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ANDREW JOHNSON, ANTI-SLAVERY SPOKESMAN

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ANDREW JOHNSON, ANTI-SLAVERY SPOKESMAN

By J. REUBEN SHEELER

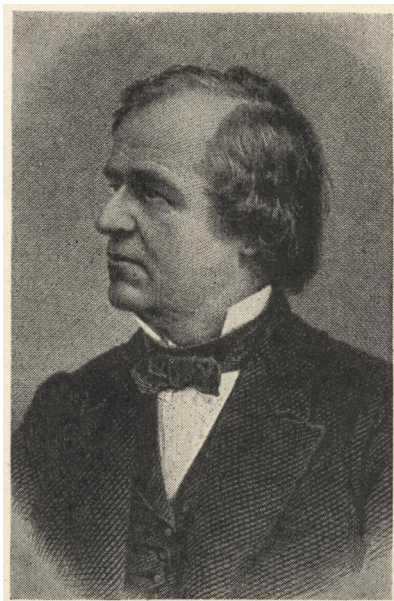
THE anti-slavery attitude was perhaps somewhat stronger just across the North Carolina state line in the mountainous section of Tennessee where there had risen an anti-slavery society, the earliest in the south, and where the publication of the *Emancipator* an anti-slavery publication edited by Elihu Embree of Jonesboro, in Washington County, Tennessee, had blazed the way to freedom. Among the leaders of the anti-slavery sentiment, there is no doubt that Andrew Johnson became the most nationally distinguished of the real spokesmen of the true anti-slavery sentiment of the non-slaveholders of his state. It is true that William G. (Parson) Brownlow was perhaps the most vehement in his expression, and as a spokesman of the sentiment he was without a doubt radical. Andrew Johnson was more conservative in his approach and attained greater political prominence. This same conservative attitude was to give him much difficulty with the Radicals of Congress during his presidency.

Born in Raleigh, North Carolina, December 29, 1808, Andrew Johnson was at a very early age to become destitute when Jacob Johnson, his father, died as a result of an effort to save the life of Colonel Henderson, who was editor of the *Raleigh Star*. Young Andrew Johnson was apprenticed by his mother to a tailor in Raleigh for seven years. Never attending school a day in his life, young Johnson's desire to learn was to some extent satisfied as he heard speeches from the British Parliament read to him by an older man who whiled away much of his time at the tailor shop reading to Johnson as he plied the needle. It was then Johnson's ambition to learn to read these speeches as the friend read them and some day to be able to speak

as ably as those members of the English Parliament.¹

Johnson asked to borrow the book from the owner, who readily gave it to him. He then learned to read from the book. In 1826, after a disapproval on the part of the girl's parents and the unsuccessful attempt to marry, Johnson decided to go West in search of a brighter future. He left Raleigh and went to Tennessee, where he settled in the small town of Greenville in the eastern mountain section about sixty-five miles from Knoxville. Here he established his tailoring business and later was married to an intelligent young woman who was able to help him much in improving his reading and writing and in the mastery of English speech. Here in East Tennessee Johnson found the people primitive, honest, warm hearted and hospitable as well as possessors of a fair amount of English education. In East Tennessee Johnson found very little of the southern oligarchy. It was here among the non-

¹Savage, John, *Life and Public Service of Andrew Johnson*, Derby & Miller N. Y. 1866, p. 1-10.



