

ROSS, ELIZABETH.

JOE, AFRICAN BORN.

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Elizabeth Ross,  
Investigator,  
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Joe, an Aged African

About the middle of the 1870's there died at the home of Mrs. Sallie Keys an aged negro who had been a native of Africa. The Keys home was on a portion of the ground now owned by the Sequoyah Club, adjoining Buffington on the bank of the Illinois River. Old Joe had once been a slave of the Keys' family and after receiving his freedom he had no place to go and lived at the home of his former owners until his death.

In years long past there were several of the older people of the present Welling locality, and of the Park Hill locality, who well remembered the old man who lived to a great age. Of course his exact age was not known but from appearances he seemed to be at least ninety years old. The name Joe had been given him after he was brought to the United States.

A native of one of the African countries, Joe had been captured by slave dealers when he was a youth. He had a

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distinct recollection of the region in which he had spent his boyhood days, and sometimes spoke of the customs of his people and of the sunny and warm climate. Many years had passed since old Joe had been carried away from his far-distant native land, but he never forgot its scenes and at times expressed the hope that he could some day return to the place where he had lived with his people.

Old Joe spoke the English language with a peculiar accent. As his years increased Joe became more feeble and rarely walked more than a quarter of a mile from home. He was bent and wrinkled, the oldest person in a wide region of country.

As was recalled by those who once knew old Joe, he was the most highly skilled weaver of baskets throughout the Tahlequah District. He usually made large baskets, such as many of the people used about the barns and cribs, carrying corn when feeding livestock. These baskets, which held a bushel of corn, were woven from finely split strips of the whiteoak tree, and were very durable. So closely were these baskets woven that it was said "Old Joe's baskets would almost

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hold water". Long after the old man died some of his baskets were yet in use. It has been said that old Joe, as a boy in Africa, learned how to weave baskets, though in that country cane and reeds were probably the materials more often used. The shape in which the baskets were made was peculiar to Joe, the pattern probably being the same he had used in making large baskets in his native land. A number of persons have engaged in making baskets since Joe gave up his weaving on account of advanced age, but no one ever equaled him in making durable and symmetrical baskets. Eventually, old Joe failed greatly in strength and became unable to leave his room in the old house on the bank of the Illinois River, and at length he died. Some of the freedmen of the locality prepared a grove, not in the burying ground used by these people but nearby the Keys' home. The Keys' family adhered to an old custom and had a burial spot a short distance from the home, and consequently a spot was selected near the top of the high bank of the Illinois, where one other interment had at some time been made.

A small slab of gray limestone was placed at the head

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of the grave, and probably yet stands where once the trees and grass grew densely. Some of the older people sometimes expressed the belief that old Joe may have been the son of an African chief, or leader.