

# In Search of the Promised Land

A SLAVE FAMILY IN THE OLD SOUTH

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NEW YORK OXFORD  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

Franklin, John Hope, and Loren Schwenger. *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

was secured on a warrant for first degree murder.<sup>1</sup> This entry is the last known mention of Henry in the historical record.



One year following the Civil War, while working as a surgeon at the Freedmen's Hospital, **Dr. John H. Rapier Jr.** died suddenly from what was described as a bilious fever. He had not yet reached his thirty-first birthday. *The Christian Recorder*, a Philadelphia newspaper, noted his passing by citing a resolution of the Reunion Literary Club of Washington, D.C., mourning "the loss of one of our most distinguished members, whose gentle, manly deportment, unexceptionable moral character and literary attainments, had secured for himself the esteem and respect of every member of this club, and that his premature death, in the full vigor of faculties, which gave promise of so much usefulness, is the occasion for deep and abiding regret."<sup>2</sup> John Rapier Jr. had packed an immense amount of experience into his thirty-one years. As a youth who had been skeptical of whether blacks could live in conditions other than slavery and dependence, he came to embrace abolitionism and to work to advance both the Union cause and the welfare of former slaves.



Following the war, **John H. Rapier Sr.** continued to live and work in Florence, Alabama, where he had been a barber for nearly forty years. In 1867, when freedmen went to the polls for the first time to elect delegates to a state constitutional convention, the elder Rapier was chosen as a voter registrar for Lauderdale County. "We will endeavor to bring to the consideration of our new duties," the

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committee that nominated him said, "a solemn sense of the great responsibilities now resting upon us as enfranchised citizens, and entering kindly feelings toward all men, regardless of antecedents, we will enter upon the discharge of our new obligations with a sincere desire to promote peace, harmony, and union."<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, however, illness struck. Rapier's son James wrote: "Father keeps poorly the Dr. had doubts as to his recovery but is more hopeful of him this morning." It was useless, for everything the elder Rapier ate turned into a green liquid and was "ejected by means of vomit." James, who was with his father at the time, told his uncle Henry in Canada that his father "insists on my telling you that he would like to see you very much and how much he would like to be at your house to have Aunt Maria cook him something he can eat." But James could not help thinking that his father would probably never see his brother Henry.<sup>4</sup> His premonition proved correct. Ten days later, at the age of sixty-one, Rapier died of stomach cancer. He bequeathed his real estate and personal property, including cash, to his former slave children, including Susan, Charles, Rebecca, Joseph, and Thomas. As he did not mention his wife, Lucretia, she was probably not still living.<sup>5</sup> An article in his hometown newspaper, the *Florence Journal*, noted that "Uncle John, as he was familiarly known by everyone in Florence, was one of the oldest inhabitants. He was ever respected by the whites as by those of his own color, and it may be truly said that he died respected [by] all classes."<sup>6</sup> Little did the editor or other white townspeople realize that Rapier struggled his entire adult life with the question of whether or not to remain in the South, and he had urged his four free-born sons to emigrate.<sup>7</sup>



During the postwar period, Sally's grandson **James Thomas Rapier** continued his efforts in behalf of freedmen and women. Returning to Florence, Alabama, after his eight years in Canada, he presided over the first political gathering of former slaves in northwestern Alabama. Following the passage of the 1867 congressional Reconstruction Acts, he advised blacks to "Proceed with calmness, moderation and intelligence." At the first Republican state convention in Montgomery, he served as chairman of the platform committee and helped draft a plank that called for free speech, free press, free schools, and equal rights for all men without regard to color. His moderate stance during the early period of Reconstruction prompted the conservative press to say "He is, in every particular, except that of race, a superior man."

Shortly after the presidential election of 1868, however, Rapier was driven from politics as well as from his home in Florence by the Ku Klux Klan. Barely escaping with his life, he remained in seclusion for nearly a year. In 1870, he reemerged as the Republican nominee for secretary of state. He lost in the midst of Klan violence, virulent attacks by Democrats, and opposition among white Republicans. As time passed, Rapier grew increasingly radical. He advanced the view that the federal government should help pay for the education of blacks. He called for the formation of a federal bureau to assist black tenant farmers and also organized the Alabama Negro Labor Union. In 1872, he won his party's nomination for Congress from the Second District, which included the capital city of Montgomery. Following a vigorous and violence-free campaign, he won a resounding victory.

