

**NATHAN WARREN,  
A FREE NEGRO FOR THE OLD SOUTH**

BY MARGARET SMITH ROSS\*

Nathan Warren was a mulatto, born in slavery in Maryland in 1812, and reared in the District of Columbia,<sup>1</sup> probably at Georgetown. He came to Little Rock about 1834 as a slave in the family of Robert Crittenden. Some accounts say that the Crittenden family set him free; Nathan's descendants understand that he bought his freedom.

Robert Crittenden died December 18, 1834, intestate and woefully insolvent, leaving his widow to fight a losing battle in the courts for even the roof over her head. Sometime during this period of financial stress, between 1834 and 1840, Nathan Warren became a free man, one way or the other.

We find no recorded manumission papers in his name in Pulaski county, nor are there any granted to any slave by Crittenden or his estate. However, on pages 50-51 of Pulaski County Deed Record Book J, we find the following document:

February, 1835

This is to certify that my yellow boy Nase is to be free after serving me three years and six months after the twenty seventh of May eighteen hundred and thirty five.

Daniel Greathouse.

This may be the record of Nathan's emancipation, for he was a "yellow boy," his nickname was Nase, and the date is approximately correct. There is no record of the transfer of a slave from Crittenden or his estate to Greathouse, nor of the acquisition by Greathouse of any of his slaves from any source. On April 1, 1837, Greathouse having died the year before, Isaac M. Cooper testified to the au-

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\*The author is research assistant at the Arkansas History Commission and an associate editor of the Quarterly.

<sup>1</sup>Family Bible of Mrs. Gordon Johnson, formerly Zola May Warren, of Little Rock. In 1902 Mrs. Johnson, the daughter of Nathan Warren's son William, copied into her Bible a part of the records written by Nathan in his own Bible, which has since been destroyed. She also supplied the accompanying picture of Nathan Warren, as well as many of the personal details of his life, contained in this article.

thenticity of the manumission papers of the yellow boy Nase, and he was legally emancipated.

Public sentiment against free Negroes was reflected in this comment in the *Arkansas Gazette* of November 17, 1835: "They are always a troublesome class everywhere, and particularly where there are slaves. There are several about Little Rock, who are doing more mischief to the slave population than many are aware of. We hope our City authorities will make it their first business to pass some wholesome regulations in relation to free Negroes, which will keep them under proper restraint. Next to the black-leg gentry, they are the greatest nuisance about our City." Although the situation in which he found himself probably was as bad for the community as the *Gazette* pictured it, Nathan Warren as an individual was loved and respected by both Negroes and whites. Within the next few years, the City of Little Rock did pass ordinances restricting the activities of the free Negroes.

Nathan married the mulatto slave Anne, Chester Ashley's cook. She had a son born previously. W. A. Rector, who became one of the outstanding members of Little Rock's Negro community after the Civil War. The children of Nathan and Anne were Nathan, James, Frank, Maria Rebecca, Ella, Archie, George, and John. Isaiah Timothy was born November 17, 1850, but it cannot be definitely determined whether his mother was Nathan's first or second wife.

Nathan's accomplishments were many and varied, and although he could not hope to become wealthy, at least he had no trouble supporting himself. He became the town's confectioner, and in his latter years was a minister. He was a talented fiddler, much in demand for all social events. He was also a barber, a carriage driver, and a general handyman.

About 1840 he was employed as a carriage driver by Chester Ashley, and accompanied the Ashley family to Cincinnati, Ohio to visit relatives.<sup>2</sup> He does not appear in the 1840 Pulaski county census, and may have been living

<sup>2</sup>Deposition of Nathan Warren, September 6, 1870, in the matter of the estate of Hamblin Cox. Woodruff Papers, Archives of the Arkansas History Commission.

in the Ashley household at that time.

On March 10, 1841 Nathan purchased from Chester Ashley and Roswell Beebe, lots 4, 5 and 6 in Block 114 in the City of Little Rock, paying \$300 for them. This is the southeast quarter of the block bounded by Broadway, Arch, Seventh and Eighth streets, the lots fronting on Arch street. Nathan kept the property until February 5, 1846 when he sold it to James McVicar.

