



THE SOUTH EAST: COY'S HOUSE, NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI.

Tukufu: We flew almost 700 miles west for our next investigation in Natchez, Mississippi. The South before the Civil War was home to a slave-owning white aristocracy, who were some of the richest people on Earth. Natchez, Mississippi, was their crown jewel and playground. So was it possible that their neighbor who owned this house was an African American? I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I've come to Natchez to unravel this perplexing story. The owners of this beautiful Natchez house are Jim and Ruth Coy.

Ruth Coy: The house seems to be alive, much like a tree, the bark on a tree. It's been here awhile and it's to be respected.

Jim Coy: Well, I love houses that have a history because I like the feeling of being somewhere that other people have lived their lives.

Tukufu: The Coys know a bit about their house, but there's one part of its history that nobody's been able to explain.

Jim Coy: An African American named Robert Smith built the house in 1851.

Tukufu: An African American built this house? What else do you know about him?

Jim Coy: Well, the other interesting mystery is that we know that he traveled South on a slave ship. My wife and I would like to know, how does a slave traveling on a slave ship come to owning this beautiful home?

Tukufu: So Robert Smith went from traveling a slave ship to owning this beautiful home. I don't see how that's possible. Life was terrible for slaves working in the brutal cotton fields of the South. While plantation owners accumulated incredible wealth from cotton, slaves were literally being worked to death. Their life expectancy decreased significantly during these years of severe cruelty. How on earth did Robert Smith live here during those times? Maybe I can get some insights into Smith from Ron Miller, a local historian who knows the house and its history. Okay, what's going on? It's 1851. This is Natchez, Mississippi. This is the heart of the Deep South. Slavery is ruling the day. And this is an African American sitting here buying up property and serving a very vital role in the economy in Natchez, Mississippi. How?

Ron: He was a smart businessman. He was able to parlay what I imagine must have been a small amount of money into a great amount of money.

Tukufu: Ron told me that from this part of the house Smith ran the town's taxi service. We're in the addition that Robert Smith made to accommodate his carriages and his horses.

Ron: This would have been the carriage house, possible stable wing. This was the front room, the parlor. This was the public room of entertainment. This is where you'd receive your guests. A little fireplace, probably burning coal. This was, I think, the kitchen and dining room, with the cooking fireplace at that end. The second floor and the third floor all contained bedrooms for the family.

Tukufu: How did an African American accumulate this kind of wealth in the pre-Civil War South? I know Robert Smith is buried here in town. There may be some clues on his tombstone. Okay, that's not the guy. "William H. Fox." "Joseph Simmons" All right, here we go. "In memory of Robert D. Smith, born in Baltimore, Maryland, April 1st, 1807, died May 30th, 1858." I want to go to Baltimore. That's where this story starts and that's where I'm on my way to.

Tukufu: Baltimore, Maryland, is more than a thousand miles northeast of Natchez, but just below the Mason-Dixon Line, which made it part of the Slave-holding South. First stop is the Enoch Pratt Library, well-known for its records on the Baltimore Black population. I'm going to talk to historian Ralph Clayton about Slavery in Baltimore and to see what records the library might have about Robert D. Smith. So Slaves would be sold here?

Ralph Clayton: Slaves would be collected from the counties around Baltimore, brought into the city, placed in pens. We were also a large auction site. And here we see an example of a Slave trader reading the body of a Slave.

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Tukufu: Reading the body?

Ralph: Yes, checking for whip marks. And we see here the resulting auction. And the Slave trader beginning to bid on the male that he's interested in.

Tukufu: Just the male. So he's ripping this guy from his family.

Ralph: Yes. After being sold at auction in Baltimore, slaves were shipped south to New Orleans and other southern ports.

Tukufu: How do I find out about an individual slave who may have been shipped south? We can check the list of the actual slave manifest and try to find him there.

Tukufu: Let's do it.