ANDREW JOHNSON

slaveholding, small land-holding group that Johnson began his political career. Alexander Hawthorne of Illinois, who was formerly of Greeneville, asserts that the people of Greeneville promoted Johnson for city alderman in the interest of its common citizens. Johnson was elected on written ballots in 1828, and in 1830 he was chosen mayor of the city of Greeneville.² Johnson held the offices "with great credit to himself and much benefit to the town."³ In 1835 he was elected to the Legislature of the State of Tennessee at the age of twenty-seven. In the Tennessee Legislature Johnson did more as a Democrat than oppose the National Bank. He also urged participation in the government by more of the people. "From the commencement of his public life," wrote a contemporary, "he raised his voice in indignant protest against the political encroachments of the slaveholders, who had partly succeeded in erecting an aristocracy in the very midst of the Republic."⁴ In 1834 Johnson introduced a bill to revise the three-fifths rule of representation of slaves and to base the representation upon the white voters of the state. This bill failed, but Johnson continued his efforts in this direction. In his early political career Johnson was influenced by Andrew Jackson, who was president of the United States at the time Johnson was in the Tennessee Legislature. The loyalty to the Union expressed by Andrew Jackson was reflected in the words of Johnson several times in later years. It was in 1830 that Jackson had no doubt saved the Union when nullification was threatening. In his toast at the Jefferson dinner, Jackson had said, "Our Federal Union; it must be

²Bacon, G. W., *Life and Speeches of Andrew Johnson*, London, p. 5.

³*Ibid.*, p. 6

⁴*Ibid.*: p. 7-8.

preserved."⁵ This statement caused Calhoun and Hayne to realize that the time for secession was not yet ripe. Jackson acted further by sending David Farragut to Charleston and warning the nullifiers that an army would follow.

In 1840 Johnson again attempted to put through the Senate the bill for the abolition of the three-fifths representation of slaves in Tennessee.⁶ This ratio in Tennessee was simply the same policy of the compromise in the United States Constitution. The effort to exclude property as a force in national government was a success but for this one exception in which it favored property in man. The effort to abolish this basis in Tennessee was one of Johnson's most severe strokes at the slave aristocracy of the state and a direct effort to strengthen the political power of the non-slaveholding whites of the state of Tennessee. For this, the slaveholders and radical southerners of the state hated him.⁷ This proposal would have meant much in cutting down the political power of the slaveholders of the western portion of the state. It met with the approval of the mountainous district and caused the people of the first district of Tennessee to nominate Johnson for the national House of Representatives. In the election of 1843 he was successful in obtaining the seat in the United States Congress to carry the cause of the non-slaveholding whites to the national House of Representatives. Here Johnson opposed the protective tariff and introduced a bill that was to benefit the non-slaveholders of the South, his Homestead Bill, for which he fought throughout his career in Congress.

He fought also for religious freedom. Though not a Catholic, he spoke in defense of the Roman

Catholics.⁸ He said: "I am a member of a Protestant church and a citizen of Greeneville where there are few Catholics, and where the citizens are somewhat prejudiced against them."⁹ This stand showed that he was interested in justice in this matter whether or not it was popular material for the "back home" use of a Congressman.

Johnson voted for the Annexation of Texas because he felt it was a gateway to the abolition of slavery, and like Hinton Helper he felt it would remove the Negroes from the Southern States. He stated that it would "prove to be a gateway out of which the sable sons of Africa are to pass from bondage to freedom; where they can become merged in a population congenial with themselves, who know and feel no distinction in consequence of the various hues of skin or courses of blood."¹⁰

After serving ten years in the House of Representatives Johnson returned to Tennessee as governor in 1853 to take up the cause of the non-slaveholding class in Tennessee. He served two terms as the chief executive of the state. In this position he launched the movement for a system of education with public schools. It was during his administration that the public school system of the state had its beginning as an effort to educate the masses. In the statement as to the need for such action in Tennessee, Johnson declared:

"All who entertain any personal and state pride must feel deeply wounded . . . that Tennessee, though the fifth state in the Union, stands lowest in the list of education, save one While millions are being appropriated to aid various work of internal im-

⁸Stryker, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 31. In Johnson's Congressional career he advocated the Homestead Bill, opposed the "Know-nothings", believed in Laissez Faire, opposed Federal control and abolition of anything within the states. He did not feel that slavery should be protected all over America, but he did favor the fugitive slave law. Never going all the way with the Calhoun school, Johnson considered their religiously justified slavery inconsistent.

Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

provement, can there be nothing done for education?"¹¹

During his second term he was able to get through the purchase of the "Hermitage," the home of Andrew Jackson, whom he had admired and whose principles of democracy he had tried to promote in his political life. After serving two terms as governor of Tennessee, Johnson took his seat as U. S. Senator from that state in 1857.

JOHNSON AND THE HOMESTEAD BILL

During the sessions of the Senate the chief objective of Andrew Johnson seemed to be that of securing the enactment of the Homestead Bill that had been in the House since 1846. This bill in its purpose was that of assistance to the non-slaveholding white people not only of his state but of the entire country. For his fight on the three-fifths representation of slaves he had won the admiration of the non-slaveholders and the hatred of aristocrats of his state. Now the Homestead Bill was just as odious to the aristocrats and won for him nation-wide hatred of this group, for it was to be by land control that this group would maintain its powerful system in the United States. Were there to be free land, the system of control in the new country would fail. The Homestead Bill in substance was to provide a title of ownership to a homestead of 160 acres of land for persons who occupied and tilled the soil of the public domain for five years. In its original form the measure was stated as "a bill to authorize every poor man in the United States to enter one hundred sixty acres of land."¹² Briefly giving the history of the bill, Johnson said in the Senate on December 22, 1857:

On the 27th of March, 1846, this bill was first introduced into the House of Representatives, and on the 12th of May, 1852, it passed that House by a majority of two thirds. The House of Representatives passed it

¹¹Jones, James S. *Life of Andrew Johnson*, East Tennessee Publishing Co., Greeneville, 1901, p. 51.

¹²*Journal of the House of Representatives*, 30th Congress, March 12, 1846.

⁵Compare this statement of Andrew Johnson in 1850: "The preservation of the Union is paramount to all other considerations," Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁶Savage, John, *Life and Public Service of Andrew Johnson*, Derby & Miller N. Y., 1886, p. 29.

⁷Stryker, Lloyd Paul, *Andrew Johnson, A Study in Courage*, N. Y. 1929, p. 23

six years, two months and fifteen days after its first introduction. It then received the endorsement of the House by a two-thirds vote. In 1853 the same bill in substance was introduced by Hon. John L. Dawson, of the state of Pennsylvania, and it passed again by an overwhelming majority. Thus the bill has twice received the sanction of the popular branch of the Legislature. It was transmitted to this body and here it failed on both occasions.¹³

The Homestead Bill was turned over to the committee on Public Lands and there received a unanimous recommendation for its passage and was to be voted upon February 8, 1858.¹⁴ A series of petitions presented by Johnson to the Senate indicates evidence of a strong sentiment for the measure. On January 25, a petition for the Homestead Bill was presented from New York.¹⁵ On February 4 there was one from Connecticut;¹⁶ on February 9, one from Kentucky and another from Wisconsin;¹⁷ on February 15, one from Iowa;¹⁸ on March 1, one from Pennsylvania;¹⁹ on March 29, one from Detroit, Michigan, and two more from New York.²⁰ From the petitions it is quite evident that the popular opinion of the Northern States was clearly expressed to the Senate, while not one petition in favor of it came from the South. During this time Johnson received one petition from Tennessee, his home state Legislature, which bore no mention of the Homestead Bill. However, this is no evidence that there was a lack of popular interest. There is evidence that there was popular sentiment for it in the South and this was fully admitted by Clement Clay of Alabama when he said in reply to Johnson's statement that strong public opinion favored it:

I do not think it becomes us, as Representatives of sovereign states to run after public opinion, but I think we should rather lead it; we should

correct it when it is wrong, and should follow it when it accords with our judgment, and when it is right.²¹

Not only did Clay admit that the masses favored it, but he further voiced the idea of democracy held by him and his associates. Johnson attacked Clay and pointed out that it was by advocating the Homestead Bill that Clay himself had obtained an overwhelming vote in Alabama. He further showed that John C. Breckenridge had been successful in reaching the vice presidency in 1856 by his favoring the bill in 1854. It seemed that the Homestead Bill had been one on which members of the Senate had climbed to office but on which they long hesitated to commit themselves by a vote in Congress.

