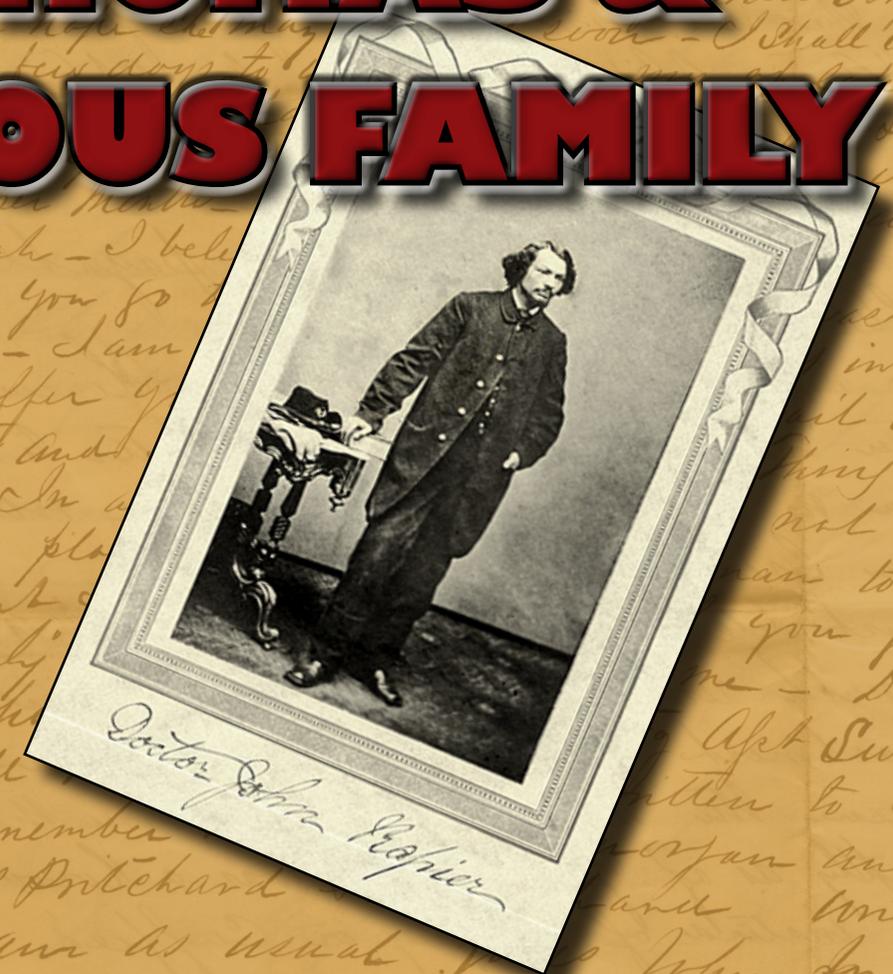


# HENRY K. THOMAS & HIS ILLUSTRIOUS FAMILY



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cultivated. I am socially speaking a "stie  
who but little pleasure as you know in tell  
new friends, I much rather presume upon Remember  
know - In our Hospital some changes have I am as usual

seen eight Straps and all - Mr Fred do  
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of Monday the Pres - sent for him to visit  
Capitol - Did you ever hear such  
President of the U.S. sending for a "Mig  
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*Slave shacks on a Virginia plantation.*

**H**ad it not been for the hard work of one Sally Thomas, born a slave to Charles Thomas near Charlottesville, Virginia in 1787, the Buxton settlement may never have seen several of its most accomplished residents.

Around 1817, Sally and her two sons, John (1808-1869) and Henry (1809-1882), were sent to another farm owned by the Thomas family in Tennessee. In all likelihood, John and Henry were the sons of Charles Thomas's brother.

Sally's third child, James (1827-1913), was the illegitimate son of Tennessee's Chief Justice, John C. Catron. In the Dred Scott case, Catron ruled that Scott had no right of citizenship and that he remained a slave despite having lived in a free state for two years.

Despite the fact that Catron and his wife had no other children, he never officially recognized James as his son and his only documented gesture towards the boy was giving him 25 cents on one occasion.

Sally's owner allowed her to take in laundry if she provided him with some of the profits and as a 'quasi-slave' she could rent her own house and move about Nashville freely.

All three of Sally's sons were born slaves, and it was constant worry that they could at any point be sold away from her. Through a combination of providence and hard work, that never happened.

Her eldest son John H. eventually took the name Rapier in deference to his one-time employer Richard Rapier, a river barge captain who left \$1,000 in his will for the purpose of purchasing young John's freedom, which happened in 1829.

