Frank Johnson's Band [1]

Frank Johnson's Band

by Thomas C. Parramore, 2006; Revised October 2022.

Frank Johnson's Band was a popular brass ensemble of black musicians that played frequently at health spas, balls, tournaments, state fairs, and other occasions from the 1830s to about 1870. Organizer and leader Frank Johnson was said to have been born enslaved on a Roanoke River [2] plantation in Northampton County [3] in 1774. He earned enough as a fiddler to purchase his freedom, along with that of his wife and children. Johnson's band included some 15 members, all or most of whom were his sons and nephews. "Old Frank," who conducted in a stovepipe hat and spike-tailed coat, could play any instrument and was a fine dancer, sometimes performing at balls in that specialty. He also called the numbers for square dances and reels.

Johnson's group was a favorite among well-to-do planting enslavers and was said to perform only for Democrats [4]. The last known appearance of the band seems to have been at a tournament in Halifax [5] in 1866. The band had dispersed by 1871, by which time Old Frank, at the age of 97, was reportedly residing in Tarboro.

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