



The Barber of Natchez—and the Future Confederate General Who Tried to Bring His Family Justice

Norman Dasinger, Jr., May 14, 2021

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William Johnson Jr. | fair use

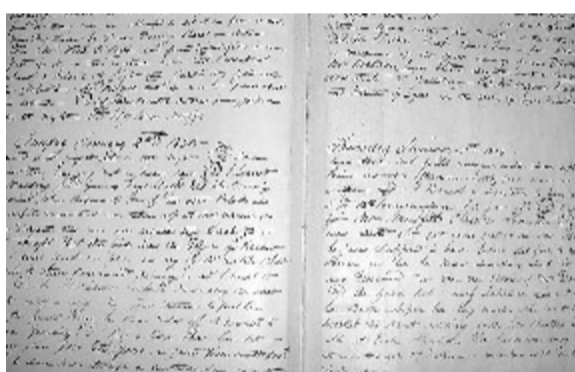


William T. Martin | LOC

One of the most prominent, and probably the wealthiest, African American in pre-Civil War Mississippi was William Johnson.

Born into slavery in 1809, his owner, probably his father, emancipated him in 1820. William had learned to read and write, and his petition of freedom was signed by the governor of Mississippi. Once free, he learned to be a barber. His brother-in-law was a free black named James Miller, also a barber, who owned a shop in Natchez. In 1830, James, whose success is witnessed by his owning four slaves, sold his Natchez business to William. Eventually, William Johnson would own three barbershops, a bath house, and an 800-acre plantation. He was also a slaveholder. In his journals, he writes about his businesses, his clients, and their issues, but also about his slaves.

In 1851, a boundary dispute between Johnson and his neighbor found the two men in court. The judge ruled in favor of William Johnson. The neighbor, Baylor Winn, also a free black, was not pleased. So, he shot and killed William Johnson soon after the court's ruling.



An excerpt from William Johnson's journals | NPS

Winn was arrested and stood trial. The prosecuting attorney in Adams County, Mississippi, at that time was Will T. Martin. Born in Kentucky, Martin relocated to Mississippi in 1840 and became a very well-respected lawyer in Natchez. By 1845, he was elected district attorney and, therefore, was responsible for the Winn case. During the War Between the States, Martin would serve as a Confederate cavalry commander and would earn a reputation as a gifted officer and fearless soldier.

But in 1851, he was the local official charged with winning justice for William Johnson. At first, Martin appeared to have a very simple and easily winnable case. There was a witness to the violence, and Johnson's reputation was without question. Surprisingly, Winn and his defense argued that he was actually white and not a free person of color because of his Indian ancestry. Therefore, by law, the black man who witnessed the murder could not testify against the "white" Winn. Two hung juries could not decide the case, and Winn just walked away.

In a story published later in the *Natchez Courier*, the following words were used to describe William Johnson, "The Barber of Natchez":

"His funeral services were conducted by the Rev. Mr. Watkins, who paid a just tribute to his memory, holding up his example as one well worth of imitation ... We observed very many of our most respected citizens at his funeral."

William Johnson's house stands today on State Street in Natchez. After an extensive renovation, the National Park Service opened it to the public in 2005.

Will Martin's house, Montaigne, is a regular stop on the famous Natchez Home Pilgrimage.



William Johnson's house in Natchez | NPS



Will Martin's house, Montaigne | cc



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