

Thornton Gray

The following item is reproduced from W.H. Snowden's 1902 booklet *Some Old Historic Landmarks of Virginia and Maryland: A Hand-Book for the Tourist Over the Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Railway*, fourth edition, pp. 70-72. Thornton Gray was born about 1825. Although the son of Mount Vernon slaves, he was probably born and brought up on the George Washington Parke Custis estate at Arlington. A "stable-hand and handyman," he married Selina Norris, a second-generation Arlington house servant in the parlor of the "big house." When fleeing the federal occupation in 1861, Mary Lee, wife of Robert E. Lee, entrusted the keys to Arlington House and the Washington heirlooms therein to Selina Gray. The Gray family remained in the vicinity of Arlington after the Civil War.

WASHINGTON'S SERVANTS.

Just before the war it was not uncommon to read in the newspapers the announcement of the death of "another of Washington's Servants. Then almost every octogenarian darkey in "Old Fawfax" claimed to have belonged to "Mars Joge," and could tell wonderful stories of old times at Mount Vernon. But of late no mention has been made of these worthies. All of them have passed over the borders and joined the ranks of the plantation armies beyond.

To the latest generation the descendants of the slave families of the Mount Vernon estate have great pride in telling that they are "some of dat breed." In this connection we cannot refrain from giving to the reader the ballad of "Thornton Gray," one of "de old sarvents" whom the writer once interviewed, and who was reputed to have been an offshoot of African royalty.



THORNTON GRAY, ONE OF WASHINGTON'S "SARVENTS."

He was an ancient colored man,
His age one hundred ten ;
He hailed from old Virginny,
And once a slave had been.

His hair was thin and silver'd,
His brow with furrows set,
Features fine cut and moulded,
And face as black as jet.

In olden times, the story ran,
That kings and noblemen,
In Afric's sultry climate,
His forefathers had been ;

And as I gazed upon him,
And closely scann'd his mien,
It seemed a trace of royalty
Full well might yet be seen.

He bow'd him low and tip'd his hat,
And laid aside his hoe,
The while I briefly interviewed
About the long ago.

"My name is Thornton Gray," he said ;
"Dey calls me 'Uncle Thorn,'
Lived mos'ly in Old Fairfax,
In Wes'mo'land was born.

"Was ris by Mars' Wilkers'n ;
Great farmer, may depend ;
Own'd all de big plantation
Dey call'd de River Bend.

"Made heaps of fine tabacca,
Had stores of corn and wheat ;
Hard labor, mind you ; but de han's
Had plenty den to eat.

"Times aint de same as den dey was ;
'Pears like dey's chang'd all round ;
De folks dat lived when I was young,
All dead and under ground.

" 'Taint long I knows for me to stay
Here after all de res' ;
I only waits de Lord's good time,
Sho'ly he knows de bes'.

"I soon shall yhear de trumpeter
Blow on his trumpet horn,

An' call me home to glory,
An' de riserickshum morn."

My good freed man, to him I said,
Of age, one hundred ten,
You might relate much history
Of former times and men.

I wait to hear the story,
Which none can tell but you,
For none have lived five score of years
And ten more added to.

You must have seen the Britishers,
And heard the cannons roar ;
"Why bless you, chil', was mos' a man,
And heard and seen de war."

And Washington, you must have seen,
That great and good hero,
Who led the Continentals !
And fought our battles through.

"Why surely I has seen him,
And know'd him well : for, boss,
I was de Ginerals sarvent ;
Took care de Ginerals' hoss!

Fine man he was for sartin,
Good friend to all de poor—
Dar's none in dese days like him,
And none, folks said, before."

Enough, I said ! I'm well repaid ;
And grasped his trembling hand—
No honor hath a man like this,
In all our glorious land !

No further did I question him
About the long ago.
And when I said to him good-by,
He took his garden hoe.

Who hath beheld our Washington,
And lived to tell us so,
Deserves as well a story
As many others do.

And hence our homely ballad,
A tribute slight to pay
To this departed colored man,
And ancient—Thornton Gray.

The James, the York, the Rappahannock and the Potomac flow from the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies through their rich and lovely valleys and mingle with Atlantic waves and form the Chesapeake, which seems a sea of diamonds with its phosphorescent lights scintillating under the twinkling stars. Virginia has nearly 2000 miles of navigable tide waters, abounding in fish and oysters and other luxuries of the sea.

Along these beautiful valleys are some grand old mansions and magnificent plantations. At the gate of one of these old homes, we saw not long ago a relic of a past age—an old decrepit darkey, leaning against the fence looking with sad and wistful eyes over the broad fields and beautiful grounds. Years had passed since I had been in this part of old Virginia, and I had no idea of meeting any one I knew. He came to me with feeble steps and bent form ; and as he looked back through the years of long separation he called me to memory and through streaming tears, said : "Lord, Massa, has you come back to de old home agin ater so many long years ?" It was old uncle Ephraim. I asked what he was doing there. "Laws, chil', I was just looking



"IT WAS OLD UNCLE EPHRIAM."



"UNCLE JOE AND AUNT DORCUS
DEY DANCED DE JIG."

ober de old place once more ; old Mistis and old Marster lies yonder in de garden, and all de young foks done gone way off. I is de las one ob de old plantation stock lef. I was thinking ob dem big old corn shuckings we uster have in old Marster's time, when I was de foreman on de plantation. Ah! dem was grand times befo de war! Big corn shuckings all de fall, plenty good things, wind up wid a great big supper, and den old Uncle Joe and Aunt Dorcus dey danced de jig for de white folks. Laws, chile, dem was good old times befo de war! Possums ain't fat nor taters ain't sweet and juicy now like dey was in dem good old days befo de war."