Frustrated by her inability to save enough money to buy Henry's freedom, Sally encouraged him to run away, which he did in 1834. Travelling only by night, Henry was caught near Louisville, Kentucky where he was put in jail. However, he managed to break free the first night and made his getaway in a stolen boat. Having plunged over the falls of the Ohio River, Henry made it to Indiana, where a sympathetic man removed his chains.

While Sally would never see him again, Henry would eventually play a prominent role in Buxton. Not only would he become a valuable member of the new community, but Henry and his

wife Maria would also provide a temporary home in Buxton for two of his nephews, both of whom would make a significant impact on the broader black community.

Sally's youngest son James was six years old when she purchased his freedom with the assistance of attorney Ephraim Hubbard Foster who lent her the final \$50 she needed to pay the \$400 cost of his freedom. However, it was freedom on paper only as freed slaves were legally required to leave Tennessee. That was a move that Sally, who as a 'quasi-slave' ran her own business, was unable to make.

Later she would purchase her own freedom, but would remain a slave to all intents and purposes in Nashville.

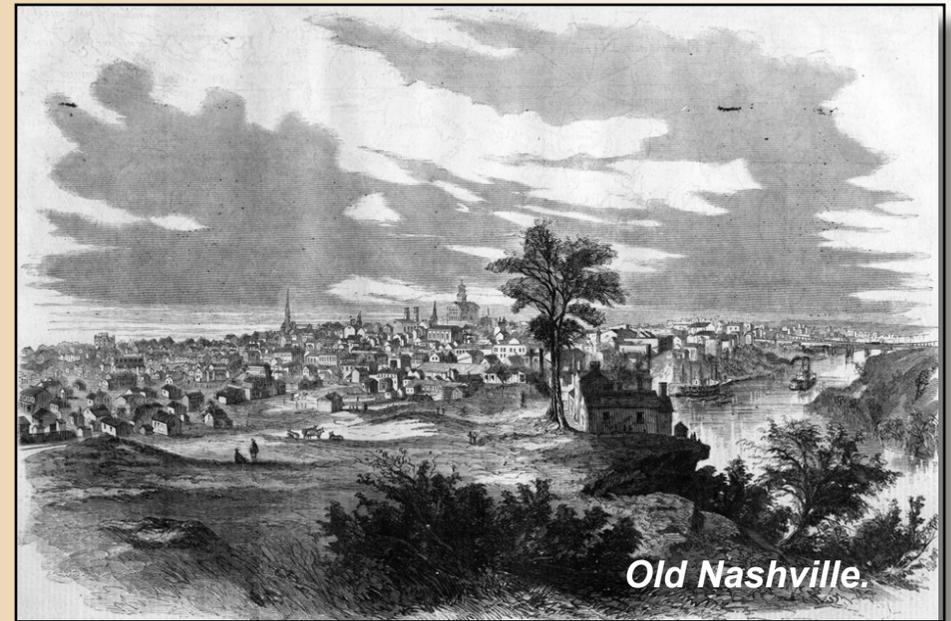
Illiterate herself, Sally recognized the importance of an education and ensured that all three of her boys learned to read and write.

Our story now returns to Henry, her second son.

By the mid-1840s, Henry had a barbershop in Buffalo, New York and began buying real estate.

In 1845 he went to a free suffrage convention in Geneva, New York, but was always worried his status as a fugitive slave would catch up with him. His worries increased with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, but, despite his fears, Henry joined others in speaking out against the Act.

The following year, another fugitive slave was captured in Buf-



falo. Henry travelled to Toronto with prominent blacks including Mary Ann Shadd, Henry Bibb and Isaac Shadd, all of whom advocated immigrating to Canada.

In 1851, Henry closed his barbershop, put his property up for sale and moved to Buxton, where he purchased 100 acres. Early on in Buxton, Henry served on the board of directors of the Canada Mill and Mercantile Company, and travelled to the U.S. at one point to raise money for a lumber mill for Buxton. He was also a member of St. Andrew's Church. Financial troubles plagued him, but Henry and his family remained in Buxton until after the Civil War.

*"The settlement improves slowly, but prospects are good for its success," he noted in 1856. "The lumber mill is making improvements for the neighbourhood. Soon the railroad will pass through.*

