JAMES PORTER
By
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In 1826, James Porter was born in Charleston, South Carolina, of free parents. At an early age, his parents dedicated him for a missionary. Because of an accident which left him crippled, he was unable to carry out this task. Therefore, he concentrated on receiving the best education available which consisted of ancient and modern languages. In addition to those studies, James also studied vocal and instrumental music under George O. Robinson of Charleston.\(^1\) The remarkable talents Porter exhibited in music would eventually become the catalyst for his migration to Savannah, Georgia.

In 1855, a mission for urban blacks was founded in Savannah by Reverend Sherod Kennerly among others. A musician was desired for the mission in order to instruct their undisciplined choir. "In Charleston, South Carolina, there lived a free man of color who had been throughly instructed in music—vocal and instrumental— and had been a teacher to the people there for some time."\(^2\) Reverend Kennerly, having been previously aware of Porter's exceptional musical skills, petitioned him to become musician for St. Stephen's, the Episcopal mission. Porter promptly accepted this invitation, and he and his wife, Elizabeth, moved to Savannah in 1856. This was the beginning of an industrious career for Porter.

As time passed, James Porter proved to be an effective musician whose orderliness and organization was not surpassed by any other. Because of his overwhelming influence in the growth of St. Stephen's, he was eventually made a senior warden within the church.

\(^1\)Hoskins, Charles, Black Episcopalians In Savannah; Georgia, Charles Lwanga Hoskins @ 1983 pg.54

\(^2\)Gordon, A. S., The Georgia Negro; Ann Arbor, Edwards Brother's Inc. @ 1937 pg.403
As senior warden, Porter was frequently called upon to address issues of concern. On one such occasion, January 12, 1865, Porter and twenty-two other black leaders were interviewed by General Sherman here in Savannah. Porter emphasized to General Sherman that blacks would only benefit from freedom if they were given land to work and, thus, live independently of whites. This address to General Sherman was reportedly fundamental in his issuing Special Field Order Number 15 which set aside the coastal islands for blacks.\(^1\) Although this address produced positive sideaffects for the black community on a whole, Porter himself suffered injustice and was denied any further upward mobility in St. Stephen's. Porter's application for ordination to Diaconate, which had been previously accepted and supported by the Standing Committee of the Diocese, was blantly refused by Bishop Elliot, a white clergyman. In addition to this, he also refused to license Porter as a lay reader although on numerous occasions Porter had been placed in charge of the congregation. As a result of this injustice, Mr. Porter became extremely disillusioned with the Episcopal domination, and he began to distance himself from the mission.

James Porter, having been a music teacher, once again decided to pursue this interest. After the Civil War, he opened an eighth-grade private school for the purpose of educating young black males here in Savannah. The school, which boasted a daily attendance of 450 males, was located in the Bryan's Trade Office.\(^2\) Mr. Porter's reputation as a pious, efficient educator proceeded him throughout the city.

\(^1\)DeBolt, Margaret W., Savannah: Historical Portrait; Virginia Beach, The Donning Company Inc. @ 1976 pg. 87

\(^2\)Hoskins, Charles, Black Episcopalians In Savannah; Georgia, Charles Lwanga Hoskins @ 1983 pg. 54
As a result of his widespread favorable recognition, Porter was appointed principal for the first public school for blacks here in Savannah. The school was opened in 1878 by the Savannah Board of Education when the old Scarbrough Mansion on West Broad Street was made available by Wymerly Jones DeRenne of Wormsloe.1

Mr. Porter not only proved he could function in the educational circles, but he also functioned productively in the political realm. In 1866, he was elected president of a Negro political association which meet in Augusta, Georgia, to "discuss and increase" the political and civic rights of Negroes in Georgia.2 The delegates appointed a board and elected a superintendent to supervise the establishment of schools for Negroes in Georgia. This was seen as a major accomplishment by the black community here in Savannah, and as a result, Mr. Porter was urged to seek election for the State legislature. Propagandist material, such as "The Loyal Georgian" written by Reverend Simms further encouraged Porter to pursue a position as a Negro legislator. He was victorious in the election, and serves in the legislature from 1868-1870. As an able, conscientious legislator, he introduced many bills to secure and protect the rights of the black community. Mr. Porter was concerned with blacks enjoying the rights that the end of the Civil War had brought.

Upon the end of his tenure, Mr. Porter returns to Savannah. It is at this time that he pursued an ordination of minister by the local A.M.E. church. His first pastoral assignment was in Thomasville, Georgia, where he also became the first principal of the public school for Negroes. Mr. Porter took his educational accomplishments one step further and wrote a book entitled, English Grammars for Beginners. Subsequently, his second pastoral assignment was in Yazoo, Mississippi. While there, he also becomes principal of their public school.3
James Porter traveled extensively due to his various religious assignments. His journey encompassed such places as Canada, Bermuda, New York, and Florida. For this reason it is difficult to trace his exact history. The facts which I did find where his experiences while here in Savannah, for which I am sure that limit his accomplishments. If there were more time to explore his past, I would certainly attempt to trace his route of travel.

Nevertheless, the Reverend James Porter left an important legacy to Savannah, Georgia. His various organization of civic groups such as the Mutual Benevolent Society proved beneficial in improving the life of Negroes here in Savannah. He was not afraid to publically demand equality for all in this city. It is rumored that Porter was confined to a wheelchair, and ,thus, spoke so feverently because he knew that people wouldn't physically harm him.. Whether this is true or not, it is important to give tribute to this dedicated, articulate, well-educated man of color. Having weathered the storm, Mr. Porter departed this life in September, 1896, in New York City.

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1 DeBolt, Margaret W., Savannah: Historical Portrait; Virginia Beach, The Donning Company Inc. @ 1976 pg.87
2 Perdue, Robert E., The Negro in Savannah; 1865-1900; New York, Exposition Press @ 1973 pg.48
3 DuBois, W.E.B., Black Reconstruction in America; New York @ 1935 pg.506

1 The Colored Tribune, February 26, 1876; Volume I, No.35 pg.2
2 Estate: File No.240, Estate of James Porter, Date; 1896 Chatham County Courthouse, Probate Court
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