

## JESSIE POWELL ANTHONY

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

That Winchester once had an African-American community whose roots went back to the slave states of the South is part of the story of Jessie Powell Anthony.

Anthony was born in 1885 in Halifax County, Virginia, the youngest of twenty children born to former slaves. Her parents, Emanuel and Betty Powell, and their seven remaining children came to Winchester when Jessie was seven. Her earliest memories, however, were of Virginia and the slave stories she was told.



Jessie Belle  
Anthony (1885-  
1982) in a 1973  
Globe photo

In 1973, when she shared her story with both the Winchester Historical Society (printed in *The Winchester Star*) and *Boston Globe*,<sup>2</sup> she said that her paternal grandparents were herded on a slave ship in Africa. Her grandfather is believed to have been thrown overboard on the voyage to Virginia. Her father was safely strapped to his mother's back, and the two survived the ordeal of the voyage.

In Virginia her father assumed the name of Powell. Both her parents suffered disfigurements rendered by their master to distinguish them as their rightful property. "My mother's master cut off her thumb so that he could tell his slaves. My father had a big scar over one of his eyes so his master would know him," she told the *Globe*.

"My mother and father remembered seeing their parents sold and sent down the Mississippi," the *Globe* quoted her saying.

Born free, Anthony was also born blind. She miraculously gained her vision at age three or four, sitting in a doorway in the farm in Virginia. "My mother used to sit me in a doorway in the sunlight," she said. One day, sitting there in the doorway, "the sound of chickens rustling somehow turned into fantastic, beautiful music. She had a feeling her eyes were being tenderly massaged. Incredibly she saw her mother for the first time and cried out in great joy, 'I can see. I can see.'"

At first unconvinced, her mother tested her by asking what kind of a dress she was wearing and what she was holding. Jessie answered correctly, proving she could see. "Jessie was hugged and tossed into the air again and again by her father, who had sped on his horse back to the barnyard at a gallop when he heard the news. The whole countryside came from far and wide to witness this remarkable event," *The Winchester Star* reported. This experience left Anthony with a profound faith which she loved to express through singing spirituals.

## LIFE IN WINCHESTER

When the family came to Winchester, she said, “We were the pioneers.” At that time, she recalled, there were only four African-American families in the area. The Squires had been first, followed by the Barksdales, also from Virginia.

Her brothers, she said, worked as coachmen and her mother and sisters as maids. Occupations noted for family members in the censuses include servant, washwoman, janitor, house painter, and factory laborer. The Powell women being excellent cooks, Anthony said, they were called upon to cater dinners for important occasions. “Once they cooked for John D. Rockefeller,” she said for the *Globe*. “But I never liked to cook because they made me do the dishes.”

At that time there were plenty of jobs for servants in local homes. “At the time of her youth she believed Winchester to be the wealthiest town in Massachusetts,” the *Star* reported.

While a student, she attended the Chapin School and then the Wadleigh and experienced some discrimination. According to *The Winchester Star* story, “She vividly remembers having a white class mate stand up to tell his teacher he thought blacks were dirty and immoral. The teacher granted Jessie a rebuttal. Jessie reminded her white classmates that the white man’s stealing of the blacks from Africa was surely not moral and she told them of the then current news of a newborn white baby found floating in the Charles River. ‘Was that clean or moral?’ she asked.”

Distressed by such incidents, she decided not to attend Winchester High School but rather to go to Hampton College in the South. But things seemed strange there, and she came back to Winchester with a new husband.<sup>3</sup>

Her husband died at a young age, according to Anthony, because he was a brass cutter and inhaled brass cuttings. In 1910, she was living with her mother, sister Rachel (a cook), and two-year-old daughter on Cross St. In 1920, she was working as a housekeeper and, like her siblings, was living on Florence Street with her daughter Temperance Jackson, who was the first African-American girl born in Winchester to graduate from Winchester High School (and went on to Howard University and B.U. graduate school).

## SPIRITUALS

The Powells, like other African-American families in Winchester, were founding members of the New Hope Baptist Church on Cross Street. Anthony became a leader of the spiritual singing and evangelistic work. This extended beyond the bounds of Winchester.

“While at her employer’s home in Maine,” she told the *Globe*, “a guest overheard her singing the slave songs of her parents and recognized that she could make a unique contribution to this country’s musical heritage.

“Subsequently, Mrs. Anthony performed at many churches and music festivals. At a festival in

Nova Scotia, she received a request to sing for a visitor who was recuperating from an illness. “‘It was King George of England,’ she said.” (King George V was visiting at the resort home of his sister.)

In her 80s, a great-grandmother, Anthony moved to a senior housing home in Dorchester. It was there that she reflected on her family and life in Winchester, ever faithful and devoted to her music. Concluding the *Globe* interview, she was quoted as saying, “I live by the grace of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 23, 2006. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> “Fran VerPlanck, “Miracle Restored Eyesight of Baptist Church Founder,” *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 25, 1973; “Her spirituals recall parents’ years of bondage,” by Eleanor Pingree, *Boston Evening Globe*, Jan. 22, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Powell married Cornelius George Jackson in 1907 and George Anthony in 1915, both marriages taking place in Winchester.