Meanwhile he had made another purchase that pleased him even more than his land ownership. He had at least two brothers, Henry and James Warren. Henry had acquired his freedom and lived at Washington, D. C., but James, who was between 13 and 19 years younger than Nathan, was still owned by Timothy Crittenden. The two free brothers pooled their resources, and on July 9, 1844 they jointly bought James from Crittenden. However, James was not yet free, as legally he was still owned by his brothers. Finally, on January 15, 1850 Nathan purchased Henry's interest in their brother James, for the sum of ten dollars, and on February 5, 1850, he filed emancipation papers.<sup>3</sup> Nathan signed these papers with his mark, but in later years he learned to read and write. When the census was taken in 1850, James Warren was living in Nathan's household in Little Rock.

It was probably during the forties that Nathan established his confectionery business. Henry Jackson, another free Negro, operated a confectionery earlier, but he invented a cooking stove which proved to be profitable, and he moved to Evansville, Indiana, where the stove was manufactured. Nathan Warren took over Jackson's old stand. William E. Woodruff II remembered it as a two-story frame building on West Markham street, on a lot now covered by a part of the Capitol hotel building.<sup>4</sup>

He never advertised in the newspapers, but his confectionery was well patronized. He was always called upon to provide the refreshments at weddings and other social events, and even on short notice he always came through with mouth-watering delicacies such as his famous

<sup>3</sup>Pulaski County Record of Deeds, Book U, p. 492-494.

<sup>4</sup>William E. Woodruff II: "A Chronicle of Little Rock," *Arkansas Gazette* November 7, 1931.

teacakes. The ladies of Little Rock begged for his recipes, but he firmly refused, saying, "If I lets you white ladies have my receipts, I gives away my trade."<sup>5</sup>

As time went by, the feeling against free Negroes grew stronger. The *Gazette* and other newspapers fanned the flame, and urged the legislature to evict the free Negroes from the state. Although he was personally popular among the white citizens of Little Rock, Nathan obviously felt the stigma of his status. Shortly after midnight on Friday, March 19, 1852, it was discovered that his confectionery store was on fire. This was a two-story frame building on the west side of Main street, in the heart of the business district, and around the corner from the location described years later by William E. Woodruff II. The fire started under the floor, at the fireplace, and spread to the north side of the building, where it "was blazing briskly up between the plastering and weather-boarding, which was charred to the height of eight or ten feet." Fortunately, the fire was extinguished before it could destroy the building or harm the nearby business houses.

Nathan was convinced that the fire had been deliberately set, but the editor of the *Gazette* inspected the damage the next day, and pronounced it the result of accident or carelessness. In spite of this reassurance, Nathan apparently saw the handwriting on the wall. His brother James probably either died or left Little Rock about this time, for after 1852 his name disappears for good from the Pulaski county tax lists.

Finally the opposition to free Negroes culminated in an act of the legislature, approved February 12, 1859, which required all free Negroes to leave the state, their only alternative being to become slaves again. In an article written by Jane Georgine Woodruff,<sup>6</sup> this law is given as the reason for Nathan Warren's exit from Arkansas, and it is stated that he left his wife and children behind with the Ashleys. Actually, Nathan left the state more than a year before the law was passed, and he did not go alone.

<sup>5</sup>Mrs. Sue Crease Peay and Miss Sophia Crease: "Good Cheer of Early Days," *The Arkansas Pioneers* (Little Rock: Arkansas Pioneers Association, January, 1913.) p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Jane Georgine Woodruff: "A Pioneer Childhood in Little Rock," *Arkansas Gazette*, November 7, 1931.

His wife Anne had died, and he had remarried. His grand-daughter recalls that his second wife was Mary Elizabeth, another Ashley slave, and that Nathan bought her and their daughter, Ida May, born at Little Rock, October 26, 1856. He did not buy the children of his first wife, but Mrs. Ashley "threw in" Ella, who was sickly and half blind and was not expected to live long. (However, she lived to be 85 years old).

