
Documenting Family History: The Diary of Mary Sprow

by

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“You a worriation. A miration to no end, girl.” Mary Johnson Sprow’s soft but excited voice greeted me when she reminded me “for the better part of a year you’ve been a worriation; had me looking high and low to lay my hands on my old diary. So, just come on over here and see it.” She had to add a request, knowing it was one I would never seriously consider. “Child, will this stop you from worrying me about all this old time stuff?”

In fall 1979, Mary Johnson Sprow, a diminutive woman with a captivating smile and an irrepressible spirit that she maintained until her death in 1981 at the age of 94, found a diary¹ she had written while working as a live-in servant in 1916. After seven years of interviews with her, her three siblings, and their spouses finally I would touch the paper on which she so tenderly placed the thoughts of a young woman born near Success, Virginia, in the post-Reconstruction era. Slavery, freedom, migration, urbanization, and many of the other broad themes of African-American history become real with this important slice of family genealogy. Moreover, the diary reveals the emotional and personal themes of life, the values of work, play and love.

Documents of family history like the diary, provide fascinating and moving “insider’s” explanation of how African Americans at the close of the last century made “their way through the interstices of a punitive system.” Family records are crucial to research because they are windows into the lives of poor, common, and unnoticed persons, like my aunt, who have a rich, uncommon, and distinct impact on the history of their families and communities. Family documents provide valuable sources for understanding, in the words of the people involved, the feelings, experiences and aspirations of members of this important social and cultural group. Without question this diary helped to document a family history that began with a young female slave brought to Fauquier County during the late 1780s from the area know as Western Virginia [today it is Mason County, Kentucky.



Mary Johnson Sprow

The diary edited for this article directed my search for slave ancestors, and Mary begins the diary by describing the work of her grandmother Winnie, and her father Peyton who were slaves of John Walden in Fauquier County, Virginia. The diary confirms that Peyton, the father of thirty-three children, was a sheep-shearer who learned his trade while a slave on the Walden family farm. In the beginning of the diary, Mary also introduces Catalpha, Virginia, a small community about twenty-five miles from the town of Success, Virginia, which, most important, led me to the county and state records that confirmed how John Walden acquired Winnie and her son Peyton. William Walden, Peyton’s father, sold Peyton to his brother John in the early 1820s for one dollar. The same slave sales receipt also transferred Winnie to John Walden and stipulated that neither Winnie nor her child Peyton could ever be sold from John Walden’s farm. The two remained the property of John Walden from the 1820s

until they gained their freedom in 1865 at the end of the Civil War.²

The diary outlines the lineage of Mary's mother Eliza Dickerson Johnson, who was about twenty-five years younger than her husband. The Dickerson family Bible, which Mary also possessed, lists Eliza as the first of eight children born to Marttora and Rinar Dickerson on December 6, 1852. The family oral tradition indicates that she was born a slave on the Stewart farm in Caroline County, Virginia. Although the exact date is not known, it is believed that Peyton and Eliza Stewart Dickerson were married in May 1874. The tax records in 1874 show that Peyton and his wife Eliza paid taxes on 2.3 acres of land in Catalpha, Virginia, and the family oral history notes that Eliza and Peyton were married about six months before they were able to buy land. Moreover, records for the two years prior to 1874 list Peyton as a widower. In addition, the 1876 tax records show that the couple also paid personal property, county school, and district school taxes. The diary and the family oral history are filled with stories of Peyton Johnson's success as a sheep shearer, and tax records show that the family was able to purchase more land in April of 1892.³

Although Mary began to write the diary during the summer of 1916, when she was in her late twenties, she reveals some of the family life of an African-American child in rural Virginia during the post-Emancipation era. Mary was the twenty-third child of Peyton Johnson's thirty-three children and the seventh child born to Peyton and Eliza. In various places in the diary, Mary expresses embarrassment at the enormous size of her family. She was their second daughter, but she was the first female child to live into adulthood.⁴ Mary recounts the educational work of her community minister and her first job at age nine.