Despite this marked success, his personal life remained unfulfilled. In a letter to his cousin Sarah Thomas, then living in Vicksburg, Mississippi, he lamented that for five years he had been surrounded by people who cared little for him and for whom he cared but little. He was at his office “nearly all the time. Sleep there My associations are wholly of a business character. I have not visited a family since I have been here [in Montgomery].” His life appeared to be “innocent of all those social feelings” necessary to make a person happy. “You ask if I intend to marry I reckon I must answer no. I am passed that point of life when men are most anxious to marry The days of poetry are over with me and I am settled down to the stiff prose.”<sup>8</sup>

In the Forty-third Congress, James Rapier pushed through a bill to make Montgomery a port of delivery, supported legislation to improve public education in the South, sought to curb violence against freedmen and women, and played an important role in the final passage of the 1875 Civil Rights Act.<sup>9</sup> In a campaign marred by violence and retaliation against African Americans, he lost his reelection bids in 1874 and 1876 but continued his struggle for black equality. During the early 1880s, he advocated emigration to the West. He even purchased land in Kansas (along the Kansas and Pacific Railroad) to be used for the settlement of former slaves. Increasingly, however, his health deteriorated. Before his dream of emigration could be realized, Rapier died of pulmonary tuberculosis on May 31, 1883, at the age of forty-five. At his bedside was his uncle James Thomas, who took Rapier’s body back to St. Louis, where, on June 3, 1883, he was interred in the Thomas family plot at Calvary Cemetery.<sup>10</sup>



adventurers, explorers, and men of fortune. There were also professional men: a physician, several entrepreneurs, and a member of Congress. As a slave, Sally devoted her energy and intelligence to protecting and freeing her three sons and to nurturing and guiding her grandchildren. To be sure, she possessed more opportunities than most of her fellow slaves. That is what made her, despite her color and status, an extraordinary figure. The legacy she left for her children and grandchildren was an unremitting determination to become free but in any case to remain independent, fully aware of the importance of that quality in all relations with one's fellow man.

#### NOTES

1. John Rapier Sr. to John Rapier Jr., September 15, 1856, RTP; Records of the Placer County Court, Warrant for Henry Rapier for Murder, September 22, 1856, Placer County Archives, Auburn, California; Arrest of Henry Rapier, February 13, 1859, with *ibid*.

2. *The Christian Recorder*, June 16, 1866. Rapier died May 17, 1866, in Washington, D.C. *Washington Evening Star*, May 19, 1866. Shortly before his death, he opened an account in the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company Bank in the city, depositing fifty dollars. Records of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, Signature Register, January 30, 1866, no. M816, Roll 4, National Archives.

3. "Proceedings of the Meeting of Colored People at Florence, Alabama," April 24, 1867, Wager Swayne Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

4. James Rapier to Henry Thomas, September 8, 1869, RTP.

5. Records of the Probate Court, Lauderdale County, Ala., Wills B (September 13, 1869), 78–80.

6. *Florence Journal*, September 23, 1869. He died on Saturday evening, September 18, 1869, with his son James at his side.

7. *Florence Gazette*, March 6, 1862.
8. James Rapier to Sarah Thomas, January 10, 1872, RTP.
9. The port of delivery bill made Montgomery, located on the Alabama River, a federal government port of delivery within the collection district of Mobile. Signed into law in 1874, it authorized the hiring of a deputy collector of customs. Loren Schweningen, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 124.
10. Records of the Calvary Cemetery, St. Louis, Mo., Lot no. 3, June 3, 1883, St. Louis, Mo. The authors thank Bryan Prince of North Buxton, Canada, for providing us with these records.
11. USMSPC, Warren County, Miss., Vicksburg, Fourth Ward, 1870, 247 [printed page number].
12. Register of Commissions, Secretary of State, Mississippi, 1871–1874, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.
13. United States, Congress, *House Reports*, Forty-third Congress, Second session, no. 265, “Vicksburgh Troubles” (1875), 482–85.
14. Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 190.
15. United States, Congress, *House Reports*, Forty-third Congress, Second session, no. 265, “Vicksburgh Troubles” (1875), 482–85.
16. Register of Commissions, Secretary of State, Mississippi, 1878–1881, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.
17. USMSPC, Warren County, Miss., Bovina Precinct, Beat no. 4, 1880, 561 [printed page number]. The ages listed in the census are not correct.
18. Fisher Funeral Home Records, Vicksburg, Miss., September 9, 1878–April 1, 1883, typescript prepared by Mary Ragland, 1987, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.
19. Records of the Placer County Court, Indenture, Theresa Bradford and Eliza M. Bradford to Richard Rapier, September 14, 1865, Placer County Archives, Auburn, California; Marriage License, Richard G. Rapier and Henrietta Stans, August 8, 1868, in *ibid.*; *McKenney’s District Directory, for 1879–80, Sacramento, City and County, Amador, Eldorado, Placer*