

“AN AWFUL DAY”: VIRGINIA, DECEMBER 1862

*Clifton Johnson:*  
*from* Battleground Adventures

At the time of the battle, this free black man was a barrel maker in Fredericksburg, and when Clifton Johnson interviewed him in 1913 he was still working at his cooperage there. Johnson referred to him as “The Colored Cooper,” but he has since been identified as Joseph Lawson, born in 1831.

---

THE COLORED COOPER<sup>1</sup>

ME AND my wife was both free born. We could have gone away befo’ the battle, but we had a house hyar in Fredericksburg and four small chil’en, and I had work in town makin’ barrels. So we stayed all the whole time. There was n’t many who did that.

As soon as the Yankees got hyar the slaves began to run away from their mistresses and masters. They went by hundreds. You’d see ’em gittin’ out of hyar same as a rabbit chased by a dog. Some carried little bundles tied up, but they could n’t tote much. Often one of the women would walk along carrying a child wrapped up in a blanket. Fifteen miles from hyar they got to the Potomac, and the Yankee gunboats would take ’em right to Washington. Then they’d pile in wherever they could git. They never come back this way.

A good many of the Rebel soldiers stole off, too, so they could git into the Yankee lines, and not have to fight.

We had such cold weather that December when the battle was fought that the ice formed quite thick on a pond up hyar in the early days of the month. I promised Mr. Roe, who carried on butchery, that I’d help draw to fill his icehouse. He was to start work on the 13th. The night before was cold—

<sup>1</sup>That his years were many was evident in his stooping form and thin white hair, but he was still working. I visited him in the shop where he was making barrels as of yore, and he continued at his task while he told his story.

**Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?**

Sign up now at [storyoftheweek.loa.org](http://storyoftheweek.loa.org) to receive our weekly alert so you won't miss a single story!

bitter cold. I wanted to be at the pond early, and when a noise waked me, after I'd been asleep a good long time, I thought it must be near about daybreak. So I got up and went to the barn and fed my horse. But what I'd heard was the Yankees fixin' to come over hyar from the other side of the Rappahannock on pontoon bridges.

Colonel Lang was camped up the lane, and pretty soon he marched right past my door with one thousand Confederate troops. They went down in intrenchments along the river. Then the old signal gun went off, and there was somethin' doin'. I did n't know what it meant—a gun goin' off at that time in the morning. Lang killed about seventy-five men who were makin' the pontoon bridges—swept 'em off clean as a whistle—but later in the day the Yankees come across in their boats and swept him off.

Early in the morning word was sent around that they was goin' to shell the town, and they done it, too. But I did n't git no warning and did n't know a thing of it till I saw people running. Some ran with their nightclothes on. They did n't have any time to play, I tell you. All that could, got out into the country and the woods was full of 'em—white and colored. But I stayed in the town. I think there was two hundred Yankee cannon over the river on the hills. The shelling begun about five o'clock, as near as I can come at it, and the gunners could shoot the bombs and balls just where they wanted to. I know two people was killed dead in bed that morning—an old man and an old woman. We had rough times hyar. I don't want any mo' of that bumbarding in this world. I don't want it in the next world either, if I'm ever able to git there.

Tom Knox who owned the hotel had a narrow escape. He got up when the signal gun fired and put on his clothes as quick as he could and got out of town on foot. He left everything he had behind him, and he was hardly out of the house when a shell come in and split his pillow open. It did n't hurt the bed, but they tell me a knife could n't have cut that pillow into two parts any better than the shell did. The shell was lookin' for Mr. Knox, but it did n't git him. It would have split *him* open if he'd stayed there. Yes, fifteen or twenty minutes longer in his bed would have fixed him.

The neighbors come into my house when the shells begun

to fly. Oh! we had the greatest quantity of women and children there. The house was full. They all wanted to have plenty of company so if any of 'em got hurt the others could help 'em. By and by a solid shot—a twelve-pounder—come right through my house. The Yankees had been firin' a right smart while, and I s'pose the sun was 'bout half an hour high. I was settin' up by the fire with some of the others in my bedroom. The ball cut one of the big house timbers plumb in two, and I never saw so much dirt flyin' around in my life. It took the end off the bureau just as clean as you could with a circular saw, and it left dust and everything else all over the room as if some one had been sowin' seed. Ah, man! I never want to see that pass over no mo'. It was terrible.