Now to tell you about my house. It is a little house in Virginia four miles from Catalpha off the waterside's road. Now when I look back at the grounds I think that our little home should have had a very popular name. At home lives my father and mother—she having been his third wife. He having been the father of thirty three children. My father had ten children by his first wife and six by the next wife. When he married my mother the children by his first wife were grown and working for themselves; and he only had two under age—Mattie and Henry eleven and nine. The situation of only two children didn't seem to please my mother so she started a on a family of her own. I don't know whether it would be

nice just to say just how many her family was. I will not say but only start and count [the thirty-three] for you. We all had some learning in the small but sturdy Antioch Church School. It was up to ... fourth grade with Rev. Madden teaching as he could. It was a one-room colored school that was teaching just about enough so you don't have to make a X and you could read just a very little. ...Too many children caused a need for money so children like me put her to work by nine. ...I was with a white overseer of a farm near by ... not too far from home.

Still, Mary spent most of her days as a domestic worker. In a poignant passage, Mary discusses the drudgery and near hopelessness of her job. She explodes the myth of the happy black servant and insightfully reveals attitudes toward white employers. Although Mary was influenced by the Redemption myth of the kind and benevolent treatment of slaves, which was common for American thought in the year of *Birth of a Nation*, the oral history of her family outweighed the propaganda of Southern racists. She begins to consider her life no better than a slave's but then quickly acknowledges slavery's unyielding horrors:

I am a poor maid that has toiled many years for a living and has really become tired of it but still see no way out of it but to give up life to give up life my dears friends takes on more thoughts than one. What is life? Why are we made? And what are we made of? Why do we have to slave for our daily bread? Why can't we have our daily bread when we ask? God to give us our daily bread?

Then what is work? Who made work? To clean and scrub days in and days out. Above all who made the people that we toil for? that never knows what it is to want and yet is never thankful for nothing that we do. no matter how hard no matter how we try to please. When I look at them I see that they are made of the same flesh and blood as we. I see that they eat three times a day same as we—but only after being waited upon they enjoys it better because their digestion organ have had the rest while our body and minds work all the time. Our minds works so fast that when we are sleep we have bad dreams. We gets bad dreams from food that has not been well mastikated [masticated] with the teeth; only swallowed and left for the stomach to do.

After all, work would not be such a task if it was not for the ungratitude [ingratitude] we get from our employers. But then all of the good boys and girls that can find better works. You can get something to do that don't take all day and night; and you have parents that try to make something out of you. I ask over and over, why try with all your heart and brain to make something out of yourselves when there is no hope? So while it is true that you work to make a living for yourself, I feels it will be little different than a slave. Our life is not in some ways as good as a slave, when they held men and women as slaves before the Civil War. When they felt like being Stubborn, it was alright for them because their master had them to feed and clothr [clothe] and keep them.

While my dear friends if we stop work—all is over just like the big clock on the wall. Not that I want slavery, no I don't want that in my life. No, never, for slavery was so bad -but I think about it and I know again. I remember how bad I was told it was and they talked about it just to show what our lives are like now.

Mary concludes that rather than her employment, her employers who cried day and night to be waited upon, made her work "such a task." Nevertheless, as the diary continues, Mary shares the happiness that she created for herself in her life as a "freeborn."

The heart of the diary provides glimpses into African American life and community in Washington, DC during the prewar years. With war raging in Europe and near certain American involvement, the year 1916 represented a time of changing values within the African American community brought on by migration and urbanization. During these prewar years, Washington became a major draw for African- American migrants who hoped for new economic realities. In many ways, the African-American population became more cosmopolitan and urbane, moving toward what many described as the "new Negro."

Mary was sent to live with her brother in Washington, DC; however, she did not like her period of tutelage with her older brother Henry, his wife, and three children. "They worked as a couple and from the day I came here I was left alone with them spoiled kids; my brother Henry was too taken with the his little girl Helen." In just over a year Mary started work with another older brother, Memphis, in the household of U.S. Senator John Spooner from Wisconsin. Thus, the diary led me to the letters of Spooner who noted several

members of the Johnson family who came to Washington and worked as "faithful, reliable and in every respect good" servants for several families. In the senator's home, Mary served as a live-in "maid's helper" performing chores alongside "Miss Lizzie," Memphis' wife and the "lady's maid" for the household. Elizabeth Bundy Johnson had started as a "general helper" with the Spooner family and was promoted to "upstairs maid" in about two years.⁵

Unhappy with her position and pulled away from her friends in Washington, Mary laments on her loneliness as she worked during an extensive Spooner family vacation in the summer of 1916.

I am now on a little island in Mass. for the summer. It has been six years I am working—it was then that I had the same thoughts as I have now.

