

Lecture to Druid Hills Civitan, May 2001 by Jean Johnson Givens

In the recently published history of DeKalb County, I was pleased to find six of my ancestral lines mentioned, attesting to the fact that I have deep roots here! The first is Abraham Chandler who lived in a big house where Cheshire Bridge and La Vista Roads now cross. There were wonderful springs that supplied plentiful water for man and beast. The slaves washed clothes at one, beating the clothes on the very smooth rocks to get them clean. These springs were preserved as part of the gardens at Hastings Nursery until it was moved out to its present location in Brookhaven. It is sad that this historic spot was destroyed when CVS built there. Abraham Chandler maintained huge pens in which to keep cattle and pigs being driven cross-country to market. The drovers would spend the night and enjoy the hearty food served by the lady of the house Mary W. Harris Chandler. She was a very frugal person, trading eggs for ribbons for her daughters' hair. Abraham gave his wife all of the money earned from housing the drovers. I have been told that she stuffed the money into cracks in the walls of their home! At least some of this cash was found years later when the dwelling was demolished. Abraham and Mary W. had a number of children including a daughter, Elizabeth Harris Chandler, who married into the Johnson family and another, Mary Ann Amanda Chandler, who married William Pinckney Mason. This gives me two ties to Abraham! The Chandlers moved to Cedartown where the family burial ground may be found.

The second family was Harris. Mary W. Harris was the descendant of Graves Harris, a Revolutionary soldier. My aunt, Antoinette Johnson Matthews went into the DAR on this line. Bailey Chandler (1751-1809), father of Abraham mentioned before was also a Revolutionary soldier, establishing yet another DAR line. Abraham and Mary W.'s daughter was the Elizabeth Harris Chandler who married Daniel Johnson, patriarch of the Johnson-Chandler Family Association, which meets each year at the historic Rock Springs Presbyterian Church. I am proud to have had Harris in my maiden name.

There are two different Johnson lines of ours mentioned in the DeKalb history. The above-mentioned Daniel (1800-1894) was of Scottish Presbyterian descent. He, a daughter Mary Harris Johnson and a son, Daniel Noble Johnson, were commemorated in stained glass windows at Rock Springs for having been charter members of the church. I call this Daniel "Old Daniel" to distinguish him from his grandson, Daniel W. Johnson (1862-1935), my grandfather whom I called "Pop". Old Daniel lived in the V formed at the junction of Lenox and Johnson Roads near where Highland Avenue (once called Johnson Rd.) meets Rock Springs Rd. Old Daniel was a legislator in Georgia when the capitol was in Milledgeville. He is said to have ridden a prized mule from his home all the way to Milledgeville for each session. Once, while there, he purchased a fine house (located on Boulevard Avenue in Atlanta) which was being sold for taxes.

Since his daughter, Mary Harris Johnson, had run his household and cared for the younger children after her mother died giving birth to Daniel Noble, Old Daniel gave her the house on Boulevard. It was in a choice location "on high ground," and included numerous outbuildings occupying a full block. It was known in the family as the town house. Johnson Street, which shows up in older maps of Atlanta, was originally the driveway to this house but was obliterated when access to the Carter Presidential Library was established on Boulevard near the Georgia Baptist Hospital.

My story gets complicated because Mary Harris Johnson married a Johnson! John Gerdine Johnson (1817-1883) descended from English stock. His parents belonged to the historic Hardman Primitive Baptist Church once located close to where the railroad crosses Clairmont Rd. near the VA Hospital. Actually there are remnants of the old church burial ground on Emory property near the new parking facility just north of the overpass. John Gerdine was a wealthy man, a dealer in land and slaves, having made his money as an itinerate salesman of Seth Thomas clocks. In his travels, he had often stopped at the home of old Daniel and actually bounced the child Mary Harris on his knee! In later years, he teased her that he'd had to wait a long time for her to grow up and marry him! John Gerdine and Mary Harris Johnson were married in 1857. They lived in the town house and there started their family. The first child, Alice, was not sufficiently attended while her mother was in labor with her second child Jessie, though the family had a number of slaves who should have watched over her. The child died