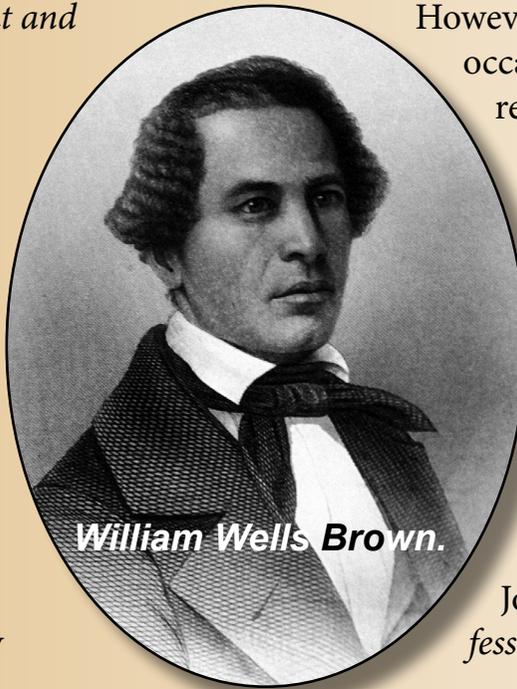
*The school is flourishing. I have six acres in wheat and two in barley.”*

During a visit to Buxton in 1861, black abolitionist William Wells Brown wrote: *“My old and intellectual friend, Henry K. Thomas, a man deeply interested in the welfare of his race has a beautiful farm in the settlement, where he is raising up his children to be tillers of the soil, instead of leaving them to the chance of filling menial positions in the city.”*

But it wasn't only his own children that Henry was helping in Buxton. His brother John's son James Rapier came to live with his Uncle Henry and Aunt Maria in 1856.

James and his older brother John Rapier Jr. had been sent to live with their grandmother Sally after their mother died. Like she had with her own sons, Sally made sure that James and John were educated, and at the time of her death in 1850, James was still living with her. After becoming bored with school, James set about sowing his wild oats and it was a great relief to his father when James agreed to continue his education in Buxton.

During a visit to Buxton in 1856, John Sr. made a \$117 down payment on 100 acres and paid Robert Harris, a black labourer \$70 to clear the trees, burn the logs and build a fence on his property. After returning to his home in Florence, Alabama, John Sr. mailed a second payment and hired fugitive slave Isaac Riley to build a house on the cleared land.



**William Wells Brown.**

However, despite the turbulence of the times and the occasionally volatile situation at home, John Sr. remained in the U.S. John Jr. also questioned the wisdom of his father buying land in Canada.

In 1857, James wrote, *“I like Canada very well, but a fellow cannot make any money here. What signifies a man's liking a place if he cannot make some money?”*

The same year, James experienced a religious conversion which failed to impress his older brother to whom he wrote, *“I am delivered.”*

John wrote in his diary: *“Letter from James. Professed Religion. Damn Fool.”*

In January of 1857, James wrote a lengthy letter to John Jr:

**“Dear Brother,**

*Your welcome letter came to hand of the date (4)th instant with the cheque of Fifty dollars drawn up in your favor and transferred to me. I have delayed no time in answering your letter for I considered it quite essential for you to know all about that piece of land belonging to you.*

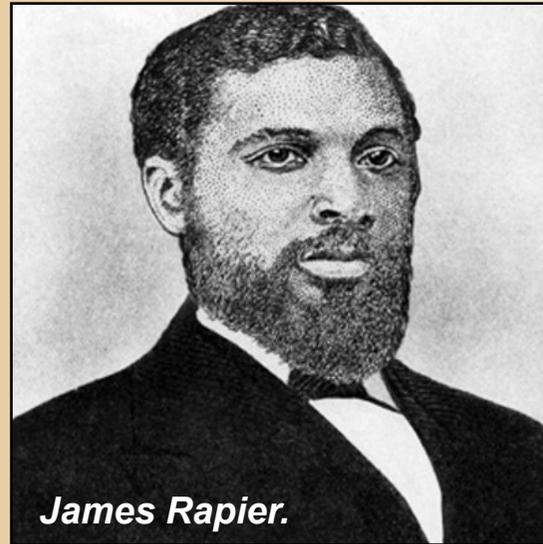
*I sold the cheque for forty eight dollars and a half. I then went to the Rev. Wm. King and asked him what was behind and he told me that five installments were due yet. You know they are twelve dollars and a half each with interest. The whole amount due is 81 dollars and 25 cents. So I did not pay him any of the draught but I have it reserved for him if you say pay it.*

*The papers you spoke of I understood you to mean the deed which he tells me will probably be a year before you could get it after the money was all paid. I knew Fifty dollars were of no avail towards getting the deed. That was the reason I did not pay him until I had farther orders from you. You can rest assured of that fact. The money is all safe enough. If you say pay him what you sent I will do so or wait until you send the balance.*

*I suppose you & Father have fixed that business up between your selves. You are doubtless aware that Father paid two installments when he was out here last summer and I suppose advanced Harris about forty dollars more on that land. There are only fourteen dollars more coming to Harris.*

*I think you will have to pay the land out and give Father a mortgage on it. Rev. King told me that you would have to put you up a house to entitle you to the land. The house you have started is of the right dimension providing it was covered and a fence before it. This all has to be done by the first of June next or it is liable to be sold for he sold one about a week ago under the Same circumstances I have wrote you all about... I will commence my letter.*