But this has been a summer of blues. We have been here six long weeks and in that time have had about eight sunny days. Is not that alone enough to give a poor lonely girl a long face when we look out and watch and it is very sad. The wind blows hard; the rain beats beside the window pane with a loud bang.

We are situatd [situated] on a beautiful cliff surounded [surrounded] by large houses and small cottages. Our cottage is quite small and as Dickens would say—considered by the lady herself attractive. and while I am describing the state of things I might just as well say who I am. So my readers if there ever will be one my understand why I write my thoughts on paper. To clear them out of my head.

Work dominated much of her life, especially as a "live-in" servant, and by late 1916, Mary decided to leave the service of her employer.

In the diary, Mary asserts that she has the will and the ability to make the transition from live-in servant to domestic worker. In spite of her family's resistance she exemplifies the determination of women workers to transform and redefine the nature of domestic work. Mary wanted to gain more control of her life, and small things, like her desperate desire to attend study classes with the 12th Street Bible Club, prodded her quest for more independence and autonomy. In September 1916, Mary outlines an unalterable program to leave live-in employment and determines that this will be her final live-in servant job and her last trip with any employer.

Mary Stakes and I started up to Miss Miller and got caught in a storm. It was the

first time in my life that I ever saw a rainbow ... the rainbow looked like a sting of gold.

We left Nantuckett today for Washington. We had a beautiful sail. The night on the water was the most beautiful moonlight that I ever seen. I at once fell in love [with the area] but we [the servants] have to move to a bad place. I am leaving this work. I will, I will. No matter when, I will. [And] Each day I know better just how. While in New York I spend the night with brother. At night we go to the Hippodrome and he is cross, I have told him my plans. And he can't tell the Senator nothing. We quarrel but I will not stay with the family. I said I will leave. Now I will.

In fall 1916, Mary quit her job as a servant.

Mary devotes much of the diary to three major problems. She feared being called back to Virginia, her family's home and spiritual center, where her mother still lived. Eliza Johnson remained a powerful matriarch, and in various segments of the diary, Mary relates the iron hand with which her mother ruled her children's lives. Although confident in her decision to leave the senator's home, Mary expresses some apprehension over her mother finding out.

Arrive in Washington go to sister's and sleep all morning. Looks for place in afternoon. I find it—small and clean. Kate is coming, now she will know I am not with the Senator. Will she tell Momma? I sent money home.

From her rural Virginia home, Eliza outlined directions for each of her children in Washington, scheduled their visits home, listed their duties upon arrival home, and reminded them of their financial responsibility to an old woman who describes herself as "tolerably well."

Mary's second dilemma was caused by her brothers and sisters who strongly opposed her leaving live-in servant work because it provided economic and physical safety for the young female who had migrated from the rural South. Her family also worried about the lack of chaperons and her attraction to "plays, dances and fast living." Nevertheless, born a generation from slavery, Mary desired social as well as economic independence.

Mary's third problem involved her love for "Mr. Sprow," whom she met at a dance. For more than a year, she traces their romance with moments of despair and triumph, failure and success, utter misery and absolute joy. Mary Johnson was enthralled by Luray Sprow, a yardman for a wealthy Georgetown family. The diary delves into the universal realms of romance

and records some of the courtship practices of this transitional period. Moreover, the diary reveals tensions between old and new values and the genuine concern for the virtue of African-American womanhood.

Mary secured a job as a dayworker, and although her tasks were the same and she worked many nights, Mary enjoyed not living in the home of the employer and her newfound freedom. She expanded her social circle and rented a room much to the displeasure of her family. She faithfully continued to send money to rural Virginia, but she no longer relied on hometown or family connections to direct her work or social life. Secure in her self-emancipation and thrilled with a new work life, Mary turned her attentions to at least three suitors—Mr. Smith, Mr. Davis, and Mr. Sprow.

Mr. Diggs came in the morning gave me a ticket sent by a Mr. Sprow. I saw him [Mr. Sprow] only once, I think. Mr. Smith called in the evening and taken me to the dancing class. Gave me a box of Reeves Carmels. The next day worked. Scolded by Currey [roommate] for not keeping our agreement in the day. Went to the Grafton boys dance had a wonderful time. Very much pleased with Mr. Sprow. Who is he?

