

The Republican

Courtesy of the Museum of Springfield History, Springfield, MA

DEATH OF THOMAS THOMAS WHO LONG KEPT THE RESTAURANT

On Worthington Street—A Fine Type of the Colored Race—His Experiences as a Slave and Freeman.

A really remarkable man has passed away in the death of Thomas Thomas, the veteran restaurateur, who died at his home on Auburn street yesterday forenoon. He was a noble specimen of the negro race; gentle, courtly, and with an integrity and genuineness of character which made him prized, whether as a servant or host. He was best known as a keeper of a little restaurant



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for 11 years in a little building on Main street, where Abbe's block was built, and for 21 years on Worthington street, just around the corner from Main street. In his small quarters Thomas entertained many dignitaries, court officials, business and professional men, who were attracted there by the delicious dishes that he knew how to prepare. Early in January, 1893, Mr Thomas felt old age creeping on him, and he was obliged to retire from active life. His strong frame soon became shattered by insidious disease, and the last year of his life was spent in a desperate grapple with many complicated ailments.

Mr Thomas was born a slave in Oxford, Md., in 1817, and was employed as a waiter when about 10 years old on steamboats on Chesapeake bay. During his boyhood Thomas had as companions Frederick Douglass and Rev Highland H. Garnett. The latter was educated in New York and Scotland, and was a friend of Wendell Phillips. He preached in Shiloh church in New York during the 60's. When Thomas was 17 years old he proposed to his master that he buy his freedom. The price agreed on was \$400, to be paid on the instalment plan, but as his master had hired him out, he had to earn the money by work outside of his regular employment. In 1836 he was sent into Mississippi, where he was so fortunate as to meet a friend. Although his master was making a good thing out of him and was reluctant to take the money, Thomas was soon a free man. He then went to New Orleans, and spent the year as a servant in the St Charles hotel. In 1838 he began his steamboating career on the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers, spending most of the time in the Indian trade as steward for a trading boat, which ran from New Orleans into the Indian territory. The sharp Yankees had established trading posts on the banks of the Arkansas to get the large quantities of gold and silver which the government was paying the Cherokee and Seminole Indians for their land. The traders would buy large quantities of cheap goods and sell them to the poor Indians for three times their value. On the return trip there were pelts, and

game and produce, which paid enormous profit for their transportation.

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During his experiences on the river, Thomas, like the thrifty man that he was, was doing a little speculation on his own hook. He would buy barrels of eggs for three or four cents and sell them for 14 cents a dozen; he brought potatoes for eight cents a bushel and sold them for a big profit, and so with butter and other produce. In fact, Thomas was the pioneer dealer in "garden truck," which has proved so profitable at the present time to negroes in the South. In 1843, however, he was thrown into prison in New Orleans for violating the law against free negroes visiting the state of Louisiana, and he had to pay board for three days at \$11 a day before he could be released,—his employer furnishing bonds that he would leave the state and not return. After visiting Quincy, Ill., he came to this city, where his mother and sister were settled. Then after spending a short time in New York, he returned here in 1844. He entered service at the old Hampden house at the corner of Court and Main streets, where he had the opportunity to meet Thurlow Weed, the father-in-law of the proprietor, O. W. Alden.

In those days it was the talk that the New York, New Haven and Hartford railroad company would build its station on Bliss street, and Thomas, anxious to be near the center of traffic, connected himself with the Union, now the Chandler house.

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The taking of the old depot to its long time location proved a blessing in one respect at least to Thomas, for in that way he became associated with another eminent man, John Brown. In 1847 the old hero first came here to open a commission house for the wool-growers of the West and South. Brown had little business as Thomas remembered him, and here again the negro served well his master, keeping a careful account of every transaction, which was of great use in the lawsuits that followed the shrinking up of the business here. In Brown's organization of the "Springfield Gileadites," a branch of a league of negroes throughout the United States to resist the capture of fugitives, Mr Thomas, like the well-known and honored sexton of the South church, J. N. Howard, was concerned; and he was one of the agents of the "underground railroad," and in his subsequent journeys South and West, he spread the gospel of liberty.

For three years after 1850 Thomas was employed as steward in the Samoset house at Holyoke. But in 1853 Thomas again started on a roving career. He first went to Springfield, Ill., serving there for two years in the American house, which was directly opposite Lincoln's office. He had the distinction of seeing the great martyr every day for two years, although he never heard one of the great political debates. In 1855, when the hotel was given up, he returned to this city just in time to join an expedition organized by Levi Tanner for Shasta, Cal. The ship on which he sailed landed its passengers in the midst of Walker's expedition against Nicaragua. Thomas got through these difficulties in his usual happy-go-lucky style, and arriving in California he lived there for three years the rough life of the pioneers, turning his hand to whatever would bring a penny. Then he was called back to Springfield, Ill., when the news of Lincoln's nomination was received. When the crowd started out

to find Lincoln he was discovered playing "barn ball" in an inclosure with "Mike," an Irish boy. When they told him of his nomination, he said nothing but started directly for home, stepping off, Thomas thought directly, like an ostrich. Thomas was so well known to Lincoln that he could have been steward of the White House had not the illness of his wife prevented.

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Then Thomas returned to this city to spend the rest of his life. He married in 1841 his first wife, who was Margaret Williams of Baltimore, Md., and lived long enough to leave two children who died young. His second wife, who is still living, was Martha H. Hall of Amelia county, Va.; he married her in 1843. He had no children by his second wife, but had an adopted daughter, Hattie Thomas.

The funeral will be held Monday afternoon at 2 o'clock, at his late home on Auburn street. Rev Mr Van Horn of Newport, R. I., who formerly preached at the Sanford-street church, will officiate. When the Sanford-street church was composed of abolitionists Mr Thomas was a member, but withdrew when it became a Methodist church. Mr Thomas was a charter member of Sumner lodge of Masons, which will have charge of the funeral services.

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