On May 20, 1858, Johnson delivered his speech to the Senate on the Homestead Bill. In citing southern opposition he said:

Some persons from my own region of the country, or in other words from the South, have thrown out the intimidation that this proposition partakes, to some extent, of the nature of the Emigrant Aid Society, and is to operate injuriously to Southern States.²²

Johnson tried to show the Senate that economically for the United States it was better for the taxing system and production that all the land be tilled. He said:

The great object is to induce persons to cultivate the land and they thereby make the soil productive. By doing this, you induce hundreds of persons throughout the United States, who are now producing but little, to come in contact with the soil and add to the productivity capacity of the country and thereby promote national wealth.

He proceeded further to show how it increases wealth. He argued that it created patriotism in these people whom the nation needs in time of war, that they have an interest in owning something. He also showed that it made more reliable people. He asked, "Is not a man who is adding to the wealth of his country more reliable than one who is simply a consumer and has

no interest in it?"²³ He appealed to the Southern Senators by trying to make them feel that it would help reconcile the North to slavery.

On May 27, 1858, Johnson called for definite action by the Senate on the measure, pointing out that they had had twelve years to understand it. Clay of Alabama still insisted that he was not fully acquainted with it. The session of Congress closed after postponing it for the next session.

It was during the same session of Congress that it became necessary for Johnson to define his position in the Senate and free himself from this Democratic Party of the South which had gone far from the ideals of liberty and opportunity held by himself. A social oligarchy was fast forming in the South. Such men as Rhett, Yancey, Hammond, Toombs, and Benjamin had thrown off their masks of democracy and had openly denounced free institutions and free labor without reference to race. They held that all bodily labor was slavery except in name, and it would be better if the masses everywhere, without reference to color, were placed in a position where contentment should take the place of dangerous aspiration.²⁴ What had happened was that Negro slavery had revolutionized the opinions of the Cotton States and the system had reacted upon the people among whom it had existed. The leadership of the South had thwarted all trends toward advancement of any people except the favored ruling class, who were like feudal landholders. Thus in America, the arsenal of freedom, had caused to spring up the early seed of modern Fascism.

This idea was being so circulated in many southern periodicals, and the only efforts to combat this assault of Southern Democrats upon the principles of liberty would be found occasionally in an individual of the Border States or mountain area with courage enough to speak out against it. This was to

¹³Congressional Globe, Vol. XXXVI, Part I, p. 135.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 377.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 542.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 623.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 697.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 900.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1401, Part II.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 2424.

²²Congressional Globe, Vol. XXIII, Part II, p. 2267.

²³*Ibid.* p. 2272.

²⁴Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

be found only in a number of men like William G. Brownlow, Horace Maynard and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, and Hinton R. Helper or Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick of North Carolina. Johnson was forced to break with the Southern Democratic group as it condemned the political leadership of men from the ranks and looked down upon labor as slavery. The following is from the argument between Johnson of Tennessee and Hammond of South Carolina. The statements of each very clearly show the two positions of the South in conflict, Johnson speaking for the non-slaveholders and Hammond expressing the slaveholders' view. Hammond had declared that:²⁵

In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life; that is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect, and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have or you would not have that other class which leads in progress, civilization and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government; and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air as to build either the one or the other except on the mudsill. Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to the purpose to her hand. A race inferior to her own but eminently qualified in temper, in vigour, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We have them for our purpose and call them slaves. We found them slaves by the "commonest consent of mankind" which according to Cicero 'lex natura est.' The highest proof of what is nature's law. We are old fashioned at the South yet, it is a word discarded now by 'ears polite'; I will not characterize that class at the North with that term; but you have it; it is there—it is everywhere—it is eternal.