*Father told me when I started that I could go to school this winter & spring and then I could come there if I wanted. So I am going to take him at his word. You can look for me if life last and have good luck about the 15th of April. Uncle Henry wants to come there too a little later in the spring, so you must write to us & let*



**James Rapier.**

*us know which way to come.*

*I was afraid I would have to run away when I had the row with Scott but it did not cost me anything. Uncle wants to know whether you received that watch or not. I wrote you at... and also sent you a paper there.*

*I hardly know how to thank you for these ten dollars until I get able to pay you again. I am getting along at school very well but you will perceive this at once from my writing, grammar & spelling. John this is Sunday morning and everything looks gloomy.*

*The ground is covered with 12 inches of snow. The trees are covered with sleet and very smoky this morning and inclined to be a little rainy and being ensconced in a neat little cottage by a log Fire and being all alone I have a little chance to write. The church bells sound reechoes through the woods summoning the people to assemble together to hear the word of God proclaimed.*

*All of these combined is enough to turn my thoughts back to the home of our boyhood where all four of us boys were together, where we all breathed as one but are we not scattered about the face of the earth.*

*Do you expect ever to see us all together again? I do not. Just look where we are at, you in the east and myself in the north, Henry & Dick in California & Father in Alabama. Did you ever think how small our Family is and Sarah the only female among them out of*

eleven. I think you and me might drive down stakes together and keep them down. What says you, John?

*I would write more but I have not room to express my feelings. I am going to get Adams & co to express .... Unusual for me to write so long a letter... all send their respects to you, Sarah in particular. John, I bid you fare well until we meet in April if both lives...*

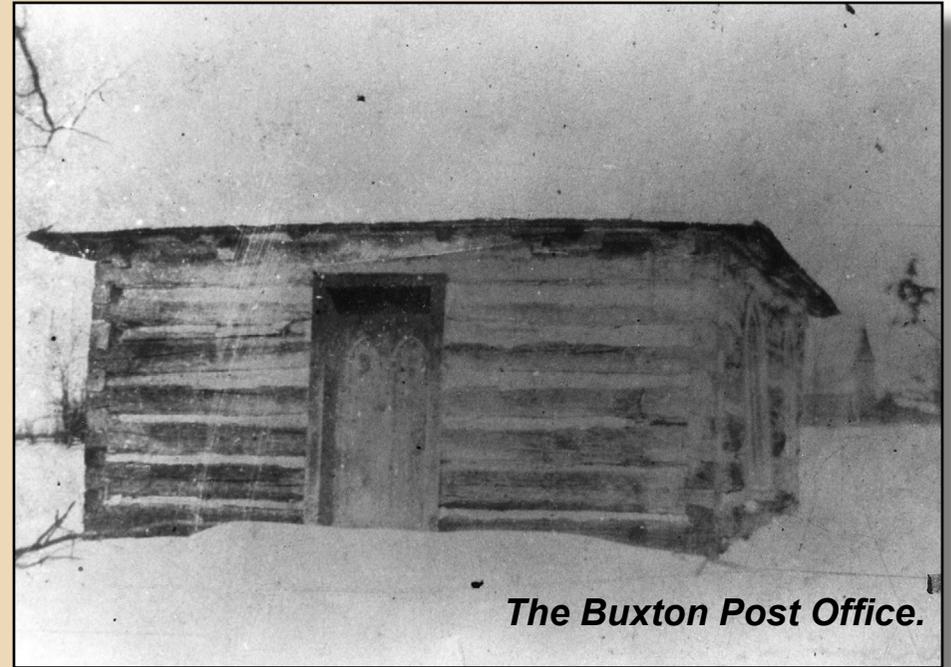
***adieu I remain your Brother, James T. Rapier.***

*PS Get me a situation and uncle Henry too if you can do it. Must I Bring a friend with me? Let me know Answer immediately if not sooner.”*

Two years earlier, John Jr. had yielded to his taste for adventure and encouraged his Uncle James, only eight years his senior, to join him on a trip where they would become part of an English-speaking colony being established by American William Walker and they would receive 250 acres apiece.

However, the two would-be adventurers soon found out the reality of Nicaragua, and Walker, was not what they had expected.

*“The wild roar of Lake Nicaragua is (an) eternal funeral dirge,”* wrote John Jr. The pair decided to leave Nicaragua two months after leaving, but on the way back, John Jr. agreed to join Parker French, a former associate of Walker’s as his personal secretary. James Thomas continued on to the U.S. where he would eventually become a successful businessman.



***The Buxton Post Office.***

It wouldn’t be long before French was revealed as a scoundrel and he and John Jr. would part ways.

