

[Amy Chapman's Funeral]

Alabama

Ruby Pickens Tartt

Livingston, Alabama

Sept. 28, 1938

Life History 511 So [Hull?] [???

AMY CHAPMAN'S FUNERAL

On Tuesday morning of last week, Aunt Amy Chapman, one of the oldest citizens of Sumter County and certainly one of the most respected of its colored people, passed away died . Although she had reached the age of ninety-five, Aunt Amy still possessed an extraordinary a vigor of both body and mind far beyond her years.

Only a few days before her death she had met me in Livingston and asked me to drive her home. "I'm tired on my feet hurt," she had said. "I want you to take me home." "Why Aunt Amy," I asked, "what have you been doing here lately?" "I bin picking cotton," she replied and as I did not think she was farming this year I expressed surprise. "Oh," she answered, "Tain't my cotton, hit's other folks' cotton. Didn't have nothing else [?] to do, so I thought I might ez well help in de fiel's."

And it was in the cotton field that she suffered the stroke which proved fatal. She never [?] rallied, and four days later "at first light" she passed away peacefully as if in sleep.

Perhaps it was fortunate that death came so swiftly, as a lingering illness with its consequent helplessness and dependence on others would have been unendurable

Library of Congress

to Aunt Amy. Nothing could have been more abhorrent to her staunchly individualistic old soul than the thought of being constantly under obligations to anyone. She never 2 asked a favor of me, to drive her over to Livingston on Saturday when she went to buy her weekly provisions or to take her home when she was tired, that she did not immediately force upon me some sort of payment in kind, a bucket of figs, eggs, or vegetables from her garden. When I heard that she was ill and went to her house to see if I could do anything for her, her son Hewey showed me a box of sweet potatoes washed clean of dirt which she had dug for me. And I remembered the last time I had seen her . when I had taken her home in my car she had insisted against all my protests that she would bring me some potatoes soon for my kindness to her. Even in her illness she had thought to tell Hewey to be sure to give them to me.

Aunt Amy's earlier life is like something out of the worst pages of Harriet Beecher Stowe. She was born a slave on Governor Chapman's place about five miles north of Livingston. She learned to be a seamstress , did sewing and weaving for her "Ole Miss." According to her own account, Governor Chapman was good to her, but he owned around three hundred slaves and had several plantations; and he spent most of his time with his family at Huntsville. One overseer he dismissed on learning that he treated the slaves with cruelty. But it was a white overseer, a Mr. Hewey Leman, who was the father of Aunt Amy's children. "I didn't want dat man, but he wuz de overseer an he beat me till I had ter have him - twarn't nuthin' else ter do," she told me once.

3

Mr. Leman was married and a curious relationship seems to have developed between his wife and Aunt Amy after Mrs. Leman became used to the situation. The couple took two of the children into their own home to live with them, Mr. Leman averring that since the scandal was out anyhow, he might as well own them! Before his death, he provided liberally for them, giving each a house and a piece of land. And when Mrs. Leman became seriously ill, it was Aunt Amy who nursed her till her death. One wonders about the Lemans - what curious compulsions, what distorted forces of the human psyche motivated

Library of Congress

Hewey Leman? What fates compelled Mrs. Leman to accept a situation so hopelessly impossible?

Aunt Amy's children have also made a place for themselves and are well respected in Livingston. Hewey, who was named for his father, teaches at the local colored school and upholds his position with professional dignity. Another son, Mack, who is now in Texas is a property owner and has his own small business. Aunt Amy, at her death, had a sizable bank account for one of her race and owned land in her own name.

The indomitable character of Aunt Amy's spirit can perhaps most truly be exemplified by an incident which occurred last spring. She appeared at my door one morning and asked me to drive her over to town to buy some wire fencing. "And what are you going to do with your fence?" I asked conversationally. "I'm gonna put it roun' my 4 peach orchard?" she answered. "Why, I didn't know you had a peach orchard, Aunt Amy," I said in surprise. "I ain't," she answered, "but I'm gonna set out some cuttings this fall!"

In life, Aunt Amy had no use for her colored neighbors, and would not allow any of them to come near her house. Privately I often thought she was afraid of being conjured; but whatever her reason, her aloneness in her old-age worried me. She was too jealous of her independence to go and live with one of her married sons, and I was often anxious about her, wondering how she would manage if taken suddenly ill. But when illness came, her neighbors forgot her former aloofness of attitude and were kind. Several of them stayed with her to the end, taking turns sitting up with her at night and seeing to it that she was kept as comfortable as her condition would permit. And on Wednesday afternoons on a lowering, threatening day, fifty or sixty of them accompanied her to her last resting place in the old Chapman burying-ground, a most out-of-the way and almost inaccessible place.