There are no manumission papers on file in Pulaski county for either Nathan's wife or Ida May, which indicates but certainly does not prove that Mary Elizabeth may have been free before her marriage, which would mean that Ida May was born free. A 17-year-old free mulatto, named Elizabeth Warren, lived in Nathan's household in 1850, but her age does not jibe with the age given for Mary Elizabeth in the 1870 census.

At any rate, Nathan's wife and daughter were definitely not freed by Mary W. W. Ashley at the same time. Emancipation papers for Ella were drawn up on February 22, 1856 and filed July 7, 1856.<sup>7</sup> She was identified in this record as Mary Ellen, an infant female child, "the daughter of my deceased slave Anne, and her husband Nathan Warren." These papers committed the child to the custody of her father, and mentioned no cash consideration.

The family went to Xenia, Ohio, where their three youngest children were born. William Alfred was born August 15, 1858; Edwin Luther was born December 26, 1860; and Mary Eliza, called Mollie, was born February 3, 1862.

Jane Georgine Woodruff gave a touching account of Nathan's return to Little Rock, indicating that it took place between 1859 and 1861, and implying that Nathan was alone in his new home. S. H. Tucker, on his annual trip to the east to buy stock for his dry-goods store, met Nathan on the street in New York. The old Negro was pathetically underfed and poorly clad, all his former prosperity gone. He begged Tucker to take him back to Little Rock, and the merchant risked the consequences and brought him home. The people of Little Rock were so glad to have

<sup>7</sup>Pulaski County Records of Deeds, Book Z, p. 358.

him back that the authorities pretended not to notice the violation of the law, and he was allowed to stay.

This is an interesting and dramatic story, and it may represent the general understanding of the people of Little Rock about the incident. Nathan Warren never lived in New York, but he may have visited there, or he may have met Tucker in some other city along the way. At the time he came back to Little Rock, which was certainly later than 1862, there was probably no risk involved.

The first evidence that he had re-established his home in Little Rock is in the 1868 tax list. He owned no property, but his wife Mary was assessed for lot 9, block 286. This was the property at 1012 Ringo, where the Warren family lived for many years. The house is still standing, although considerably altered in appearance. When Nathan Warren lived there, it was a one-and-a-half story building, with the half-story at the rear. Later it was owned by Eddie Warren, Nathan's son, who died unmarried early in 1885 and willed the property to Gabriel Hays, who had married into the family. Nathan continued to live at 1012 Ringo until shortly before his death.

Nathan married a third time, but the marriage was not successful. He was not divorced from his third wife, Louise, but they were separated. She was some 34 years his junior, and by a previous marriage, she had become a mother at the age of 14. After her separation from Nathan, she lived at 1100 Izard, with her daughter and son-in-law, Laura and Augustus Richmond. Nathan's children were fond of her, and his grandchildren always called her "grandma."

Nathan re-established his popular confectionery, but the business had its ups and downs. The 1870 census listed his occupation as grocer. In 1872, the city directory listed him as a baker at 110 West Fifth street, where he was in business for himself. In 1873, he had a fruit stand in the next block west, and J. G. Leiser was operating a confectionery at Warren's old stand. In 1878, he worked in Francis Ditter's confectionery, and in 1880 he was in business with W. C. Gibbons, under the name Gibbons and Warren, at 902 Main street. The census report of that

year lists him as a huckster. In 1881 he no longer had a partner, but was still a confectioner in the same location.

During the reconstruction period, several of Nathan's family connections held office, although neither he nor his children did. In 1872-74, Hugh Newsome, who had married Nathan's daughter Ella, was city marshal. A. L. Richmond, whose wife was a daughter of Nathan's third wife, was alderman from the third ward in 1872, and a member of the school board in 1873. In 1884, W. A. Rector, son of Nathan's first wife, was constable of Big Rock township, and had served previously as city collector and city marshal.

Nathan Warren was ordained as an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church on November 19, 1882 at Morrilton. His credentials, signed by Bishop H. M. Turner, were not filed for record at the Pulaski county court house until April 29, 1885.<sup>8</sup> He was one of the organizers of Bethel A. M. E. church, and was its pastor for a time. This church is still in existence, at the corner of Ninth and Broadway streets.