Meanwhile, several years after the death of his wife in 1841, John Sr. began a relationship with his housekeeper and the couple had five children together. Because she was a slave, all of John Sr.’s children with her were also born slaves in contrast to the freeborn status of his first four sons.

Even though John Jr. did not encourage his father to move to Buxton, he was concerned about the welfare of his half-brothers and sisters as tensions continued to escalate in the South: *“.. move out West and give Lucretia and the children some kind of a (chance) for justice,”* he wrote John Sr. in 1857.

James remained at Buxton during the 1857-58 school year: "I study very hard now. And I am getting along very well at school. We have a Splendid teacher... I can knock off a chapter of Caesar as slick as any of them."

The following year he wrote: "Rev. King wants me to go to college. I wish to go to Toronto for Normal School for four years and then graduate. For two things I have in view only, viz: to serve my God and get an education."

In 1859, Henry wrote a letter to his brother John:

"I rec'd yours dated 28 Dec. asking the reason why I did not answer yours of last summer & write occasionally. If I neglected to answer the reason was I left it for James to do believing you would be satisfied. So you heard from us, I blame you for not writing to us knowing where to find us at all times & I have said that I would like to hear from you occasionally.

I have come to the conclusion I am so poor owing to bad Luck, but few honor me with a prepaid letter informing me of their whereabouts & how they fare, fearing I would ask for aid, I have been very poor for some time, a friend in need etc. Enough James & Sarah have promised to write, I have looked for you here at different times & would like to see you here this year if only on a flying trip nothing very encouraging or strange going on here at present except in the election of a colored councilor Mr. A. Shadd has the highest honor of any colored person in Canada.

Provisions is scarce in this vicinity & raising in price, corn \$1 per bushel. Sarah & James must write you the news please excuse me I must be away to cutting wood, & if I never answer yours I

am pleased to hear from you at all times & I have no disrespect for you now than at any time previous and wish you success & a fortune either in marrying or any other honourable pursuit if you are trying for a fortune by games my advice is quit it for it is not good to get it that way.

***Yours as usual, H.K. Thomas.***

***Ps please forward to (our brother) James in one of your own."***

Meanwhile, John Rapier was feeling the wanderlust again and travelled to Haiti where he became friends with a wealthy Cuban-born plantation owner. "Like all mixed bloods, he hates blacks to the death," John Jr. wrote of his new friend. Before long, John Jr. would share the sentiment, temporarily, but not before declaring his support for slavery and being embarrassed by the arrival of an ink-smearred letter from his brother James.

In a letter to his Uncle James from Jamaica dated July 28, 1861, John wrote:

"...I have received two letters from Father, besides I have also heard from James and Uncle Henry. James' letters are always enigmas for me to solve and his mode of addressing letters are about as lucid as the fellow who wishing to write to Sir Humphrey Davy, addressed him "Zrumphty davi."

If you ever should write to him, hint that it does (not) depend entirely on the quantity of ink that you use, but something on the manner of applying it to the paper, that secures a decent and legible address... I am now somewhat differently situated in life, and commingle with a different class of people than heretofore, and

*therefore it is highly essential that I should leave no gap by which my former position would become exposed, or I would be snubbed by the proud Jamaicans and this, as much as I despise many of their customs, I can not afford. Nothing goes as readily to prove the antecedents, and associates of a man, as the Kind of correspondents he has, if his letters are neatly addressed and written so that he can read an extract occasionally to his associates, it helps him wonderfully and vice versa.*

*I feel a delicacy in telling this to James but he does spread the damnest quantity of ink of anybody I know....*

*I am pushing along with all speed possible in my new profession of Dentist, you should see me sometime have a poor devil suffering with the toothache with his Jaws distended, lance in hand dissected around the molar preparatory to applying the forceps. And then to hear such screams of agony as I can wring out of mouths, It is wonderful indeed perfectly astonishing that I who have been but a few months in the profession can make my patients bellow louder, hold on to the tooth faster and longer, and finally wrench it out with more of the jawbone sticking than my master who has spent years in the profession.*

*Aren't you proud of your promising nephew – When I see you I*



*will just pull out two of your front teeth to show you how it is done.”*

In 1862, John Jr. was invited to study medicine with a Canadian doctor and enrolled at university in Ohio. The same year, he visited James and his other relatives in Buxton before attending medical school in Michigan.