Ralph: There were thousands of these manifests collected from various cities. Every shipment had a manifest of its human cargo, a record of each and every slave aboard. Here is the brig "Virginia," and there's Robert D. Smith, given with Lucy Boyer, Caroline Boyer and Emily Boyer. And then we can see across here. Lucy Boyer is the owner-shipper.

Tukufu: She's the owner-shipper.

Ralph: For herself and children.

Tukufu: So Robert Smith is the son of Lucy Boyer.

Ralph: Exactly.

Tukufu: Okay. Then we discovered something totally unexpected. Look, they have changed the document to show free persons of color. Someone has added the word "free" before "persons of color." This meant that they were free.

Ralph: Exactly.

Tukufu: They were not enslaved.

Ralph: And you can see they've changed the document up here to show that they're going to be residents in the city of New Orleans.

Tukufu: Right, and they've scratched out that they were being sold or being taken as slaves. This is fascinating.

Ralph: It sure is.

Tukufu: This is the kind of information that I really wanted to get. So Robert Smith was a free person of color. While a slave couldn't own the Coys' house, a free man of color could. But he's not headed for Natchez. He's making a three-week voyage to New Orleans. What did he expect to find there? Robert Smith was 16 years old when he got off that slave ship. What was life like for a free man of color here in New Orleans then? That's a question I have for city historian professor Rafael Cassameer, whose family has lived here for more than 200 years. Why would a free person of color have moved from Baltimore to New Orleans back in the 1820S?

Rafael Cassameer: It may be surprising, but it was not segregated by race.

Tukufu: So there was no residential segregation in the 19th century?

Rafael: No segregation by race, no segregation by class. There was no segregation except different groups of people

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tended to congregate together.

Tukufu: So even though it was in the Deep South, New Orleans was an even more open society than Smith was probably used to.

Rafael: Slaves, free people of color, the old free community interacted on a much looser basis than you had in other places. But the key here was, you had (an) opportunity to make money. When you had money, there obviously were more privileges that you could get.

Tukufu: So New Orleans was a good place to make money back then. But how exactly did Robert Smith accumulate the money for that beautiful house? I'm looking at the New Orleans city directory. This is where you'd look if you wanted to know what someone did and where they lived. And I'm looking for our guy, Robert D. Smith. And here I am, 1830. So we got "S"s. Here's the Smiths, and here's our guy. "Robert D. Smith, Grocer." Not bad. In 1830, Smith was only 23 years old and he already had a business going. Here we have really old documents. Judith deFay researches genealogy of free persons of color here in New Orleans. There has to be more to Robert Smith's dealings.

Judith deFay: If I go all the way down here to the "S"s. There we go. Okay, we're looking for Smith. Like you say, there's a lot of Smiths. Lot of Smiths in the world. Okay, here's a John. Uh-huh. Here's an Ann. Yeah. Robert. We have "Robert D. Smith" and a list of his dealings in New Orleans during this period.

Tukufu: And what can we gain from looking at this?

Judith: We have the year, 1837. We have the other person involved in the deal. And we have page numbers, so that we can now go to the original document. This is an act of sale from Robert D. Smith, free man of color, to Edward Barnett. He is selling a house, Orange and Camp Street in the American sector, Lower Garden District is what they call it now.

Tukufu: Okay.

Judith: He's selling it for \$4,000. That's a lot of money.

Tukufu: A lot of money. He's a very enterprising young man.

Judith: Very enterprising.

Tukufu: And like a true entrepreneur, Robert Smith knew how to make a profit.

Judith: He bought it for \$650, so he's buying bare property.

Tukufu: Okay, and he's making a very handsome profit on it.

Judith: Yeah. Well, let's see what else we've got here. He's selling a house. He is selling a mortgage. He's making another mortgage. He's selling two slaves to two different people.

Tukufu: So he sold other slaves.

Judith: Yes.

