

Johnson, John Lewis ^[1]

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by William T. Auman and David D. Scarboro, 1988

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John Lewis Johnson, physician, druggist, and dental surgeon, was a founder and leader of the Unionist secret society known as the Heroes of America ^[2], or "Red Strings," during the Civil War ^[3] and Reconstruction ^[4]. Born in Philadelphia, he was the son of Dr. Henry M. Johnson of Lynchburg, Va., and Hannah Lewis Johnson of New York.

Some time in his youth Johnson moved to Virginia, and from there to Lexington, N.C., in 1841. In 1843 he began to study medicine with Dr. William Dillon Lindsay of Lexington, and in 1845 he returned to Philadelphia to attend Wilson's Medical School. After practicing medicine and selling patent medicines in Virginia, he moved back to Lexington in 1855 and went into the drug business with Dr. Samuel Pendleton. Johnson may have experienced hard times, for the 1860 census describes him as a brickmaker. In 1860 he moved to Forsyth County ^[5] and established a practice in Winston, living in the village that is now called Union Cross.

The Civil War interrupted Johnson's fledgling practice in Winston, and in 1862 he served with the Confederate Army as an assistant surgeon under his old teacher, Dr. Lindsay. The circumstances of his enlistment are obscure, but he may have been conscripted or enlisted to avoid conscription, as his strong Unionist ^[6] sympathies suggest that he would not have joined voluntarily. He served with the Army of Northern Virginia until after Fredericksburg, when he and Dr. Lindsay were captured. Johnson may have contrived to be captured because he was quickly exchanged.

Early in 1863 he began his career as a leading organizer of the Heroes of America, a secret society dedicated to the Union cause that arose in 1861 in the "Quaker ^[7]" counties of Randolph ^[8], Davidson ^[9], Forsyth ^[5], and Guilford ^[10], close to Johnson's home. Johnson may have been a member of the organization from its creation; certainly from 1863 to 1869 he was one of its most active agents. In 1863, under cover of a job as a druggist in the Confederate hospital in Raleigh, Johnson took the lead in spreading the Heroes of America to many counties in central and eastern North Carolina, and also probably crossed into the Union lines at New Bern and Beaufort to establish contact between the society and the Union's occupying forces. He strongly supported the peace movement ^[11] led by William W. Holden ^[12], editor of the *Raleigh North Carolina Standard*, and participated in a peace meeting in southern Wake County ^[13] on 23 July 1863.

When the Heroes of America was exposed by the Confederates in June and July 1864, Johnson was forced to flee North Carolina. On his way north he decamped a company of Confederate soldiers to the Union lines, an event that was remembered locally as "Johnson's Raid." On arriving in Washington, D.C., he met with Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick ^[14], and initiated Hedrick and Daniel Reaves Goodloe ^[15]—and probably President Lincoln, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Commissioner of Pensions Joseph Barrett as well—into the Heroes of America. Most likely Johnson and Hedrick set up a national Grand Council of the Heroes of America to cover the order's activities throughout the border states. Johnson then went to Cincinnati, where he attended a course of medical lectures, and in January 1865 he may have returned to North Carolina via Kentucky.

Johnson's family suffered greatly for his Unionist activities. He and his wife, Eliza Gafford, whom he had married at Danville, Va., on 3 Sept. 1839, had thirteen children between 1840 and 1867. Two of his sons died in a Confederate prison in Richmond, and a third was captured in West Virginia while trying to reach the North but survived imprisonment. One of his sons who died was scarcely a year old, which strongly suggests that his wife was arrested and incarcerated when Johnson's activities were exposed in 1864.

After the war, Johnson learned dentistry in Philadelphia and established a practice in Forsyth County. He became a Republican ^[16] and remained active on the Grand Council of the Heroes of America (he was elected Grand Lecturer in 1867) until the order broke up about 1870 under pressure from the Ku Klux Klan ^[17]. After its collapse Johnson presumably withdrew from politics, for little more is known of him until his death in Winston-Salem. He was buried at the Moravian Church in Union Cross, and his tombstone bears the Masonic ^[18] emblem.

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