I had a splendid cellar under my house, and we all went down into that. We did n't have no breakfast. But I did n't bother my mind at all about that. I was n't hungry a bit. I was already filled up with skeer. The chil'en would have liked breakfast, but 'deed and they did n't git it. They was not so skeered as the grown folks because they did n't know the danger. The older people was just skeered to death, all hands of 'em, and some was mo' uneasy 'bout the chil'en than they was 'bout themselves. We had a tejjious time of it with nothin' to do but talk of how the shells was running.

That was an awful day—awful day, but the firin' stopped up some by noon, and we all come up and took a peep. I went out in the back yard where I could look and see the Yankees like bees on them heights across the river. A ball had struck a hay-stack I had piled up in my lot, and I expected my horse would be killed tied right there in the stable, but he wa'n't hurt a bit. The town seemed to be deserted. I walked up as far as the corner, and looked up and down and could n't see a soul—man or woman, cat or dog. The neighbors stayed at our house until night, and then they went home and give the chil'en something to eat, I reckon.

Next day the place was full of Yankee troops. One of the citizens had a good deal of whiskey in his cellar, and I had helped hide it. The cellar had a brick floor, and we took up a part of it and dug a hole. All the liquor was in jimmy-johns, and we put the whole parcel of 'em down in the ground, covered 'em up with dirt, and laid back the bricks. Nobody would

have known anything was buried there if they'd walked over that hyar cellar floor all day. Some one must have told, for the Irish brigade found the whiskey, and the men got so drunk they did n't know what they was doing.

The Rebels was on Marye's Heights. That was a hot place—a hot place! The Yankees never had no chance to win there. They kept chargin' a stone wall at the foot of the Heights. But Lord 'a' mercy! they was all cut to pieces every time. Some got up to the wall so they could put their hands on it, but they couldn't git no further. That wall still stands, and when there comes a rain they say the blood stains show on it even yet.

One of the leading Southern generals in this fight was Stonewall Jackson—you've heard talk of him. He was a plague, he was a honey, old Stonewall was—he was a honey! He wanted his men to take off their pants and just have on drawers so he'd know 'em. They would n't do it, and I don't blame 'em. They did n't have much to take off nohow, I reckon, and it was winter weather. Jackson's men did n't wear no shoes. Instead, they had on each foot a piece of leather tied up behind and before with leather strings. I found one of those foot protectors where they camped. Old Stonewall was a terrible man. He did n't think anything of marching his troops thirty mile in a night. They had the hardest time of any soldiers I heard of in the war. Ha, ha! do you know what kind of food he gave 'em? Three times a day each man got one year of corn—a raw year of corn. They did n't have to stop marching to eat it, but gnawed and chewed it as they tramped along.

I went to the battlefield and took a look around when things got cool, and I can tell you I don't never want to see no mo' war in my day. The battlefield 'peared like somebody had been doin' something—it 'peared awful bad! The dead was scattered around, and some looked like they was fast asleep. When a man had been hit by a shell that exploded it bust him up in such little pieces you would n't 'a' known he was ever the shape of a man. A good many bodies was all laid in a row side of the stone wall with blankets over their faces. I saw some old gray fellers among the dead. They had no business to be in the war at their age. Out in front of the stone wall was the Yankees where they'd fallen one 'pon top of t' other.

The Southern troops took possession of the town after the

battle. Some of 'em was so smoked up I did n't know whether they was white men or black men. They was nasty and dirty, and their clothes was dreadful. If a Rebel wanted a good pair of pants or shoes he had to shoot a Yankee to git 'em. Every Union man that was killed was stripped, and you often could n't tell the Rebels in their borrowed clothing from the Northern soldiers.

A heap of 'em on both sides suffered mightily for food. Some had the rashions but no chance to cook what they had. 'Bout noon one day two Rebel soldiers come up to our house off of the river, and they said to my wife, "Aunty, we've got some fish we want you to fry."

They'd been on picket duty. The Rebel pickets was on this side of the river and the Yankee pickets on the other side layin' there watchin' one another, and these fellers had put in some of their time fishing. They'd caught a mess of herrings, but they did n't have no salt nor nothing to cook 'em with. So my wife took a piece of meat and fried the herrings nicely and gave the men some bread to eat with their fish. Their rashions could n't have been much. Some of the soldiers pulled up wild onions and e't 'em.