

QUEST FOR EQUALITY

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Founder, Chicago Defender

HANDICAPS OF BIRTH

First Installment

MY RECOLLECTION of my earliest days is rather vague. However, by piecing together what bits of information I could gather from my mother and from family friends of long standing, I am able to get a fairly accurate picture of my life before coming to Savannah, Ga., the only native home I actually know.

I was born in Fredericka on St. Simon's Island, Ga., on November 24, 1870. My birthplace was a very humble, four-room farm house furnished with only scant necessities, but comfortable nevertheless. Although my parents owned this home, it was not much to boast of in the way of a possession.

Born in Slavery

Father and mother, Thomas and Flora Abbott, were young, proud, hard working, and I was their second child. I had been preceded by a girl who lived but a short time and died before my birth.

Thomas Abbott—my father—was born in slavery. His master, during bondage and after emancipation, taught him surveying. Through the meagre income accrued from this occupation, he managed to support his young wife and family. He assisted in surveying the first street car line in Savannah on Broughton and Whitaker streets. He died while I was yet an infant.

My mother, Flora, upon whose shoulders my care and training were placed at an early age, was also born a slave in Savannah. From childhood she had an inordinate urge to be educated and lift herself above the lot of the average slave.

First Copy Girl

By painstaking, personal effort, she learned to read and write by putting tissue paper over the name plates of the town residents' doors and tracing the outline in pencil. While still a child she became the first copy girl on the first newspaper to be published in Savannah.

The editor of the paper lived next door to her. She delivered news copy from him to the shop and carried proofs back to the editor. When she was a young girl, her father, Jacob Butler, who was owned by the family of the Butler Painting company, (a company still in existence in Savannah), bought his freedom out of slavery and soon bought the freedom of his children.

Flora Butler lived with her father and sisters and brothers on Broughton street—150 feet east of West Broad street, and when the opportunity presented itself, she furthered her education by attending one of the secret schools for slaves.

Attends Secret Classes

She had to leave at 5 o'clock in the morning to reach the class in time, and had to carry a bucket or pail of some

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sort to make it appear that she was going to work or on an errand. For, the slightest suspicion that she was attending school would have caused her to be returned to slavery from which she had been freed.

Schools for slaves were not permitted but a Mrs. Dellamorter held secret classes and also taught music to those who were interested. In this manner my mother acquired an education equivalent to a high school rating.

When Flora Butler married Thomas Abbott, she went as a bride to St. Simon's Island, Ga., where she lived until the birth of her two children and the death of her husband.

Stepfather Educated Abroad

Upon the death of my father, mother moved with me back to Savannah where she could earn a better livelihood. Here she worked among German storekeepers and soon became adept at speaking the German language. About a year later she met and married the Rev. John H. H. Sengstacke, the only father I ever knew. Of this union eight children were born.

My stepfather was also born in slavery, but his father, who did not want his son reared in such an atmosphere, took him out of the country and educated him abroad. After graduation from college he returned to America and became a Congregational minister.

When he married my mother he was teaching at the Mill street school in Savannah and holding church services in the classroom on Sundays. He owned the property on which he taught and preached. A few years later he built the Pilgrim Congregational church on the outskirts of Savannah in Woodville where he spent the rest of his life. This was almost in front of the famous hermitage of Savannah, Ga.

The earliest recollection I have of my childhood is in Savannah with my mother and stepfather. Mother was firm in her teaching of self-reliance. When I was five years of age, I got my first job working at the grocery store of Mr. J. P. Daily whose son still owns the store in Savannah.

My wages were 15 cents per week and mother taught me that 10 cents of my weekly earnings must be paid to her for room, board and laundry. As my earnings increased my expenses augmented accordingly. Out of the little that was left for me to use as I pleased, I was encouraged to save a part, in order that with the accumulated amount I might in course of time accomplish something worthwhile.

This training proved to be one of the greatest influences of my life and one of the greatest blessings.

(Continued Next Week)



1870 - Robert Sengstacke Abbott - 1940