Tukufu: Very interesting. I know all too well that slave-holding was not limited to Southern Whites. Some free people of color seeking the status and profit that slavery provided owned them as well. Then we discovered something that put all of this evidence in a new light.

Judith: This is a power of attorney to a man in Cincinnati, Ohio, for the purpose of "manumitting, emancipating, and granting freedom to his female slave named Ann McCauley together with her four children, for the express purpose of

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freeing them.”

Tukufu: Wow! So Robert Smith emancipated Ann McCauley. But why? And what happened to her? It looks like she couldn't stay in Louisiana. In 1830, Louisiana passed a law that made it impossible for a freed slave to remain in the state. Louisiana slave owners were afraid that freed slaves like Ann would be the wrong example for those still in captivity. So after she was freed, she would have been forced to leave New Orleans. All of this is happening in the space of six weeks. Which is suggestive that he's not staying in town. He's selling everything off. He's leaving town. Why would Smith sell off all his property and leave the city that had brought him success? Natchez is right across the state border, up the Mississippi River from New Orleans. I'm going to check the public records to see when he's first mentioned.

“You are hereby authorized to celebrate the rights of matrimony between Robert D. Smith,” -- our guy -- “and Ann McCauley” this is the woman that he purchased in New Orleans. He's marrying her, here in Natchez, Mississippi. In the 1840s, half of Mississippi's Free Blacks lived in Natchez. This would have been a place where Smith could marry and live with his wife free. So Robert Smith did travel a slave ship, but not as a slave. He was a free person of color. In New Orleans, he was a successful businessman, but was forced to leave to have freedom for the woman he would marry. And he settled in Natchez, where he prospered in a taxi business, built a house and called it home. My journey ends here, back in the Coys' house in Natchez.

Tukufu: I've completed my research and I have an answer to your question about Robert D. Smith. He did travel on board a ship carrying slaves, but he was not a slave. He traveled with his mother and two sisters as a free person of color. He arrived in New Orleans, purchased a home, and set up a grocery business. And he was a very successful businessman here.

Coys: Unbelievable.

Tukufu: While in New Orleans, he met the woman who would become his wife, and she was a slave. And he purchased her.

Coys: Unbelievable.

Tukufu: Yes, he purchased her, and he sent her out of Louisiana because she couldn't be free in Louisiana.

Coys: So he sent her out of Louisiana.

Tukufu: And so they ultimately ended up here in Natchez, Mississippi, in this beautiful home.

Coys: This is a love story.

Tukufu: It is a love story. It's about love and it's about freedom. In part, he had to escape from Louisiana to find freedom to marry his wife in Natchez, Mississippi. Certainly helps us to understand Robert Smith and his family and why he came to Natchez.

Coys: Yes, yes. That is a great, great story.

Tukufu: It's my pleasure. After Robert died in 1858, it looks like his wife and children left the house and the country. The last record about them in Natchez is a request from Ann in 1858 to go to Valparaiso, Chile, where the oldest of Smith's children was working in a foundry.



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MORE ON FAMOUS AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Robert Smith was a shrewd businessman who prospered during the years of Slavery. But he wasn't the only African American to succeed despite years of racism and prejudice. The famous singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was born a slave in Natchez in 1817, just before Robert Smith arrived. Known as the "Black Swan," the culmination of her career was a performance in 1854 at Buckingham Palace, England, in front of the Queen. John Mercer Langston was born free in 1829. He was the first African American elected to public office, and was twice suggested as a candidate for the Vice-Presidency. Henry McNeil Turner learned to read and write at a time when it was against the law to teach a slave the alphabet. And in 1872, he was one of the first African Americans to receive a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Ida B. Wells Barnett was a pioneering journalist who set the tone for the anti-lynching movement with her newspaper articles and pamphlets. She became one of the most influential journalists, reformers and women's rights advocates in the late 19th and early 20th century. Her dedication to equality for all was sparked by being thrown off the ladies' coach on a train headed for Memphis in 1884.

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