

EXPLORING SALLY THOMAS AND LAUNDRY PAST AND PRESENT

TEACHER TOOL 3

The following is from pages 14-16 of *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South*. The excerpt reveals some details about Sally Thomas's life in virtual freedom and about the operation of her laundry business in Tennessee. Read the excerpt aloud to your students.

One advantage Sally quickly discovered: Nashville offered good opportunities for a few privileged blacks. Even as a slave, Robert Rentfro, better known as "Black Bob," obtained permission from the county court "to sell Liquor and Victuals on his Good Behavior." Later, he bought his freedom and became the proprietor of a popular inn and livery stable at the sign of the Cross Keys on the public square. Freed by her owner, Thomas Malloy, mulatto woman Sophy was also able to arrange for the freedom of her two brothers after Malloy's death. She called upon John Cockrill and entreated him to pay nine hundred dollars to Malloy's estate. Cockrill agreed, and later acknowledged that Sophy has completely reimbursed him. Temperance Crutcher, another slave born and raised in Nashville, purchased her freedom and successfully petitioned to remain in Tennessee as a free woman of color. "Nashville is, and always has been her home," she explained, "and is the home of her kindred and friends."

Shortly after her arrival, Sally obtained permission from her owner to hire herself out as a laundress, a practice common among urban slaves. This meant she could approach employers, arrange for work to be done, and retain a portion of her earnings. Sometime later, she rented a frame house on the corner of Deaderick and Cherry streets, in the central business district. There, she established her business, which specialized in washing and cleaning men's and women's fine apparel. She converted the front room into a laundry, where she manufactured her own soap, blending fats, oils, alkali, and salt in a small vat.

As the city grew during the 1820's, Sally built up a loyal clientele. During the morning, she made her rounds to the homes and businesses, collecting sheets, towels, dresses, shirts, trousers, coats, hats, jackets, and undergarments. She then returned to begin the arduous process of sorting and cleaning. She specialized in fine linens and clothing made of velvet, silk, and cashmere. Despite a recession during the early 1820s, the wealth of white residents rose dramatically during the decade. Consequently, the demand for Sally's services increased. As her reputation for high-quality work spread, Sally Thomas, as she now called herself, had more business than she could handle.

Even during these early years, it was apparent that Sally was not a slave in the usual sense. Though she was supervised by a member of the Thomas family, he permitted her to come and go as she pleased, and found such an arrangement advantageous and profitable. Part of the advantage to him was that he did not have to worry about negotiating hiring contracts or receiving his monthly payments. As time passes, Sally became what contemporaries termed a "quasi-slave." The term was used to describe slaves who had been permitted freedom by their master but who had not obtained a formal deed of emancipation from the state—an ambiguous and contradictory position to be in. Sally moved about freely, rented her own house, ran her own business, negotiated her own contracts, bought and sold various items, and possessed her own

property. It was, of course, against the law for slaves to act in such a manner, but residents of Nashville valued Sally's services enough that they either did not care or might not have known that she was in fact a slave.

Sally dreamed of someday saving enough money to purchase her children as well as herself out of bondage. But even with her drive and ambition, this seemed highly unlikely. Her income rarely exceeded fifteen or twenty dollars a month. Although she was eventually spared from paying "freedom dues"—the specified amount that slaves paid to owners for the privilege of hiring themselves out—she did have various household and business expenses. Meanwhile, young slave children were selling for as much as three hundred dollars, and handsome, intelligent, "likely" women such as Sally Thomas, despite being older, might bring four or five hundred dollars. Even if she could save enough to purchase her children and herself, it would take many years. (pp. 14-16)

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