas Autobiography, 210, 211.
53. Edward, *s Annual Directory for St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1866), n.p.
54. Thomas Autobiography, p. 278.
55. "*Ibid.*, 276-279.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 278; See: Walter L. Fleming, *The Freedmen,s Savings Bank* (Chapel Hill, 1927); Carl R. Osthaus, *Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud: A History of the Freedmen's Savings Bank* (Urbana, 1976); Abby L. Gilbert, "The Comptroller of the Currency and the Freedmen's Savings Bank," *Journal of Negro History*, LVII (1972), 125-143.
57. Thomas Autobiography, p. 279.

58. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Deeds, Book M (May 16, 1826), p. 441; Book 12 (August 8, 1839), p. 319; Book P2 (December 4, 7, 8, 1840), 191, 194, 195, 210, 211; Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1858), p. 7.
59. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Marriage Records, Vol. 13 (February 12, 1868), p. 222.
60. The St. Louis Dispatch, quoted in the Montgomery [Alabama] Daily Advertiser, February 25, 1868.
61. Ibid.
62. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Tax Assessments, Book 17 (1871), 20, 21; Deeds, Book 402 (February 4, 1870), p. 81; Book 405 (April 1, 1870), p. 69.
63. Ibid., Deeds, Book 405 (April 1, 1870), p. 69; Book 405 (April 9, 1870), p. 489.
64. "Ibid., Deeds, Book 397 (April 15, 1870), p. 432; Book 400 (April 20, 1870), p. 516; Book 402 (February 4, 1870), p. 81.
65. Ibid., Deeds, Book 406 (April 1, 1870), p. 69; Book 438 (January 9, 1872), p. 464. He still owned his Iowa and Kansas property, which, since 1857, had depreciated in value.
66. Ibid., Deeds, Book 452 (August 10, 1872), p. 396; Book 470 (May 1, 1873), p. 295; Book 473 (March 11, 1874), p. 323.
67. Ibid., Deeds, Book 594 (July 11, 1878), p. 431. The lease was dated June 4, 1874, though the entry date, as shown above, was four years later.
68. Ibid.
69. Gould's St. Louis Directory (St. Louis, 1875), p. 902.
70. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Deeds, Book 594 (July 11, 1878), p. 431.
71. Ibid., Deeds, Book 470 (May 1, 1873), p. 236; Book 492 (March 11, 1874), p. 323; Book 502 (June 20, 1874), p. 155; Book 521 (March 9, 1875), p. 53. The \$2000 to \$2500 gross is an estimate, derived from deed records and the fact that he had 12 barbers on duty. The shop's financial ledgers, unfortunately, are not extant.
72. Ibid., Deeds, Book 521 (March 9, 1875), p. 53; Book 536 (January 14, 1876), p. 419.
73. Records of the Madison County [Illinois] Court, Wills, Box 232 (February 24, 1884), n.p.; Records of the St. Louis City Court, Deeds, Book 616 (August 1, 1879), p. 271; Book 617 (October 6, 1879), p. 258; Book 631 (January 12, 1880), p. 128. At this time St. Louis county deeds were filed at the city court. The above will, written by Antoinette, notes the purchase of the Tennessee property as well as the Alton house.
74. Tax Book for the Year 1879: State of Missouri (St. Louis, 1880), 26-29, found in Records of the St. Louis Court, Assessors Office, St. Louis, Missouri.
75. Gould's St. Louis Directory (St. Louis, 1889), p. 1256.
76. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Deeds, Book 1139 (February 24, 1893), p. 5; Book 1153 (May 19, 1893), p. 388; Book 1156 (May 22, 1893), p. 274; Book 1181 (September 14, 1893), p. 215. 77 Ibid., Book 1201 (March 17, 1894), p. 303; Book 1229 (September 3, 1894), 333; Book 1314
77. (November 5, 1895), p. 232; Book 1296 (November 5, 1895), p. 483; Book 1300 (November 5, 1895), P. 383; Book 1306 (November 5, 1895), 140, 447; Book 1320 (November 20, 1895), p. 189.
78. St. Louis Globe, May 28, 1896.
79. Ibid., May 27, 1896.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., May 29, 1896.

82. Records of St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, Burials (December 1, 1897), n.p.
83. Alton Telegraph, November 29, 1897.
84. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, November 29, 1897.
85. James Thomas, Chicago, Illinois, to Judge W. P. Early, Edwardsville, Illinois, July 16, 1898, in Records of the Madison County Court, Wills, Box 232 (July 23, 1893), n.p.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Deeds, Book 1453 (July 12, 1898), p. 408.
89. Ibid.
90. Thomas Autobiography, passim.
91. Ibid., p. 252. Written between 1902 and 1910, the reminiscence is probably the last genuine slave autobiography. According to Stephen Butterfield, who was not aware of the Thomas manuscript, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* was the "last true slave narrative." It was published in 1901. Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1974), p. 93. For the usefulness of slave narratives in understanding antebellum history, see: John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, XL (November, 1975), p. 478.
92. Thomas autobiography, p. 252.
93. Ibid., 115, 116; His father was a white man, Judge John Catron.
94. Ibid., p. 312.
95. Theodore Rosengarten, editor, *All God,s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1975), p. 548.
96. St. Louis Globe-Democrat, December 17, 1913.
97. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 16, 1913.
98. Ibid.
99. Records of the St. Louis City Court, Wills, #43967 (January 5, 1914), n.p.
100. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 17, 1913; Charles J. Callan and John A. McHugh, *Blessed Be God: A Complete Catholic Prayer Book* (New York, 1925), 159-173. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Catholic scholar Rev. Father Thomas M. McAvoy, formerly of our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, in Greensboro, North Carolina, for graciously sharing his considerable knowledge concerning the early twentieth century funeral mass, as well as appreciation to my father, Ivan Schweninger, of Boulder, Colorado, for reading the manuscript and offering many worthwhile stylistic suggestions.