The Senator from New York said yesterday that the whole world had abolished slavery. By the name, but not the thing. All of the powers of the earth cannot do that. God can only do that when he repeals the fiat, 'the poor you always have with you'; for the man who lives by his daily labor and scarcely lives at that and who has to put his labor in the market, and take the best he can get for it; in short, your whole hiring class of manual

²⁵*Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, Vol. XXXVI, Part III, p. 2271, May 20, 1858.

laborers and 'operatives' as you call them, are essentially slaves . . .

Hammond declared further that in the South there were not nearly as many beggars as there were on the streets of New York; that the South had helped to elevate its slaves but did not believe in giving them political rights, whereas in the North they were allowing their slaves to vote, and if they were enlightened they would overthrow the government of the North. The North had made war on the very hearthstones of the South. "How would you like for us to send some lecturers and agitators North, to teach these people this, to aid in combining and to lead them?" To this question several shouted "Send them along."

This is reference to the Homestead Bill . . . Hammond said:

There is no need for that. Your people are awaking. They are coming here. They are thundering at our doors for Homesteads, one hundred and sixty acres of land for nothing, and Southern Senators are supporting them . . . The great West has been open to your surplus population and your hordes of semi-barbarian immigrants, who are crowding in year by year. They make a great movement, and you call it progress . . . Whither?

One hundred million dollars of our money passes annually through your hands. Much of it sticks; all of it assists to keep your machinery together and in motion. Suppose we were to discharge you; suppose we were to take our business out of your hands; we should consign you to anarchy and poverty.

Johnson, who was from the laboring class, could not fully agree with the position of Senator Hammond on labor. Of the upper South and of the non-slaveholding whites, he could not accept his apology for slavery. He replied:

I do not think whites should be slaves; and if slavery is to exist in this country, I prefer black slavery to white slavery. But what I want to get at is, to show that my worthy friend from South Carolina should defend the Homestead policy, and the impolicy of making insidious remarks that have been made here in reference to portions of the population of the United States

. Will it do to assume that

the man who labors with his hands—every man who is an operative in a manufacturing establishment or a shop—is a slave? No sir, that will not do If this were true, it would be unfortunate for a good many of us and especially for me I am a laborer with my hands and never considered myself a slave, in the acceptance of the term slave in the South.²⁶

In the 36th Congress the Homestead Bill was still a question for discussion. However, by 1859 at the opening session of Congress the John Brown raid had created much excitement and discussion. Hinton R. Helper's book *Impending Crisis*, in the minds of the slaveholders, was associated with the John Brown raid, and these incidents claimed the attention of Congress. It now became necessary for Johnson to take his stand in Congress on the secession movement that was growing strong. Johnson felt that the battle should be fought out in the Union. He wanted to build up a strong Senate to oppose President Lincoln and prevent any action he may advocate. On December 19, 1860, he gave his speech on "The Constitutionality and Rightfulness of Secession" in which he condemned South Carolina and the South for seceding. On the 22nd he was burned in effigy at Memphis in his home state.²⁷ Johnson remained in Washington in the Congress of the Union as a Senator from Tennessee, denying that Tennessee had seceded. The phase of his life as Military Governor of Tennessee and then Vice President and President of the United States is a very familiar story to all students of American History. He was chosen by Lincoln to run with him in 1864. On leaving the presidency Johnson returned to Tennessee, despised by his fellow-statesmen. But, unlike Helper, Johnson was soon touring his native state speaking and winning the confidence of his people. Defeated for the Senate in 1870, Johnson became more de-

²⁶*Congressional Globe*, Vol. XXIII, Part III, p. 2271

²⁷Greeley, Horace, *The American Conflict*, D. D. Case, Hartford, Conn., Vol. I, p. 407.

terminated to go back to the seat in Washington in 1875. And he did succeed in being elected to the Senate, the only president thus to come back. On March 4, 1875, he again walked into the Senate that had greatly changed from that before 1860. He delivered only one important speech which showed that Johnson, who still believed in a Federal Union and rights of the common man, was sympathetic toward the war-torn states and was deeply interested in the supremacy of the white man.²⁸ On July 31, 1875, he died after a stroke at the home of his daughter in Carter County near Elizabethton, Tennessee.