Nathan was also an active member of the Masonic Lodge, and rose to the 32d degree. All the Negroes in the community called him "Father Warren," while the whites continued to call him "Uncle Nase."

In his latter years, his health was not good, and the family of his son William cared for him at the old homeplace at 1012 Ringo. Finally he went to live with his daughter Maria at 813 Arch, where he died soon afterwards, on Sunday, June 3, 1888. He had a large Masonic funeral the next day at Bethel church, and was buried at Mount Holly cemetery.

For years his grave was marked by a tall obelisk, supposed by his descendants to have been erected by the Masonic Lodge. This tombstone was eventually removed, without notification or explanation to his family, and since the cemetery records do not list a lot number for his grave, its exact location is uncertain. However, the grave of his daughter, Maria Warren Phillips Craigen, is on lot 1027 North Elm, and presumably Nathan is buried near

<sup>8</sup>Pulaski County Record of Ministers Credentials, Book B-2, p. 25.

her. Her grave is marked by a tombstone erected by the Order of the Eastern Star. Cemetery records do not mention the name of the owner of this lot.

Through his children, Nathan Warren had yet another claim to fame, for he was the father of most of the members of the celebrated Ashley Band. The Ashley Band was so called because it was composed of slaves owned by the Ashley family, but even in later years when slavery was abolished and the official name was the String and Brass Band, the old name still clung to it. According to some accounts, the band was going strong as early as 1836. I find nothing to support that statement, but if there was an Ashley Band during the thirties, it was not the same band that later became regionally well known, for at that time the children of Nathan Warren were yet unborn.

Nathan himself was a fiddler of some repute, and in the early days played for many a local ball. All of his children were musically inclined, and John was perhaps the most gifted. Before he was six years old he could play long and difficult selections on a toy French harp. George played an E flat cornet, and Frank a corneopeon. The daughters, Maria, Ella and Mollie, were all accomplished musicians, and Mollie taught music for a while. Both Mollie and William had some formal training in music, and William, who was too young to be in the Ashley band, could play almost any instrument. Ida played a little, but was less talented than the rest of the family.

There were seven members in the original band. These were Nathan, Jr., George, Frank, John and Isaiah Warren, all sons of Nathan; Wash Phillips, who married Nathan's daughter, Maria; and W. A. Rector, Nathan's step-son.

Recognizing their unusual talent, the Ashley family employed a teacher for them. But the teacher soon found that it was no easy task to instruct natural musicians, for as soon as they heard a piece of music they could play it. The teacher despaired of ever teaching them to play by note, and gave up in disgust.<sup>9</sup>

It was a matter of no concern to the Ashley Band. When they played so well by ear, why should they learn

<sup>9</sup>Jane Georgine Woodruff, *op. cit.*

to do it the hard way? They played everywhere, at private and public affairs, and in the summer evenings they had concerts on the Ashley lawn. For a long time, theirs was the city's only band. Their fame spread, and they became the pets of the Ashley family, the people of Little Rock, and even of strangers who heard them play. But in spite of the attention lavished upon them, they remained humble and unspoiled. And it must not be supposed that their only duties were in the field of entertainment, for it is said that they had other chores, and were particularly employed as nurses for the sick.

After the war, the band continued and always sought the advice of Gen. William E. Ashley, the son of their original owner. The children of Nathan's second marriage were not regular members of the band, but his daughters by his first marriage, Maria and Ella, often played with the band. At the request of Captain Levy, the band made a trip on the steamboat Miami to Memphis, to furnish the music at a celebration. Maria and Ella did not go on this trip. On the return trip, about six miles above Napoleon, in the Arkansas river, the Miami exploded. George Warren, Frank Warren, John Warren, and their sister's husband, Wash Phillips, were killed.<sup>10</sup> Only one of the bodies was recovered. W. A. Rector and Isaiah Warren escaped.

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<sup>10</sup>Frances Ashley Johnson: *Chester Ashley and the Old Ashley Mansion*, n.d., n.p.