from eating too much raw fruit, unripe blackberries, I think. The next born, Daniel W. (Pop), my grandfather, was about two years old when Atlanta was threatened during the War Between the States. Since John Gerdine was off serving in the Confederacy, Old Daniel came to rescue his daughter and her young family. The story goes that Daniel Noble (Mary Harris' younger brother) pushed a wheelbarrow holding a trunk with two year-old Pop riding on top, to the Southern Railroad where they flagged the train to Decatur. The family had sent other trunks containing valuables, old Bibles and other treasures ahead to the Decatur station only to have them burned when Sherman torched the station. The fleeing family sought refuge in a barn "out from Madison" when the birth of John Gerdine, Jr. became imminent. Mary Harris Johnson Johnson said later, "My son was not the first child born in a barn!"

Of course the town property was destroyed when Atlanta was burned. John Gerdine had purchased some land where Druid Hills is now located, but after the war carpetbaggers occupied the two-room log house and refused to get out. Before they could reclaim this house, the family lived for two years with the Padén family who were nearby neighbors. I am reminded of the phrase in *Gone With The Wind* that "only the land remains." It was certainly true for us. When John Gerdine purchased the land, he asked the seller how he wished to be paid, in slaves or money. The purchase was consummated with a "trunk full of money." After the war, the Confederate money was worthless, the slaves were freed and only the land remained. Another sad thing that happened was that during their absence, little Alice's casket had been stolen and melted down to make bullets. She was reburied at Oakland Cemetery where the rest of the John Gerdine Johnson family, including his parents and some of his descendants, have their final resting place.

Old Daniel returned to his home after the war to find that the siding had all been removed to provide firewood for the Yankees. He owned bountiful forests on his thousand acres and his former slaves loyally helped him to start a sawmill so he could rebuild his home and supply lumber to others who needed it just as much. The family graves in the burial plot on his property were moved when Johnson Estates was laid out and placed under a single slab in Decatur Cemetery which details his family tree.

So far, we have discussed the Chandlers, the Harrises and two different Johnson lines. The next family is the Medlocks. There is a refugee story there too. John Williams Medlock's home was where Grace Methodist Church stands today on Ponce de Leon Ave. Vilenah Antoinette Mason had married William Parks Medlock, son of John Williams, and was carrying his child when Sherman was threatening Atlanta. William Parks was off fighting so she was refugeeing with his family from the Ponce de Leon homeplace. The wagon was all packed and ready to leave at dawn when they awoke to find that the horses had been stolen during the night. One of the women urged the others to their stop crying, saying "Providence will provide." Looking out the window they saw a bony old mule out in the garden eating cabbages. They named him Providence, changed the wagon from single-tree to double-tree, hitched up the mule and headed for Sandersville with the pregnant Vilenah Antoinette riding in a platform rocking chair placed in the wagon bed (This platform rocker was claimed by Willie Vilenah when her father's estate was settled many years later, and is a prized family heirloom). The family had not heard from William Parks Medlock in so long that they feared that he was dead. When the girl child was born in Sandersville, they named her William Vilenah for her two parents. William Parks had been wounded in the battle of Nashville when a sniper bullet passed through one hand and lodged in the other when he was drinking a cup of soup. He was taken to Mississippi and from there he walked home to Atlanta. He lived to father many other children but my grandmother was the one who bore his name! She was known as Willie or Billie and had two streets named for her, Willivee Drive (she signed her checks Willie V. Johnson) and Vilenah Lane at the Johnson home place in Druid Hills. Medlock School, Medlock Road, and other Medlock names in the area were for her father, William Parks, who moved to DeKalb County after the war and there acquired extensive property. Norcross was known as "the cradle of the Medlocks" and other Medlock place names in the metro area are for other members of the family.

