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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Retropolis

How an abolitionist painting set in D.C. became proslavery propaganda

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By Kristina Gaddy

On the steps of the Capitol, the president addressed the crowd, reportedly the largest the city had ever seen. People had flooded into D.C. for the occasion, and local newspapers advertised balls and celebrations. Visitors crowded the streets as a parade moved down Pennsylvania Avenue, lining the route and hanging out of the windows of brick rowhomes to get a view.

But not everyone was celebrating the March 1857 inauguration of James Buchanan. In the alleys behind some of those rowhouses, artist Eastman Johnson had spent time with people who were less than pleased about the election of a proslavery Democrat. Slavery was still legal in the capital, and all Johnson had to do to witness it was visit the interior yard of his father's home on F Street NW.

Johnson's painting of a group of enslaved people in that yard would launch his career. But although Johnson, an abolitionist, intended the scene to humanize African Americans, the artwork would go on to be used as proslavery propaganda.

The 1856 election had been contentious. Republican candidate John Fremont promised to end slavery, as violence between pro- and anti-slavery forces was erupting in Kansas. Buchanan's election put abolition out of reach. And two days after his inauguration, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the Supreme Court ruled that Black Americans, free or enslaved, could not be U.S. citizens.

Johnson had felt the tension within his own family. Since his return from studying art in Europe, he had divided his time between Wisconsin, the Minnesota Territory and D.C. His father, Philip, worked for Buchanan's Democratic Party and lived on F Street NW between 13th and 14th streets, in a largely proslavery neighborhood. His neighbors included future Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Although Philip Johnson didn't enslave anyone, in the late summer of 1857, he wed Mary Washington, a relative of George Washington who owned three enslaved people.

The city's design hid slave quarters in backyards and interior courtyards, but Eastman knew these people were there. He had been born in the free state of Maine, and earlier in his career, he painted portraits of abolitionists Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as a painting of Uncle Tom and Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"We do not know the specific catalyst for Johnson turning to the subject of slave life in 1857," Patricia Hills wrote in "Eastman Johnson: Painting America," but his exposure to both abolitionist ideas and enslaved people likely had something to do with it.

When Johnson chose to paint Mount Vernon after a visit there in spring 1857, he didn't create a grand scene idolizing George Washington. Instead, the painting shows the mansion from the side, with a windowless white clapboard cabin at the center. An enslaved Black man sits in the cabin's doorway, his body slumped with his hands on his knees. In six different paintings of the kitchen at Mount Vernon, Johnson depicted an enslaved woman laboring next to children. In both scenes, the physical surroundings are decaying: rotting wooden fences, bricks crumbling, plaster peeling from walls.

Johnson used his father's D.C. yard as the backdrop for his next painting about slavery. He painted small groups of people interacting with each other: a White woman peeking around the corner; two young Black girls turning to see her coming into the yard; a woman and a man talking; a banjo player and a boy looking at him longingly; a child dancing to the music, holding a woman's hands while a child lies next to them; a child and woman looking out the window. Unlike in many depictions of African Americans in art at the time, Johnson rendered each person fully, each with distinct skin tone, clothing style, posture and facial expressions. And just as in the Mount Vernon painting, the deterioration of the house where the enslaved people are gathered suggested that slavery was decaying the nation.

He named the painting "Negro Life at the South." (Johnson, born in New England, had never traveled farther south in the United States than D.C., apart from Mount Vernon.) It was a scene of distinctly urban slavery, featuring a beige-brick rowhouse and an older, collapsing wooden house where the enslaved people probably lived.

When Johnson exhibited the painting at the National Academy of Design's Annual Exhibition in 1859, most critics praised it. The editors of Harper's New Monthly Magazine wrote that it was "conceived with great spirit, and painted with Dutch fidelity." The New-York Tribune understood its abolitionist message, writing that it was "a sort of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of pictures" and presented "a sad picture of Southern Slavery."

But to Southerners, Hills wrote, “the painting appeared as an apologia for slavery with its depiction of happy, well-fed enslaved people,” with the banjo player looking merry, the child dancing, the man and woman chatting, and everyone appearing idle. That attitude extended to some Northerners whose wealth originated in the slave system, like cotton broker William P. Wright, who bought the painting in 1859, and New York sugar refiner Robert Stuart, who purchased it from Wright’s estate in 1867.

In 1860, the painting was displayed in Troy, N.Y., under the title “My Old Kentucky Home,” a reference to the Stephen Foster blackface minstrel hit. Later, a tobacco company used the image with the words “O Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” to advertise a product that had always been associated with slave labor. (“Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” written by Black minstrel performer James Bland, would later become the Virginia state song.) Any anti-slavery message Johnson had tried to impart in the painting was lost.

His next paintings would leave no room for ambiguity. A year after he displayed “Negro Life at the South,” Johnson received a commission from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother Henry Ward Beecher to paint a girl named Rose Ward. Beecher had sold Ward — born Sally Diggs — in a mock-auction to raise money for the abolitionist cause. In the painting, Rose looks at her “freedom ring,” a golden band she had allegedly been given in the auction. The image was supposed to further elicit sympathy and publicity for abolition.

In 1862, the Civil War raged in Northern Virginia, and after the Battle of Bull Run, Johnson painted “A Ride for Liberty — The Fugitive Slaves.” In it, a Black man, woman and child ride a horse at full gallop, and we understand they are fleeing for their lives. Unlike “The Freedom Ring,” Hills wrote, “this work shows the fugitives as the agents of their own freedom.”

Abolition finally came to D.C. in 1862, Maryland in 1864 and Virginia in 1865. Johnson continued to paint African American subjects until the early 1870s, in paintings infused with the morality of abolition and Black equality. But just as former abolitionist politicians didn’t maintain a commitment to fostering racial equality and integrating Black Americans into U.S. social and political life, Johnson and other genre artists abandoned paintings that portrayed “the struggles of African Americans and the notion of brotherhood,” Hills wrote, and embraced “art-for-art’s-sake painting divorced from morality or didactic purpose.”

Johnson went on to paint portraits of presidents Chester A. Arthur and Grover Cleveland and business leaders John D. Rockefeller and Cornelius Vanderbilt, and he was a founding trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. According to Hills on her website dedicated to Johnson, he is recognized “as a painter who brought more sophisticated painting techniques to America, who extended the range of ‘American’ subjects, often transforming traditional European themes, and who brought a more dignified and democratic content to genre painting.”

But more than a-century-and-a-half after it was painted, “Negro Life at the South” is still widely referred to as “My Old Kentucky Home,” its political statement and D.C. origins forgotten.