

Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 3 | Number 7

Article 4

7-1-1922

The Passing of a Slave

Bruce E. Mahan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

Mahan, Bruce E. "The Passing of a Slave." *The Palimpsest* 3 (1922), 227-230.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol3/iss7/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Passing of a Slave

The presence of an aged negro at the State encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic in Iowa City recently brought to mind another colored soldier who wore the blue during the trying days of the Civil War, and spent his declining years at Bedford, Iowa.

Born in slavery in Savannah, Missouri, and owned by a man named Jack Davis this negro had none of the advantages of education afforded his race today, yet he so improved his mind through an unquenchable thirst for information that he acquired a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. He died a few years ago, in 1915 to be exact, and the white man's church in which was read the funeral service was filled to the doors by the many townsmen who paid tribute to his memory.

During the war a detachment of Confederate troops came to the Davis place to take the slaves away to a safer location, and young Jack Howe was sent to the barn to care for a horse belonging to an officer. With some other negroes he managed to escape and to cross the Iowa line. He then enlisted in the Union army and served faithfully until the close of the war. One of his most cherished memories was the fact that he served in the campaign of Vicksburg under Grant. After receiving an honor-

able discharge he came to Taylor County, Iowa, and for several years engaged in farming. Later he removed to Bedford where he ran a truck garden.

Although he never learned to read, every evening found him seated in an arm chair in front of the town hall listening to the reading of newspapers. Governmental affairs interested him particularly and his memory for details was marvelous. He would listen to the reading of the President's message to Congress with all the interest displayed by a fiction lover in the latest popular novel. When the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill was in process of formation he followed painstakingly the framing of each schedule and foretold with considerable accuracy the unpopular reception it would create.

War news, too, held his attention. During the Spanish-American imbroglio of 1898 he was the first to buy a paper when the newsdealer put the morning dailies on the counter and then he would seek some other old soldier to read it to him. Part of this interest was due, doubtless, to the fact that he had a son in the famous colored regiment that supported Roosevelt and his Rough Riders at San Juan and El Caney. Later this son went with his regiment to the Philippines and there he died after a lingering illness.

During the Russo-Japanese struggle of 1904-1905 Jack Howe stubbornly defended the cause of Russia, arguing that Russia was the friend of the Union in the dark days of 1861-1865 and hence deserved the

sympathy of the United States in her difficulty. He lived to see the beginning of the great World War and, feeble though he was, his hunger for information was unabated and he importuned his friends daily to read or tell him the progress of the struggle.

Jack was a regular attendant at the sessions of the district court and to hear him mimic the leading lawyers of the county seat was a rare treat. Half in fun and half in earnest opposing counsel in a jury trial would consult him as to the verdict when the case had gone to the jury, and the remarkable thing about his answers was the number of times he accurately predicted the outcome.

In politics he was one of the best-known characters in southwestern Iowa. Republicanism was almost a religion with him. He admitted that there were some good Democrats but how a negro could vote the Democratic ticket was beyond his comprehension. Even in local affairs, in city and school elections, he supported Republicans only. At every Republican rally or meeting he occupied a front seat and when the speaker made some telling point or soundly berated the Democratic party Jack would raise his voice in his own version of the rebel yell to the great amusement of the audience and to the consternation of a speaker who had not been warned of the old negro's enthusiasm. All the Republican candidates who campaigned in the eighth Congressional district knew him personally and laughed heartily over his enthusiasm during their speeches.

“Uncle Pete” Hepburn, Judge H. M. Towner, Senator A. B. Cummins and former Governor Leslie M. Shaw were his favorite political orators and they were sure of a rousing reception on Jack’s part every time they spoke at Bedford.

Jack Howe, ex-slave and ex-soldier, was a credit to his race, and his death reminds us of the passing of the American slave. He was past ninety when he died, and the youngest negro born in slavery has already reached the twilight of his life. A few years more and the rapidly thinning ranks of the negroes who served in bondage will be depleted. Then will have gone from American history many who like Jack Howe were courteous, genteel and faithful — a distinct and worthy type of the colored race.

BRUCE E. MAHAN