

Emily Brown Moton

Portrayed by Etta Neal

Presented at Jamestown Presbyterian Church,

Rice, Virginia

June 24, 2007

I was born in slavery and raised in Amelia County. The exact date and place of my birth is not to be found on any official records--my best guess is that it would be in the late 1840's on the Hillsman plantation.

My mother, was a strong and courageous woman, both physically and mentally. She "carried the keys" on her owner's, Dr. Craddock plantation, and was the superintendent of the others coloureds, making of the clothes, caring for the children on the plantation, as well as the children of the coloured mothers that worked in the field. Seeing that the children were fed and dress and that there conduct or behavior was in order. The children were taught the story of Uncle Remus "Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit", a familiar story of the south for both black and white. My mother died at 96 years old.

My father was of a strong tribe from the west coast of Africa. His father was a tribal chief, slave merchant in Africa, a powerful man who had bodyguards throughout the jungle. He sold his captives to a captain of an American slave ship and received his trinkets then was asked to row out in a boat and inspect the captain's slave ship, they offered him food and he ate it and the next thing he knew he was in the hold of the ship chained to one of the miserable creatures whom himself had sold. The ship came into Richmond and he and the other captives were sold at public auction in the slave markets. He was brought by a tobacco planter and carried to Amelia.

Emily Brown Moton

I saw the armies of the North and South as they came fighting through my community in the closing weeks of the Civil War.

The Hillsman had lost everything during the war except their name and honour and the pride of aristocratic (noble/dignified) ancestry.

On Christmas Day in 1866, I married Booker Moton on the Hillsman's plantation. Booker was much, much older than me and had 2 sons from his previous marriage. Booker was employed as plantation overseer by Samuel W. Vaughan of Prince Edward County. The Vaughan plantation was called Pleasant Shade and was located on the western ridge overlooking where Little and Big Saylers Creek come together at the Double Bridges. After my marriage to Booker, I remained for some time with my own family in Amelia several miles from Pleasant Shade where my husband was working, although he came to spend time with me as often as he could.

I already had two stepsons when our own child, Robert Russa, was born August 26, 1867. While Robert was still a small boy, Booker packed our belongings and moved us with a large farm wagon with 4 mules to the Vaughan's plantation. Robert was wrapped in an old gray blanket and a blue military overcoat in order to stay warm from the bitter cold.

For many years I worked at first in the fields and later as the cook for the Vaughan family in the big house, while my husband "led the hands" on that large farm...I became a strong and courageous woman as I cooked, made clothes, took care of the Vaughan children and watched the mothers' children who worked in the field.

...after working in the field all day from sunup to sundown, it was backbreaking hard work, sometimes into

Emily Brown Moton

the dark. This large busy farm had all kinds of seasonal crops, orchards, melon and vegetable gardens, not to mention tending herds of cattle, sheep and goats, cutting wood, repairing fences, and looking after flocks of turkeys, geese, ducks and a great many chickens.

But I prayed for strength as I would hurry us through the evening meal in order to get our 2 room cabin ready for the night school which met regularly at our simple home. My brother had learned to read and write from his young master as they played and worked together around the farm. I learned all I could from my brother but I knew I had to keep it a secret from the Vaughan's that I even knew my alphabets.

There were about some twenty-five or thirty black men and women struggling with their lessons at these evening sessions, some of them having come as far as six miles...in order to take advantage of this rare opportunity...which was taking place after the close of the war and before any schools had been open for coloured or white children in this section.

Oh, I was very excited and eager about learning. I especially saw to it that my only son, young Robert Russa would learn to read and write as well as understand the basic principals of simple arithmetic. As we studied, Booker was always teasing and joking, interrupting us. But I didn't pay any attention to him.

Later, I moved to the big house as the cook for the Vaughan family and helped run the household. Robert was busy in the house learning also since he was the only child near the big house. As Robert grew older he carried the "key basket" for Mis Lucy (Mrs. Vaughan) same as his grandmother's position years ago. A position of responsibility and dignity to withhold for the colours.

Emily Brown Moton

Later Robert was big enough to become the houseboy and waiter to the Vaughan family, oh he was so proud.

The night before Robert started his new duties I made sure he knew how to stand; how to act like he heard nothing of the family's conversation; and the way to pass dishes and plates. He was proud of his new clothes too.

My duties as the cook and keeping up the Vaughan's household and children, did not stop my determination and courage to continue to learn reading and writing and teach the others, even Robert.

Each night we studied our books by the open fire that we stayed warm by or the oil lanterns. One night while studying, a knock came upon the door, I asked who is it, to my surprise it was Lucy Lockett Vaughan, affectionately called Mis Lucy, my first instinct was to hide the books but Booker said no, we are free now. If she objected we would leave the farm and find other work at another plantation. Well Mis Lucy came in and saw what I was doing and she expressed surprised but she surprised us by insisting we did not stop and she assisted in teaching us, and then "Mis Lucy" got the youngest Vaughan daughter, "Mis Mollie" to take on the task of teaching Robert and me a hour a night.

I was not able to keep up with the studying with all my duties but I made sure that Robert Russa did.

Knowing that this was unheard of, the colours able to read, and now the Vaughan family helping us, I was thankful for my strong willpower that I got from my mother and father, and thank God that I was able to help my community, of as many of my people as I could from my position in "the big house," to my little 2-room cabin.

Emily Brown Moton

Mis Lucy Vaughan died in 1876, we were very upset. Mr. Samuel Vaughan remarried 2 years later to Mis Pattie Perkinson, from the Jamestown community. She turned out to be sweet and kind and thoughtful to the hired help.

I was thankful that in my lifetime I was able to see the opening of a school for the coloured children open near the Vaughan plantation.

I was looked up to and respected by all concerned because I had courage to keep a secret of knowing how to read and write, and but acted on it because I knew the importance of having an education. Many of the colours in the community especially the women would come to me at times with their worries and problems and I tried to be helpful by listening and showing understanding.

The Vaughan children were my children too; they would come to me with their problems sometimes before going to their own mama.

Through the struggle of enslavement, through the terrors of the Civil War and the bleak, harsh years of rebuilding that followed. I had much faith, hope, and courage to hold families together by teaching their children from the Bible and making sure they were trained and educated for better and more secure lives than their parents knew.

My main concern in life, however, was Robert. He was a real good little boy, and I was sure proud of him. And his ancestors of royal blood, strong powerful people. I just made up my mind that he was going to be somebody in this world, and I wasn't going to let anybody (not even Booker with his teasing) get in my way and keep me from raising him right. I thank the good Lord that Robert turned out the way he did as a man.

Robert where are you, son; come and talk to these people.