Early in 1863, James received his teaching diploma and returned to Buxton where he taught at the Buxton school. Then he enlisted, along with his uncle for first class service in the local militia. “*Buxton has improved a great deal since you were here,*” he wrote John Jr. “*I find some very clever people here.*”

The following year, James left Canada after eight years and went to Alabama. The same year he wrote that, “*Father has done a man’s part in educating his sons.*”

In 1864, John Jr. decided to leave medical school, feeling the education he had already accrued, and the experience he had gained in Jamaica had adequately prepared him to practice medicine. He took a position with the Contraband Freedmen’s Hospital in Washington D.C., an experience he described in a letter to his Uncle James:

*Freedman's Hospital, Washington, D.C.,*

*August 19, 64*

*James P. Thomas, Esq.*

*St. Louis, Missouri*

*Dear Uncle,*

*Your letter of the 13th is before me. I had come to conclusion to "damn" you if I might use the expression.*

*I am always glad to hear from you and our St. Louis friends, but I am a little afraid I will be considered as a very poor correspondent after awhile, on account of the few letters I write. Indeed Uncle James I never worked so hard, and had so little rest, and felt so tired at night as I do now.*

*Of my success and failures, for I have both, it does not become me to speak, for your satisfaction and of those others who kindly feel an interest in me and my welfare I may venture to say that my mentality... so far stands approved by the Med. Director of the Department to whom I make daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly reports.*

*There are many ladies here from the East, blessed old Massachusetts always in the lead of good works engaged in teaching and general supervision of the interest of the Freedmen in this City.*

*They are as a class the most indefatigable and earnest laborers I have ever seen engaged in any cause— wind, rain and storm never stop them—night and day these Angels of Mercy may be found engaged in the miserable filthy hovels of these poor people doing the most servile and menial duties.*

*Foremost and bravest of these is a Miss Harritte Carter of Mass. Do not imagine Miss Carter to be an old and homely "one" who has sighed for some one to love for many years in vain, and has when up this occupation, perhaps as a penance for youthful indiscretion is saying "no" when somebody thought she ought to have said "yes."*

*By no means--Miss Carter is 24 with rosy cheeks, pretty eyes and a wilderness of the softest brown hair you ever felt, and as full of learning as an Episcopal Minister or a Catholic Priest and would make even Henry Green laugh at her humour and wit.*

*She is never seen with a sober face. And in making my daily rounds, I always encounter her, and have a half hour's pleasant chat before I assume the duties of the day.*

*I have but little time to visit and therefore have but few acquaintances, and these poorly cultivated. I am socially speaking a "stick" and have but little pleasure as you know in making new friends. I much rather presume upon those I know.*

*In our Hospital some changes have taken place. Surg. Horner (white) supercedes Surg. Powell (colo). The change was for the... of services and I believe complexion had nothing to do with it. Surg. Horner is a skillful and well educated Surg, and polite agreeable gentlemen. Dr. Powell is retained as Asst.*

*I have thought of resigning in Oct. for the purpose of attending lectures in the University of Harvard in Boston and trying for a Surgeon's Post in the spring. Perhaps I may, perhaps I may not give up this idea—I am undecided.*

*On the 14th the most eventful event of my life occurred—I drew*

\$100 less war tax \$2.50 for Medical Services rendered the U.S. Government. My draft was in favour of "Acting Asst. Surgeon Rank Ist Lieut. U.S.A." I read the address several times—I liked it tho' I confess it read strange to me. In the spring I want my drafts payable to Maj. John H. Rapier Surg. U.S.A.

