

From the autobiography of African-American; James Solomon Russell "An Adventure in Faith, the founding of the St Paul Normal and Industrial School in Lawrenceville, VA.

James Solomon Russell was the first Black Archdeacon of the Episcopal Church.

Chapter I Born into Slavery

Four years before the beginning of the war which was to change me from chattel to man, I was born in a little white-washed log cabin on the Hendrick Estate, near Palmer Springs and the Roanoke River, amid the green hills of Mecklenburg County, Virginia. On December 20, 1857, I unceremoniously became one more slave on the plantation of Mr. Hendrick.

Of my ancestry I have known little and a busy life has not allowed me time for genealogy tracing, but the ever present memory of my mother, father and grandmother has been sufficient to fill whatever place ancestral worship might have taken place in my life.

In Mecklenburg County however, the story has been handed down that my mother's grandmother was sold in Palmer Springs shortly after she was brought from Africa. She had a daughter Seleah, and both of them worked in the "Big House". Seleah had four daughters and two sons, and following the custom on most plantations, all the daughters were married under the supervision of their master. This matter of producing slaves was as important as breeding animals!

One of these, Araminta became my mother. My paternal parent, Solomon Russell, was slave on the Russell plantation in Warren County, North Carolina. My first seven or eight years, therefore, were spent without my knowing the companionship of a father or my experiencing the richness of a household that where husband and wife planned, worked, and prayed together. All my problems were my mother's until after the Civil war, when my parents joined each other and began to make of hut or cabin a home.

Palmer Springs in years past was a flourishing watering place, and attracted many visitors to the crystal mineral springs after which it was named. Besides these, the cultivation of cotton and bright tobacco were the principal occupations and these commodities, with the slaves, formed a triumvirate by which wealth was measured. Today, the natural beauty of the country is just as picturesque, but other popular resorts together with improved modes of travel, have robbed it of its value as a tourist rendezvous; the traffic in slaves is now a thing of the past, and cotton is no longer king. In the same way and typical of changing times, a modern steel bridge now spans the Roanoke River and connects Virginia with North Carolina, where in the days gone by we used to cross the stream in "flatsö. Round about the country many of the descendants of the slaves, and grandchildren and great grandchildren of my former master still make their homes: one of the descendants of Mr. Hendrick also occupies my old master's house.

My mother was poor, very poor. This poverty stood out all the more because, following the emancipation, we were left to fight our own battles and to manage our own lives; we were cast upon the billowy deep to paddle our own canoe, to what destination we scarcely knew. One thing we soon found out; no more could we look to our master for shelter, sustenance, care, and direction; we had gained Freedom and with it the responsibilities-dire responsibilities, at first-of being our own masters.

All through the Civil War, my mother and the other slaves remained on the plantation, but the news of the strife was always around us; three of our master's sons were away with the Confederate forces, and concern for them also gripped the slaves. The older slaves knew the meaning of the conflict and although they remained loyal, they hoped for freedom and would whisper such tidings as they gleaned concerning the success of the Union soldiers. When the Yankees neared Mecklenburg, my master had all his slaves and valuables taken and hid in the depths of the woods, and there they remained for weeks at a time; the slaves living in barracks and on the most meager of diets.

Mother lived in one of the log cabins near the “Big House” all through 1865, and at the close of the year my father built a small log cabin just across Smith’s Creek in North Carolina. Here we stayed until the close of 1867, when my parents and several other relatives decided to return to the Virginia side. There they built more cabins and settled down to two of the hardest years ever. Fishing, gunning, and trapping had to be engaged to augment the income that came in from the farm, but at best only a mere existence could be eked out. Although I was young, I, too had to help earn the daily bread, and so as a little barefoot farm boy, a “one gallus” boy in mother-made trousers, I milked the cow, sold eggs and the butter my mother made, hoed and followed the plough, and did a hundred and one other chores which kept me close to the soil and which were to influence me all the rest of my life.

My mother often told me that she named me Solomon, not so much because it was my father’s name, but because she had hoped and prayed that somehow I would be as wise as the Solomon of the Bible about whom she had heard the white minister preach and the Negro lay-reader exhort. On every occasion she would seek advice about my schooling and ask people what they thought of me. One of the persons who made a great deal over me was Mr. Thomas Wade, overseer on the Hendrick Estate. He would take me riding behind him as he went about the farm, answering the countless questions with which I bombarded him and laying down one condition for my going: that I wear breeches, even though I was still at the age when little dresses or gowns were the order of the day.

Mr. John E. P. Wright, who was the superintendent of the white Sunday school near Palmer Springs until he decided to help the small colored Sunday school to get on its feet, was also one of the persons who encouraged me. The colored school was begun in the Spring of 1870 with Mr. “Mack” Dugger as superintendent and my two cousins and myself as pupils.