FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
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DOUGLAS PARISH

Douglas Parish was born in Monticello, Florida, May 7, 1850, to Charles and Fannie Parish, slaves of Jim Parish. Fannie had been bought from a family by the name of Palmer to be a "breeder", that is a bearer of strong children who could bring high prices at the slave markets. A "breeder" always fared better than the majority of female slaves, and Fannie Parish was no exception. All she had to do was raise children. Charles Parish labored in the cotton fields, the chief product of the Parish plantation.

As a small boy Douglas used to spend his time shooting marbles, playing ball, racing and wrestling with the other boys. The marbles were made from lumps of clay hardened in the fireplace. He was a very good runner, and as it was a custom in those days for one plantation owner to match his "nigger" against that of his neighbor, he was a favorite with Parish because he seldom failed to win the race. Parish trained his runners by having them race to the boundary of his plantation and back again. He would reward the winner with a jack-knife or a bag of marbles.

Just to be first was an honor in itself, for the fastest runner represented his master in the Fourth of July races when runners from all over the country competed for top honors, and the winner earned a bag of silver for his master. If Parish didn't win the prize, he was hard to get along with for several days, but gradually he would accept his defeat with resolution. Prizes in less important races ranged from a pair of fighting cocks to a slave, depending upon the seriousness of the betting.

Douglas' first job was picking cotton seed from the cotton. When he was about 12 years of age, he became the stable boy, and soon learned about the care and grooming of horses from an old slave who had charge of the Parish stables. He was also required to keep the buggies, surreys, and spring-wagons clean. The buggies were light four-wheeled carriages drawn by one horse. The surreys were covered four-wheeled carriages, open at the sides, but having curtains that may be rolled down. He liked this job very much because it gave him an opportunity to ride on the horses, the desire of all the boys on the plantation. They had to be content with chopping wood, running errands, cleaning up the plantation, and similar tasks. Because of his knowledge of horses, Douglas was permitted to travel to the coast with his boss and other slaves for the purpose of securing salt from the sea water. It was cheaper to secure salt by this method than it was to purchase it otherwise.

Life in slavery was not all bad, according to Douglas. Parish fed his slaves well, gave them comfortable quarters in which to live, looked after them when they were sick, and worked them very moderately. The food was cooked in the fireplace in large iron pots, pans and ovens. The slaves had greens, potatoes, corn, rice, meat, peas, and corn bread to eat. Occasionally the corn bread was replaced by flour bread.

The slaves drank an imitation coffee made from parched corn or meal. Since there was no ice to preserve the left-over food, only enough for each meal was prepared.

Parish seldom punished his slaves, and never did he permit his overseer to do so. If the slaves failed to do their work, they were reported to him. He would warn them and show his black whip which was usually sufficient. He had seen overseers beat slaves to death, and he did not want to risk losing the money he had invested in his. After his death, his son managed the plantation in much the same manner as his father.

But the war was destined to make the Parishes lose all their slaves by giving them their freedom. Even though they were free to go, many of the slaves elected to remain with their mistress who had always been kind to them. The war swept away much of the money which her husband had left her; and although she would liked to have kept all of her slaves, she found it impossible to do so. She allowed the real old slaves to remain on the premises and kept a few of the younger ones to work about the plantation. Douglas and his parents were among those who remained on the plantation. His father was a skilled bricklayer and carpenter, and he was employed to make repairs to the property. His mother cooked for the Parishes.

Many of the Negroes migrated North, and they wrote back stories of the "new country" where "de white folks let you do jes as you please." These stories influenced a great number of other Negroes to go North and begin life anew as servants, waiters, laborers and cooks. The Negroes who remained in the South were forced to make their own living. At the end of the war, foods and commodities had gone up to prices that were impossible for the Negro to pay. Ham, for example, cost 40¢ and 50¢ a pound; lard was 25¢; cotton was two dollars a bushel.

Douglas' father taught him all that he knew about carpentry and bricklaying, and the two were in demand to repair, remodel, or build houses for the white people. Although he never attended school, Charles Parish could calculate very rapidly the number of bricks that it would take to build a house. After the establishing of schools by the Freedmen's Bureau, Douglas' father made him go, but he did not like the confinement of school and soon dropped out. The teachers for the most part, were white, who were concerned only with teaching the ex-slaves reading, writing, and arithmetic. The few colored teachers went into the community in an effort to elevate the standards of living. They went into the churches where they were certain to reach the greatest number of people and spoke to them of their mission. The Negro teachers were cordially received by the ex-slaves who were glad to welcome some "Yankee niggers" into their midst.

Whereas the white teachers did not bother with the Negroes except in the classroom, other white men came who showed a decided interest in them. They were called "carpetbaggers" because of the type of traveling bag which they usually carried, and this term later became synonymous with "political adventurer." These men sought to advance their political schemes by getting the Negroes to vote for certain men who would be favorable to them. They bought the Negro votes or put a Negro in some unimportant office to obtain the goodwill of the ex-slaves. They used the ignorant colored minister to further their plans, and he was their willing tool. The Negro's unwise use of his ballot plunged the South further and further into debt and as a result the South was compelled to restrict his privileges.

REFERENCE

1. Personal interview with Douglas Parish, Monticello, Florida