

[E. W. Evans, Brick Layer & Plasterer]

E. W. Evans (Negro)

610 Parsons Street, S.W.

Brick Layer & Plasterer

by

Geneva Tonsill

“My parents were slaves on the plantation of John H. Hill, a slave owner in Madison, Georgia. I wuz born on May 21, 1855. I wuz owned and kept by J. H. Hill until just befo' surrender. I wuz a small boy when Sherman left here at the fall of Atlanta. He come through Madison on his march to the sea and we chillun hung out on the front fence from early morning 'til late in the evening, watching the soldiers go by. It took most of the day.

“My master wuz a Senator from Georgia, 'lected on the Whig ticket. He served two terms in Washington as Senator. His wife, our mistress, had charge of the slaves and plantation. She never seemed to like the idea of having slaves. Of course, I never heard her say she didn't want them but she wuz the one to free the slaves on the place befo' surrender. Since that I've felt she didn't want them in the first place. “ The next week after Sherman passed through Madison, Miss Emily called the five wimmen women that wuz on the place and tole them to stay 'round the house and attend to things as they had always done until their husbands come back. She said they were free and could go wherever they wanted to. See , she decided this befo surrender and tole them they could keep up just as befo' until their husbands could look after a place for them to stay. She meant that they could rent from her if they wanted to. In that number of wimmen women wuz my mother, Ellen, who worked as a seamstress for Mrs. Hill. The other wimmen women wuz aunt Lizzie and aunt

Library of Congress

Dinah, the washer- wimmen women , aunt Liza , a seamstress to help my mother, and aunt Caroline , the nurse for Miss Emily's chilluns.

"I never worked as a slave because I wuzn't ole 'nough. In 1864, when I wuz about nine years ole they sent me on a trial visit to the plantation to give me an idea of what I had to do some day.

2

The place I'm talkin' about, when I wuz sent for the tryout, wuz on the outskirts of town. It wuz a house where they sent chilluns out ole 'nough to work for a sort of trainin'. I guess you'd call it the trainin' period. When the chilluns wuz near ten years ole they had this week's trial to get them used to the work they'd have to do when they reached ten years. At the age of ten years they wuz then sent to the field to work. They'd chop, hoe, pick cotton , and pull fodder, corn, or anything else to be done on the plantation. I stayed at the place a whole week and wuz brought home on Saturday. That week's work showed me what I wuz to do when I wuz ten years ole. Well, this wuz just befo Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea and I never got a chance to go to the plantation to work agin, for Miss Emily freed all on her place and soon after that we wuz emancipated.

"The soldiers I mentioned while ago that passed with Sherman carried provisions, hams, shoulders, meal, flour , and other food. They had their cooks and other servants. I 'member seeing a woman in that crowd of servants. She had a baby in her arms. She hollered at us Chillun and said, 'You chilluns git off dat fence and go learn yore ABC's.' I thought she wuz crazy telling us that , for we had never been 'lowed to learn nothing at all like reading a writing. I learned but it wuz after surrender and I wuz over tens years ole.

"It wuz soon after the soldiers passed with Sherman that Miss Emily called in all the wimmen women servants and told them they could take their chillun [?] to the cabin and stay there until after the war. My father, George, had gone with Josh Hill, a son of Miss

Library of Congress

Emily's to wait on him. She told my mother to take us to that cabin until a place could be made for us.

3

"I said I wuz born a slave but I wuz too young to know much about slavery. I wuz the property of the Hill family from 1855 to 1865, when freedom wuz declared and they said we wuz free.

"My master had four sons, three of them went to the army. Legree Hill, the youngest son, went to the war at the age of eighteen years. He wuz killed in the Kennesaw mountains. His mother seemed sad over his going because he was too young and ran off and went. A sharpshooter killed him. His father went for him. He wuz buried in the Yankee line, wrapped in a blanket. He had some of the money he had when he wuz killed, on him. He wuz dressed like a Yankee, in their uniform. Of course, nothing much wuz said about it, as I 'member, cause he wasn't supposed to be a Yankee at all. He wuz fighting against the Yankees. When he wuz so stirred up to go to the war he told his mother that he wanted to go because he wanted to bring Lincoln's head back and he wuz going after his head.. He didn't get to come back. Another son, Clarence, a calvaryman, wuz the oldest son. He had two horses shot out from under him but he escaped himself.

"I left Madison and went to Athens, Georgia. I learned the trade of brick masonry and plasterin'. I moved to Athens on the second of April in 1877. I went there to work for a contractor, Nasus McGinty. I stayed in Athens from April, 1877, until August in 1880. I then moved to Atlanta. This wuz the beginning of life for me in Atlanta. I have been here ever since, working at my trade, except for short intervals I went out to work, out of town.