Within a week, she has a date with Sprow and even more questions:

Cleaned all day; went to Amey's. I got an awful scolding about [wearing] cologne. Prevented from going to night church ... Mr. Sprow called for the first time. We went out. my feet got cold and I am very much impressed with Mr. Sprow. I wonder if he is married or has he been? Another day I went to Catholic entertainment at the Odd Fellows Hall. Such a crowd. But I had a nice time. Mr. Davis walked me home. Wanted to kiss me but I absolutely refused. Where is Mr. Sprow? He said he would attend. Why did he not?

Two weeks later, Mary comments on a family argument over her living conditions and on her need to work an extra job to send money home:

Missy gave me a new red cloth for the kitchen table. And I wish that someone might call to see me in the evening. Julia and Katherine come to see me. Where is he? My sisters and I quarreled. I will not listen to them. My room is good and everything is too. Sent money home. I can talk with Amey. She can hear me but not brother. Amey and I went



The staff of Senator Spooner (circa 1910) pictured at his Massachusetts summer home. Mary Johnson is pictured on the left [holding dog]. *Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Clark-Lewis*

shopping. I lost my purse but found it in Goldenbergs. Amey said it's a sign of bad living. But I found it, so what is the sign?

I am working every day and with Bertha nights. Extra work makes me so tired but I have to send money home. I went to see Lizzie after Mr. Sprow didn't call. I was so much grieved. I hope that I shall not be sorry I like him so well.

By February 1917, Mary confesses her love for Sprow and defends her position against her family's objections:

Mr. Sprow ... each time he come I like him better. He stayed until eleven thirty and then I was sorry to see him go. My sister Braughnetta said my hours with Mr. Sprow are too late. Why? I like him so, but he will not always come. Then, run him off? I did not. Braughnetta can just tell [write home]. Anxious [days I spend] waiting for Mr. Sprow. Even when he visits late—like twenty to ten—I am happy to see him. I confess that I love him.

I try to work but my thoughts all ran on Mr. Sprow. Miss Lizzie (sister-in-law) came to talk against Mr. Sprow. I listened to her but he is my company. Brother sent her, I know it. Mr. Sprow can come late and Mr. Smith [the

beaux approved by her brothers] is not welcome. It is my room and my troubled mind.

How much I do love him. [My sisters are] still very sad about me and him. Why? Why are my own brothers making me so low? I'm not but they don't hear me—I will speak up and soon.

Still, after two weeks, Mary admits to disappointment in her relationship with Sprow:

Mr. Sprow often disappoints me. [And my family] are so happy when he does. This week I went to 20th Street to the movies. First time. Marian and Julia were scared. I was only a little scared of it. Movies are dark.

Another day ... we went to the Masonic Temple. They were having a masquerade dance but we didn't go in. I like to look at them Negroes in fancy things. Mr. Sprow was not walking anywhere for me to see him ... fear of his not coming upsets me very much. I am sorry I love him so much.

Mr. Sprow has been out so he came over and went with me he had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Richards. He went home and came back and spent the evening with me. I certainly enjoy his company. Will he come back? He

will not say. My family ... they are sad for me but I am happy.

In another of several episodes of disappointment, Mary expresses doubt about Sprow:

Mr. Sprow came but said his face was too swollen to bad to go to the ball. But I went and he did not know until he saw me there. When I got ready to come home I got a mess after him. And I know that he was mad. Later that month he called on me. I was still mad and he treated me bad. Say he was going away Friday. I am hearing that he is self conceited.

Mary and Sprow continued an uncertain relationship, and by November, a melancholy Mary writes "I am glad that I have gotten over the feeling that Mr. Sprow did care; now I see that he don't." Still fortunes changed, and three weeks later, Mary arranged a successful meeting between her brothers and Luray's older sisters. Her relationship with Luray solidified, and in her diary, an enthralled Mary exuberates, "Mr. Sprow is faithful and since December 6th calls on me every night. I love Mr. Sprow." The last pages of the diary beautifully chronicle the events that led to Mary's marriage and the first apartment of her new family:

- January 14 One year ago since I met Luray Sprow and he did come over this evening.
- January 17 This is the second Thursday that I left Marian's because they say very impolite things to Sprow. [And] It is cold there.
- January 19 A hard day of work. Mr. Sprow brought the lisencc [license] for us to be married and it shocked my nerves. Then I saw them names on the paper. Brother, Marian and Julia are still very cross with me. Kate writes a letter but will not write home about Mr. Sprow. I know she will write and tell mother sometime soon.
- January 21 One part of the day I was sonervous to think I am about to start a new life. This is a day that I shall always remember. It is a beautiful day and it is my wedding day.
- January 22 Rose early this morning worked out [cleaned a house for pay] and washed [washed laundry for extra pay]. I met Sprow in the afternoon.
- February 1 Married two weeks and is happy and now looking out for a room.
- February 18 Found a room and have moved into it. [This is the marriage date she will place

on the wedding announcements—the day when they finally have an address of *their* own.]