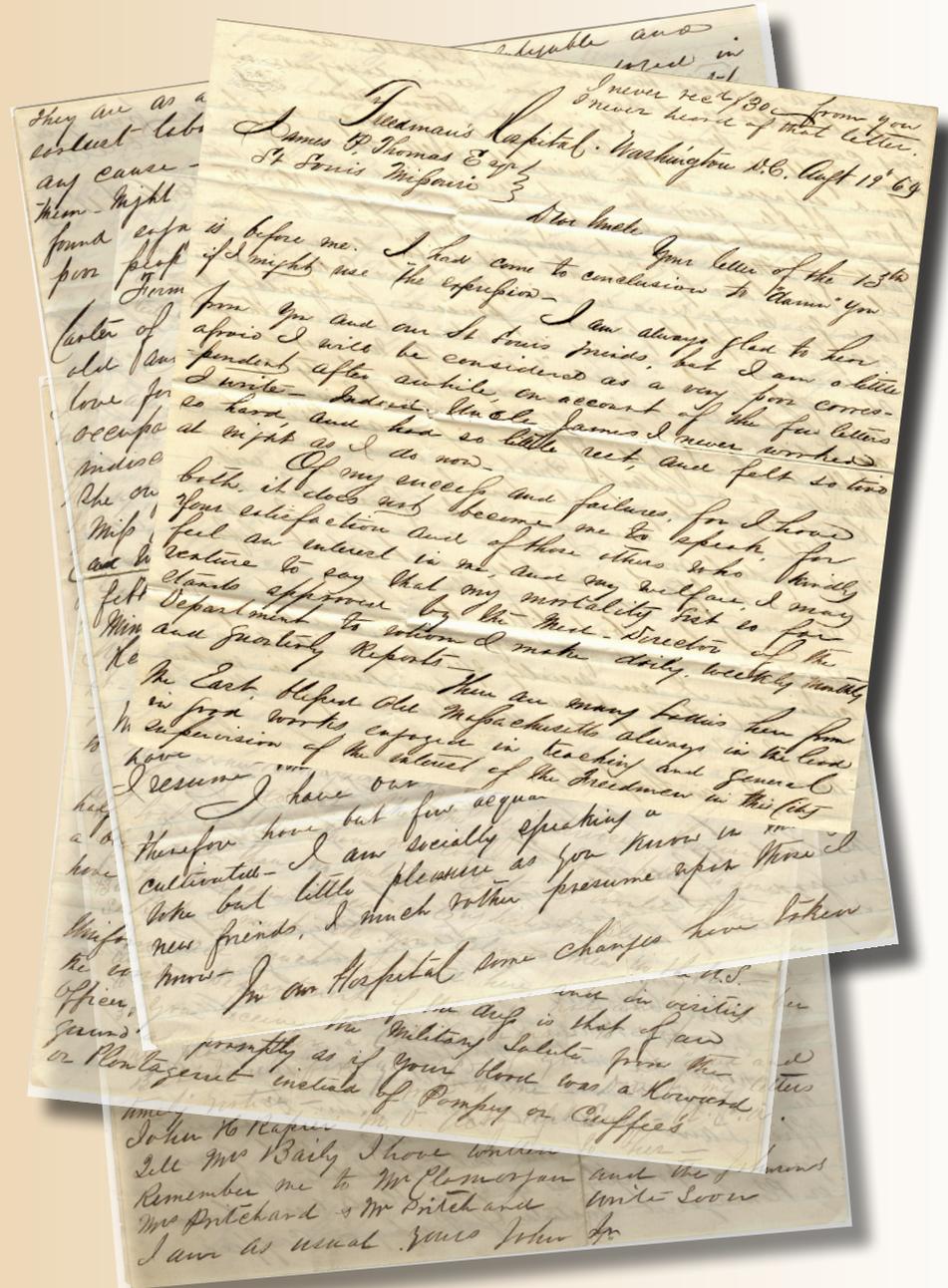
I do not like the U.S. Service. However half loaf is better than no loaf. It is better to have a blue coat than no military coat. I would rather have the Mexican Green or English Purple.

But I must tell you coloured men in the U.S. Uniform are much respected here, and in visiting the various Departments if the dress is that of an Officer, you receive the military salute from the ground as promptly as if your blood was a Howard or Plantagenet instead of a Pompey or Cuffee's.

I had decided not to wear the uniform but I have altered my mind—and I shall appear hereafter in full dress gold lace, pointed hat, straps and all. Mr. Fred Douglass spoke here last night to an immense audience and to day the President sent for him to visit him in the Capitol. Did you ever hear such nonsense. The President of the U.S. sending for a "nigger" to confer with him on the State of the Country.

I have been invited to take supper with Mr. Douglass to night. I am proud of it. He visited the Hospital to day. He is a fine looking gentleman. He made a fine impression on the public.

I exceedingly regret to hear of Miss Virginia's ill health and hope she may be well soon. I shall write to Miss Pauline in a few days to whom make my apologies for not writing earlier. I have an





**Freedmen's Hospital, Washington D.C.**

*opening here for Lady Teacher. Pay depends on her qualifications. It may be \$50 or \$30 per month. If I had the money I would send for Sarah—I believe she could get \$50.*

*If you go to New York come by Washington if you can. I am sorry I have not money in my pocket to offer you a big time. But wait until September 30th and I will do the “clean thing” by you.*

*In all Washington there is not an a number one place for a Col.*

*Gentleman to stop. But I will “fix” you up—if you give me “due and timely” notice. Write to me. Direct my letters John H. Rapier, M.D., Actg. Asst. Surg. U.S.A. Tell Mrs. Bailey I have written to her. Remember me to Mr. Clamorgan and the Johnsons, Mrs. Pritchard and Mr. Pritchard. Write soon.*

***I am as usual yours.  
John Jr.***

While at the Freedmen's Hospital, John Jr. was pleased to see that black soldiers were "*much respected...*" He also became friends with Anderson Ruffin Abbott, who, like James, had been educated in Buxton.

He also socialized with Frederick Douglass.

In January of 1865, John Jr. entered the political fray, advocating on behalf of black soldiers whom he believed should have their own officers and regiments. However, a year later, he would die of 'bilious fever,' at age 30.

