

What's in a Name – Johnson Family – Part 1

What's in a name? This is possibly something that Gabriel Timberlake asked himself when he changed his own name following his freedom to (Colchester) Canada. With that freedom, he gave up his connection to not only his “owner” and father, Thornton Timberlake, but also his life as an enslaved person. When Gabriel Timberlake took on the new name of James Johnson, he was not just trying to protect his family's and his own identity from slave catchers; he was emancipating himself through his name.

James Johnson Sr., originally Gabriel Timberlake, was born into slavery in 1828 in Clark, Kentucky to slaveowner, Thornton Timberlake, and an unknown enslaved woman. It was at the age of 19 that he escaped the Timberlake property, also known as the Sugar Grove Plantation, with the assistance of an overseer who, it turned out, was an abolitionist. According to Milo Johnson's book, *New Canaan: Freedom Land*, “A series of forays by parties of Slave Catchers into Indiana and Michigan, referred to as The Kentucky Raids, took place in the late 1840s. Some of the early black residents of Colchester (Essex County, Ontario) arrived in Essex County as a result of the Kentucky Raids. Their story of escape from the Thornton Timberlake plantation is historically significant.” Gabriel Timberlake was among those who escaped the Timberlake plantation in Kenton County, Kentucky on April 24, 1847. Gabriel, along with several others, had the assistance of Underground railroad operatives who got them safely to Cass County, Michigan, where they settled with the help of local Quakers. Following their escape, a notice offering a reward for eighteen enslaved persons, including Gabriel, was placed, offering \$3,125. The reward notice included a description of Gabriel and said, “the property of Thornton Timberlake ... GABRIEL, a yellow boy age about 19 years, polite and docile, about 5 feet 6 inches high, weighs about 150 pounds.” Unfortunately, after Gabriel and the other freedom

seekers arrived in Cass County, Michigan, slave catchers learned of their location and raided the farm where the freedom seekers were staying. These slave catchers attempted to bring the freedom seekers back, but the courts freed them because the slave catchers and “owners” had no documentation proving that the freedom seekers were the property of the slavers hunting them down.

From there, Gabriel travelled from Michigan and landed in Amherstburg where he officially became James Johnson Sr. Once in Amherstburg, local Black leaders directed him to nearby Colchester (Essex County, Ontario) where work was available. Once in Colchester, he worked for James Ferris as a farm hand. He worked for Ferris for two years, eventually earning enough money to purchase a plot of land where he could build a home and raise his family. It is actually James Johnson Sr. who is credited with being the first person to introduce burley tobacco in the Colchester area. The Johnson farm also produced sweet syrup that was made by pressing sugar cane or sorghum at their family-owned mill. **Thanks for reading part 1 of the Johnson family history. Stay tuned for part 2 next week.**