His Congressional career had been spent in an effort to help his fellow non-slaveholding whites of America. His Homestead Bill for which he fought fifteen years in Congress was taken over by the Republican party, by the "Land for all movement" of Horace Greeley and by others. It was written into the campaign platform of the Republicans as follows:

... 13. That we protest against any sale or alienation to others of the Public Lands held by actual settlers and against any view of the Homestead policy which regards the settlers as paupers or suppliants for public bounty; and we demand the passage by Congress of the complete and satisfactory measure which has already passed the House.²⁹

Andrew Johnson like Hinton Helper had achieved success in Congress in working for the benefit of the non-slaveholders in order to break the power of the slavocracy. His interest in the abolition of slavery was not particularly humanitarian but was for the economic interests of the non-slaveholders. The position of Helper and Johnson, when understood today, gives somewhat the setting for "the liberal Southerner" of the present day, who views the sectional problems from the economic point of view.

²⁸*Saturday Evening Post*, March 30, 1929.

²⁹Greeley, *op. cit.*, p. 320-321.

A Tribute to Jane Dabney Shackelford and Her Book, "My Happy Days"

Dr. Amanda V. Gray-Hilyer in selecting her Christmas presents decided that *My Happy Days* would make a nice gift for one of her friends, a teacher in the West. The following comment indicates that this was a fortunate selection. The teacher wrote:

Dr. Hilyer, I have a large boy in my 6B class who reads about on a second grade level but who I fear would be embarrassed to read from a first or second grade book and maybe would stay out of school to avoid so doing. So to save the day I am using *My Happy Days* as his basic reader. He enjoys it very much and, without realizing it, is improving slowly by reading material on his grade level. In addition to that I have him writing a textbook for himself based on his experiences at work, at home, etc., patterned after *My Happy Days*, complete with pictures (some cut from magazines and some that he has drawn). I'll keep you posted as to his progress as time goes by because, thanks to you, *My Happy Days* is fit-

ting right into my plans and I believe we'll do a "bang-up" job of teaching this fellow to read.

It is appropriate to add here that *My Happy Days* is one of the most widely approved juvenile books ever published. It may not have such a large sale as many others with high-powered advertising behind them, but on its own merits the book has won its way to front rank among those who think seriously of the needs of children and have shown some judgment as to how such books should be written. The book has appealed especially to those fighting intolerance and discrimination on account of race, religion and national origin.

This attractive work has helped tremendously to show the development of the Negro in America, not in the argumentative way, but in portraying the Negro family life of the average ambitious Negro seeking to establish a home, to raise his family in the light of the best standards of the time and to make of himself and his offspring desirable citizens. All honor to Jane Dabney Shackelford and her co-workers. They have achieved fame in putting the entire country under obligation to them.

Progress in Art

(Continued from page 152)

interpretive guides and historical hand-books for the appreciation of Negro Art. Alain Locke's *The Negro in Art* and James Porter's *Modern Negro Art* are valuable volumes in this field.

As Walter Pach has said: "The Negro does not stand apart in the civilization of America, but has an inherent share in it. His art, as well as his other emotional and intellectual expressions, is rooted deep within the soil and tradition of America. Whatever his cultural past in Africa may have been, he is first and always an American." He has known poverty, toil, prejudice, the sting of indifference, and even hatred; he has felt ambition, inspiration and realization. ALL of these have found expression in his art."



JANE D. SHACKELFORD, DISTINGUISHED AUTHOR