The Reunion Literary Club of Washington D.C. mourned his passing in *The Christian Recorder*: stating that, "*the loss of one of our most distinguished members, whose gentle, manly deportment, unexceptionable moral character and literary attainments had secured for himself the esteem and respect of every member of this club, and that his premature death, in the full vigor of faculties, which gave promise of so much usefulness, is the occasion for deep and abiding regret.*"

Meanwhile, the end of the Civil War brought illness Henry and Maria's family, brought home by their eldest son Henry, who had served with the Union Army.



**Union button found in the Thomas field.**

According to Rev. King's diary:

*"One of the young men who had served as a soldier in the war came home and brought the contagion of small pox with him, in his clothes; a few days after he came home he fell sick of fever. I was sent for by his mother... When I examined the young man I told his mother that he had the small pox and that the family must keep to the house... The mother of the young man was very much afraid of the disease; she had a baby six months old... In a few days however, two of her younger children took the disease. I had now three patients in the family... They all got along nicely only the third who took it, a boy about fourteen who had a severe coat of small pocks... He died the tenth day; all the rest recovered and got on quite well; one was deeply pock marked."*

The boy who died was likely John, born in 1854.

*"On the tenth day when they were beginning to improve, I was called to see a family named Simms who lived about two miles southwest from the Thomas family who were sick..."*

Interestingly, an archaeological dig uncovered the button from a Union uniform on the land of Henry K. Thomas, which may

have been burned or buried in an effort to rid the home of the disease.

James Rapier also entered politics in 1865 and upon the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts advised blacks to, “*Proceed with calmness, moderation and intelligence.*” However, shortly after the 1868 election, James was driven from politics and his home in Florence, Alabama by the threat of violence from the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1869, John Rapier Sr. died, but not before breaking the law by teaching his two eldest slave children to read.

In 1870, Henry and Maria gave up their Buxton farm and moved south to Bovina, Mississippi where they opened up a boarding house. Some of their children left with them, and others remained in Canada.

After spending a year in seclusion, James re-emerged in 1870 as the Republican nominee for secretary of state in Alabama. He lost due to KKK violence, attacks by the Democrats and opposition from white Republicans. Following the loss, he became increasingly radical.

The same year, he wrote a letter to Rev. King:

***U.S. Internal Revenue Assessment Office  
Montgomery (Alabama)  
July 7th, 1870***

*My dear Friend:*

*After a long silence on my part without good cause, I take advantage of the present opportunity to address you this letter knowing full well you have always taken a lively interest in me, and not only myself, but all the boys who attended the old Log schoolhouse and church. Whether I have profited by the education I received there or not, it is not for me to practice. John Riley was preaching to a large congregation in Louisville, Kentucky; his brother Jerome was practicing medicine in the hospital in Washington. I hope to visit Canada this fall on private business, when I hope to see you. Remember me to friends in Buxton.*

***I remain yours sincerely,  
James Rapier.***

James threw himself into politics at the expense of a personal life and said the government should help pay for the education of its black citizens.

In 1872, he won his party’s nomination for Congress for the Second District, which included the capital city of Montgomery which he won with a resounding victory.

During his term, James pushed through a bill to make Montgomery a port of delivery, worked to help improve public education in the South and played an important role in the final passage of the 1875 Civil Rights Act. As well, he worked to curb violence against freedmen and women. Despite losing re-election bids in 1874 and 1876, James continued to work for black equality.

In 1873, Henry became a justice of the peace in Bovina and

encouraged former black male slaves to get out to the polls and vote Republican. He told them to “*respect the white people and not act against the white people...*” but reminded them they, “*have the right to freedom of speech.*”

During a bitter municipal election in 1874, Henry narrowly escaped a mob, and shortly afterwards 35 blacks were killed. During a congressional investigation of the incident, Henry was among the few people brave enough to testify.



He said that the whites involved had justified the murder by saying that the blacks had been planning to attack them. However, Henry said he had addressed that rumour before the murder, saying there was no basis in fact.

In response to the question: “*... has there been a good deal of terror among the colored people in your country?*” Henry answered, “*There has been much. It has pervaded all classes; I believe in my vicinity there are none exempt from it.*”

In the 1880 census, Henry was listed as age 71 and the postmaster in Bovina. Their youngest son Richard, 21, was living with his parents and was a teacher at a local school.

In 1882, Henry died and was buried in Bovina.

During the early 1880s, James became an advocate for emigration to the West and purchased land in Kansas for a settlement of former slaves. However, before that could be realized, he died of tuberculosis in 1883 at the age of 45.

James Thomas would outlive all of his brothers and nephews and after retiring in 1890, spent his remaining years writing his memoirs at the urging of his children.

His death made the front page of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, an accomplishment of which his mother Sally would no doubt have been very proud.