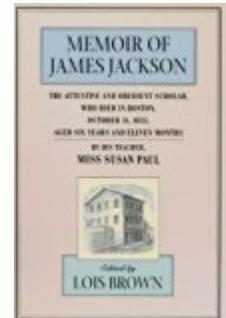


**Lois Brown, ed..** *Memoir of James Jackson, the Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months, By His Teacher, Miss Susan Paul.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. ix + 169 pp. \$21.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-674-00237-1.



**Reviewed by** Julie Winch

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A Childhood Remembered, A Teacher Recalled

As Lois Brown points out in her introduction to Susan Paul's *Memoir of James Jackson*, we know very little of the lives of African-American children in the antebellum era. Wilma King's path-breaking study of enslaved children, *Stolen Childhood*, gives us a glimpse into the lives of the unfree, but there is virtually nothing on Northern free children of color.[1] Brown's new edition of black teacher Susan Paul's life of her star pupil, James Jackson, is an attempt to fill that void.

James Jackson lived his brief life in the heart of Boston's small but vibrant African-American community. He had lost his father by the age of two and he was raised, so Paul tells us, by his pious, hard-working mother. She insists that not only is young James worthy of emulation, but his mother is a worthy role-model for any parent, regardless of race, and his home a humble but virtuous one that enshrines the values of the Christian republic that Americans of all classes were struggling to create.

As Paul explains, James devotes himself to his studies because, for him, learning and piety go hand in hand. He becomes literate not for worldly advancement, but so he can read the Bible. He is not so much intellectually gifted as attentive and fundamentally good. Paul's message for her young readers is that here is a child who lives his life according to the Golden Rule.

Although Lois Brown does not comment on it in her introduction, it is worth noting that, according to Paul, one of James's favorite hymns was "When I can read my title clear" (p. 86). The affection for Isaac Watts's hymn is juxtaposed with the knowledge Paul, as James's teacher, shares with him that whites routinely prevent slave children from gaining the education to "read" both their earthly and their spiritual "titles clear." (Incidentally, James appears to have a great affection for Watts's hymns. The quotation on page 74 which Brown is unable to identify is most likely Susan Paul's paraphrase of two lines from Watts's hymn for children, "Against Quarrelling and Fighting.") Shortly before his seventh birthday, James Jackson dies the "good death" of

the pious Victorian child, but with one striking difference. While the generality of children are described in evangelical literature of this era as *accepting* death, James (according to Paul) positively *welcomes* it as an escape from a wicked and sinful world.

On one level this is James Jackson's story but on another, as Brown's introduction makes clear, it is Susan Paul's story. Not only does she write it, but she shapes James Jackson's life, focusing on those aspects that she wants remembered. So who was Susan Paul? Why did she write this brief memoir, and to whom was it directed?

Boston native Susan Paul (1809-41) was the child of Rev. Thomas Paul, a highly respected Baptist pastor, and his wife, teacher Catherine Waterhouse Paul. In time, Susan and her siblings would become teachers. As for the broader contours of her life, I would like to have seen Brown dig more deeply. She notes that Paul's mother was living in Cambridge, at least at the time of her marriage. Beyond that, do the records indicate whether both of her parents were New Englanders by birth and ancestry or migrants from another region? Did Susan Paul and her siblings accompany Rev. Paul to New York City when, as Brown notes, he was posted there and helped found the famed Abyssinian Baptist Church? What, if anything, did Susan Paul learn from her father about his brief sojourn in Haiti and his travels throughout New England?

Both Susan Paul and James Jackson need to be set more clearly in the broader context of Boston's antebellum black community. Brown tells her readers where the majority of the community's members lived, but very little about how they were treated or what their numbers were. What sectors of the economy were open to people of color, and what ones firmly closed off? What was the legal status of women and men of color in Massachusetts? How welcome were they in the Bay State? Brown mentions colonization several times, but without explaining what it was, how widely it

was supported, and what its implications were for Susan Paul, James Jackson, and their neighbors. David Walker is referenced, as is his famous *Appeal*, but Brown tells us nothing more. Peter Hinks's invaluable biography of Walker, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, could have greatly enriched Brown's treatment of the African American community as a whole.[2]

I am left wanting to know more about Paul's involvement with the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. How were Paul and the other black members treated by their white colleagues? And what are we to make of the comment by a white BFASS member that the African-American community did not regard Paul as one of its own? What does that suggest about intra-racial, as well as interracial, divisions in Boston?

Brown relegates to her endnotes a great deal of information that properly belongs in the body of the introduction. For instance, the reader has to turn to the notes to learn that Paul's tragic death from consumption may well have been hastened by the treatment meted out to her when she was returning to Boston from an antislavery convention in New York City. Denied a berth on the steamboat because of her race, she was forced to spend the night on deck exposed to the elements.

The account Brown gives of Susan Paul's efforts to get her *Memoir of James Jackson* into print is both poignant and revealing. She was denied the outlet (and the potential profit) that the American Sunday School Union would have provided. Brown suggests that the refusal of the Union and its auxiliaries to touch the increasingly controversial topics of slavery and racism motivated them to reject Paul's work. Eventually James Loring, a sympathetic white printer in Boston, agreed to bring out the work, and it was promoted by, among others, Paul's friend William Lloyd Garrison. As for the question of audience, it is clear that Paul is addressing whites as well as blacks, adults as well as children. In fact, she

moves backwards and forwards between her different audiences.

Brown contends that Paul's text is unusual not only because it focuses on the life of an African-American child but because, according to her, it lacks the kind of validation from whites that accompanied so many antebellum black-authored texts. I would beg to differ. I am not convinced by Brown's argument that Susan Paul authored the Preface along with the rest of the *Memoir*. It reads to me as though it was written not by Paul, but a white friend, perhaps Loring. Why would Paul have written: "We were permitted to hear a statement of the facts before there was any design of making them public" (p. 67) when she *knew* the facts and did not "hear" them. References to "our colored friends," "your children," and "these children of our brethren" also suggest to me that a white well-wisher, and not Paul, authored the Preface.

There are numerous small errors throughout the introduction and notes that Brown and her editor should have caught before this volume went to press. On page 9, for instance, she apparently mixes up Prince Hall and Primus Hall. She supplies the wrong title for Gary Nash's book (p. 140). His 1988 book, *Forging Freedom*, published (ironically) by Harvard University Press, is confused with an essay, also entitled "Forging Freedom," published several years earlier. (Frankly Brown's editor at Harvard should have caught that mistake.) On page 144 she identifies Harriet and Margaretta Forten as mother and daughter when they were actually sisters. On page 17 she states that Paul was one of four BFASS delegates to the women's antislavery convention that met in New York City in 1837, but on page 116 she says that Paul was one of two delegates from the BFASS. However, these are relatively minor errors that do not lessen the value of a book that offers us a window into the lives of a remarkable woman and an equally remarkable young child. Lois

Brown has done a good job of rescuing both from obscurity.

#### Notes

[1]. Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in 19th Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[2]. Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

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