- February 21 We have been married one month today and this our first night in our room. [This is the first day and night her husband is not required to work.]
- March 7 Had a little reception tonight had a pleasant time.
- March 30 My birthday husband and I went to the theater.
- March 31 Easter Sunday had a quiet day.
- April 15 Went to a show. For years I have loved these plays most of all. Amy loves them too. How I miss Kate when we have such fun!
- April 21 We have been married three months today. Quite happy so far. We have not had a fight so far—but I see small things that he do.

Small things, however, never dampened their love. Mary died in Washington in 1981 after more than eighty years of work in domestic service. Her diary and oral history offer a different interpretation from those by scholars who emphasize the victimization of domestics and further our understanding of the African-American family, work in the fields of the South, the unending demands of domestic employers, and the daily recreational activities that workers developed. Restricted by legal, social and political practices, African Americans created stable family lives, community churches, regional clubs, and other institutions. Moreover, the diary provides researches the opportunity to trace and locate persons who worked with Mary as domestics.⁶

Workers like Mary Johnson Sprow found it difficult to envision an end to the punitive segregated system of the rural South or to believe that the larger culture would affirm the lives of dimally poor African Americans. Mary's diary makes that affirmation and provides valuable insight into the firsthand desires, beliefs, assertions, and concerns of a working class migrant. Mary Johnson Sprow was, in her own self-reflection, an "emancipated womanist." A long line of African-American women directed and timed her "hometraining." Although she began to work "out-for-whitefolks" at an early age, Mary never became a simple extension or reflection of her white employer. Her diary illustrates that the first generation of African Americans born after slavery was neither sad, passive people nor muted individuals who simply reacted to the

world around them. Their words and their lives reveal how African Americans were simultaneously plain and intricate; subtle and overt; veiled and visible. Family history research allows our ancestors—the people who experienced history—to write the correctives to this culture’s misconceptions about them.⁷

ENDNOTES

1. Unpublished diary of Mary Sprow, dated 30 July 1916. Portions of this article and diary were published in *Washington History* Summer, 1993.

2. Statement by Mary Johnson Sprow, personal interview with her brothers Lewis A. Johnson and Memphis Johnson in his home, Washington, DC, 11 November 1972. See also Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, “Oral History: Its Utilization in the Genealogical Research Process,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (March 1979), 27-28.

3. Clark-Lewis, *Ibid.* For more information on oral traditions see Jan Vansina, *Oral Traditions* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1961), 26-27. 1874 Land, Personal property, and Capitatn Tax receipt issued to Peyton Johnson (colored). Culpeper County, State of Virginia. Deed of trust between Thomas and Estelle Gaines and Peyton Johnson, 16 April 1892, Culpeper County, State of Virginia.

4. Dickerson Family Bible in the Peyton Johnson family records, Washington, DC

5. J. P. Clark to Memphis Johnson, June 15, 1908, Washington, DC. John C. Spooner to Memphis Johnson, 5 April 1910, Johnson family papers, Personal Files of E. Clark-Lewis, Washington, DC

6. David Katzman in *Seven Days A Week* (New York: Oxford Press, 1978) says women were powerless to control most of their work and living conditions; Daniel Sutherland in *Americans and Their Servants* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) emphasizes the slow, silent development of a new system of domestic service but ignores works [Carter G. Woodson *A Century of Negro Migration* (1918); or, Florette Henri *Black Migration* (1976); and, Nicholas Lehman *The Promised Land* (1991)] which are sensitive to visible, audible impact of African American women in the household work profession.

7. Florette Henri, *Black Migration* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), x; Katzman, *Seven Days*, 200; Sutherland, *Americans and Stewarts* 34 -35; “The Sphinx in the Household,” *Scribner’s Magazine* (September 1911); “The Stranger in the Gates,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (July 1873).