"I built this house in 1887 and moved in the same year on December 27. At first it had only two rooms but I've added to it until now we have ten or twelve rooms. My house now is somewhat larger than Colonel Hill's house where the family lived who owned us as slaves.

4

Library of Congress

"I have worked at my trade until I got too old to work. Of course, now I do a little piddling 'round, nothin' much though, for you can see I'm a old man and can't do much.

"I helped build Stone Hall and the Work Shop on the Atlanta University campus. It is now used by the Morris Brown College since they changed to the Atlanta University System. I worked with Alex Hamilton and Son in the year 1888 in the building trade. I had a lot of building in College Park in the Military School. I wuz never idle, as there wuzn't so many brick layers and plasterers at that time. I kept quite busy. I did brick work on the Y. M. C. A. building, under Alex Hamilton. No, I don't recall any special handicap or discrimination in my building, except in the early eighties, when there wuz but few Negroes working as brick layers and plasters, I experienced somewhat a handicap being colored. This wuz when buildin' wuz low and I worked under a white contractor. No matter how good a Negro wuz he wuz the last to be hired and then he wuz given some minor job. I saw that even if a Negro wuz a better brick layer, all the white workers wuz given the first jobs and after they wuz all supplied, then the Negro workers got what wuz left.

"Most all of the brick layers that wuz active when I wuz young are dead now. [?] I wuz talking the other day to one of the old heads, West Todd, who wuz in my crowd in the early days and we could name only four of us living now.

"My wife wuz born in Cassville, after the war. She is seventy-five years old though. We wuz born about one hundred miles apart. She has been in Atlanta since a little girl. I bet she could give you a good story herself. We had nine children and seven of them live now. My baby is over 35 years old. He lives in the house with me and my wife. So you see I'm a old man, having a baby 5 that old. " My church life started in Atlanta. I joined the Friendship Baptist Church when I wuz twenty-seven years old. That has been fifty-seven years ago. I remember when they first started Spelman College in Friendship. That wuz a long time ago.

Library of Congress

"I've seen Atlanta grow from a town of woods, pig and cow paths to a great city of paved streets, tall buildings and beautifully lighted streets. You wouldn't believe it but there wuz creeks and branches running along where the main part of town is now. There is a creek under the First National Bank Building and I 'member when they wuz building that bank they got a alligator out of the creek. It wuz small as I recall now, but 'magine that [was?] all along where the fine buildings is now, and to think I've lived to see all of this growth.

"I've witnessed some trying times here too. I saw the riot and the great fire that practically burned up a part of Atlanta. I saw the toll of the riot - hatred, prejudice, and murder. I wuz working out on what is now Highland Avenue at the time. Soldiers had to be sent out and they wuz supposed to protect everyone but some of them didn't uphold the law. There wuz a gang of soldiers, and I say gang because that is just what I feel they wuz from the way they acted, dressed in uniform of Uncle Sam and sent out because they wuz supposed to keep the law and there they wuz breaking it. They wuz acting like ordinary, revengeful people, pouring out their hatred for the Negro. Those soldiers came down the streets shouting and singing: 'We are rough, we are tough, We are rough, we are tough We Kill niggers and never get enough.'

That gang of soldiers went right on their marching and when they 6 got to McGruder Street they killed a Negro. They patrolled Randolph Street and went on down Irwin. They seemed bent on showing their wrath against the Negro. That wuz a pitiful time. Negroes wuz shot down without any cause and they wuz scared to be seen on the street. We had no one, it seemed, on our side , for there wuz the soldiers shouting and singing: 'We are rough, we are tough, we kill niggers and never get enough.' There they wuz really adding to the riot, more hatred, deaths, and not doing what they wuz supposed to do. At the time of the riot they claimed that only one white man wuz killed and thirteen Negroes. But it was rumored here - I don't know it to be true and don't know whether I ought to repeat it - but it was said the white undertaker shops wuz filled with victims of the riot and they wuz burying them at night so the Negroes wouldn't know how many wuz killed. We had no way of knowing

Library of Congress

whether this wuz true or not. There wuz a man in South Atlanta, who, it is said, killed two or three white men before he wuz captured. Really he wuzn't caught, for he barred hisself in a house and shot everyone who came near the house and the only way they got him wuz to burn the house and he wuz burned up in it.

“The same year that McKinley came through here as president, they burned a Negro, Hogue Smith. The Georgian newspaper wasn't called the Georgian then but the editor of what is now the Georgian ran a excursion down to Fairburn to see the burning of that Negro. That wuz something awful.

“Well, I'm glad I've lived to see a better understanding between the two races and I do believe in not many years to come there will be no more lynching of the Negroes and people just like us going to witness them like as though they were places of 7 amusement. I know the mean, low, ignorant Negro is the one who really causes most of the trouble between the races , but now that they are getting more civilized and the whites have come to realize they are trying to imitate them and make good citizens, they are spending large sums of money for their education and making them fit to live with. “