Here two stories mingle. I need to tell more about the Johnsons. John Gardine died in 1883, leaving his wife and a family of two girls and two boys, one of whom was my grandfather, Pop. As a young man, my grandfather went to Texas, working his way at odd jobs (he excelled at cutting wood) and working on the railroad then being built east to west. He traveled as far as El Paso and had many fascinating tales to tell later of his

adventures. He had walked to Texas but had money to ride the train home. When he arrived in Atlanta, he went first to the home of his friend, Wilson Liddell, who just happened to be the sweetheart of his sister, Jessie. Jessie was graduating from Washington Seminary that night and the two young men attended together. From the stage, Jessie spotted her sweetheart in the crowd, and beside him was her brother, from whom she hadn't heard in so long! It was quite a reunion. At the time, gossip was that William Parks Medlock, known as "Buck," had married again "before his wife was cold in her grave!" Pop decided that he would go to dinner at the Medlock place on Sunday and determine if this was true. The custom was that all visitors around the noon hour on Sunday were welcomed guests. So Pop went and, sure enough, presiding at the dinner table was the former Miss Susan Kittridge, new wife of William Parks! But Pop's eyes were all for that daughter, Willie, who was "pretty as a picture." Pop decided on the spot that he would marry her! After a proper courtship, the marriage took place at his house. Miss Susan was a perfectly nice lady, from a fine family, and a former schoolteacher, but Willie V. bitterly resented the fact that her father had married so soon after her mother's death and wanted Miss Susan to have no part in their wedding. After the ceremony in the parlor of the rambling house (on what would become Oakdale Road) that had been built around the original two rooms, Pop's mother went to live with her daughter, Jessie Liddell, at what is now Ansley Mall, leaving the home to the newlyweds. Their first son was named for Pop's mother's father, old Daniel. The second son was named John Gerdine for his father. John Gerdine Johnson, "Uncle John," also lived in the Ansley Mall area and reared a large family. ^{The other} ~~One~~ sister, Anna Butler, died as a missionary in South America, but the rest of Pop's family were very close, seeing each other at least once every week. Daniel Noble Johnson, a physician in Decatur, was Pop's uncle, though Pop always called him "Cousin Nobe" since they were so close in age. He was considered dear friend as well as a relative.

John Gerdine Johnson added to his original holdings and owned all the land roughly between Briarcliff Road, Ponce de Leon Avenue, and Lullwater and North Decatur Roads. This became the nucleus of Druid Hills. This property was a fairly self-sufficient farm for many years, producing an abundance of fruits and vegetables. Pop and his son, Daniel William Johnson, Jr., my Daddy, had a large dairy and raised all the feed

for the horses and cattle. Flour and meal were ground at Houston's mill from home grown wheat and corn. A deep well gave a plentiful supply of good water, and a clear stream wound through the pasture. There were pigs and chickens for meat and wood to be cut for the fireplaces and for cooking. Pop sold all but ten acres to the Kirkwood Land Company, headed by Joel Hurt. Pop had enormous respect and admiration for Joel Hurt, "who made a fortune without ever soiling his hands." The Kirkwood Land Company sold to the Druid Hills Land Company, which further developed and marketed Druid Hills. Pop bought out the interests of his sister and brother in the ten acres, dreaming that his descendants would live side by side on Oakdale Road someday. Daddy died very young, a victim of the great influenza epidemic in 1919 when I was five years old, leaving a wife and three small children. Pop said "Hell, I can't retire, I've got another family to raise!" Someway he managed to take very good care of us through the Depression and made *ample* provisions for our education. Needless to say Pop was my special hero! Actually, three of my six granddaughters did live for a time on the old homesite, making them the sixth generation on the same soil, sort of unusual for a place like Atlanta. Most of the remaining property now belongs to my cousin Daniel Johnson Matthews, Pop's only living grandson. His mother, Antoinette Johnson Matthews, incidentally, wrote the Oakdale Road Book, now a collector's item. She founded the Out of Doors School where so many prominent Atlanta citizens started their education.

The sixth family line is Mason. William Pinckney Mason and his wife, Mary Ann Amanda Chandler were the parents of Vilenah Antoinette Mason, who married William Parks Medlock. Auntie used to tell the story about some prominent man who donated all the land for the Decatur Cemetery. When the donor died, his family had to purchase a plot in the Decatur Cemetery for his burial! Julius McCurdy, DeKalb County historian, said that it must have been Ezekiel Mason who owned a great deal of land northeast of the Courthouse Square. I know that Ezekiel Mason and old Daniel Johnson cleared the land for the original courthouse *in Decatur*.

With the six of my ancestral lines mentioned in *The History of DeKalb County, Georgia 1822-1900*, by Vivien Price, I can truthfully say that I have deep roots in DeKalb County.

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