According to her wish, Aunt Amy was buried on the plantation where she was born. There, on top of a limestone hill commanding a splendid view in all directions of once-proud acres, her sister was buried, and they dug her grave beside Aunt Mary's. A few stops

Library of Congress

down the hillside were other graves unmarked, members of her family who had gone before.

The burying was set for two o'clock. (Among the 5 colored people of Sumter County the actual interment is referred to as the "burying." The funeral is preached later on a Sunday to be appointed by the family, sometimes after a year or more has elapsed. In this case. Hewey told us that he had set the funeral for sometime soon "before cold weather set in," and that it would be [held?] at the Jones Creek Baptist Church, of which Aunt Amy had been a member for over eighty years.) But as I had taken the wrong turning and lost my way twice, I was late in arriving. Probably I would never have found the burying ground had not Hewey sighted me from the hill and sent a man to guide me. Even then, I had to abandon the car and cover the last part of the way on foot.

Several wagons and a Ford or two were drawn up on the hill at a respectful distance, screened by the cedars. The closer relatives were seated together on an automobile cushion placed on the ground to one side. Hewey came up to speak to me, then returned to take charge of the digging of the grave. This was the responsibility of the friends of the family and fellow church-members and they gave their time and labor to the sad duty. As only a few inches of topsoil covered the solid limestone, it was an arduous process. A strong Negro man hewed at the rock with his pick, working his way the length of the grave, then back again. Then, as he jumped out panting with exertion and covered with sweat, two young Negroes took his place with shovels, throwing the chips out in two mounds, one on each side of the grave. Some of the men worked with cigarettes drooping from their lips, but there was no disrespect in this, for they meant no disrespect.

The men assembled, alternated; when one became tired he handed his shovel to another who was rested and the digging went steadily on. A smaller boy disappeared down the hillside in the direction of the spring, and after a time came back with a bucket of water and a dipper, which were passed gratefully from hand to hand.

Library of Congress

I had time to look about me and recognize the beauty of the scene. On all sides the land sloped away from the hill, disclosing pleasant valleys and peaceful hay-fields touched with the first colors of autumn. At a farther distance rose other limestone hills crowned with the cedars so indigenous to this county, and against the horizon where black rain clouds lay, lightening flickered and the distant rumble of thunder could be heard. A damp breeze, unexpectedly cool, stirred my hair, and with its coming it was as though one could lay one's finger on a single moment out of time and say, '[How?], suddenly, Fall has come, and it is no longer Summer.'

I heard one of the men standing near the grave announce in a low voice that they had come to the "last tier," and moved over to speak to Hewey's wife who was leaning on her crutches, her broken ankle propped comfortably before her. She told me that two weeks before Aunt Amy had made the long trip to town to see them. "She said the spirits tole her to come see us, en I wuz afraid then that sumpin was gonna happen," she said.

Now the grave was finished, dug to the appointed depth of four feet and its bottom leveled to hold the casket steady. In lieu of a trestle, a sapling was cut from the nearby thicket and laid across the grave lengthwise. Steadied on this, first the outer pine covering, then the coffin of light purple were lowered in, and silently the men threw in shovelfulls of dirt until it was covered and the grave a quarter filled.

Then began the simple burial service, in most respects equivalent to that read in white churches today. At its conclusion, the preacher lifted his voice in prayers which soon became a high-pitched, but melodious, chant, the congregation joining in with "Amens." It was a very brief, but sincere and dignified service, and one which I am sure Aunt Amy would have wanted. The lavender casket, too, would have pleased her, as would the robe to match, which Hewey had selected.

Soon the men were again at work with their shovels filling in the grave, while all the Negroes sang together in the wonderful harmony, which is so natural to them, the hymn

Library of Congress

which had been Aunt Amy's favorites: Dark wuz the night Cold wuz de groun' On which my Saviour lay Blood in draps en sweat run down In agony he pray. Lord move dis bitter cup Ef sech Dy sacred will Ef not, content I'll drink hit up Whose pleasure I'll fulfill.

When the grave had been filled, the mound shaped above it, and saplings placed in the soft earth at its head and foot to mark it, a curious ritual took place. ⁸ Each worker rested his spade against the mound's side, iron point in the soft earth and handles pointing toward the sky. The effect was strangely impressive, but when I asked about it later I was told only, "It is customary in our race." The ritual apparently had been followed for [som?] so many years that its significance had been lost with usage. To me it seemed symbolical, perhaps, of the toiler who has laid away his tools at last and come to rest.

The preacher asked if there were flowers to be placed on the grave, and I was pressed to come forward first with my bowl of zinnias which I placed at the head of the grave, levelling a place first with my hand so that the vase would stand upright without tilting. Then the others stepped forward one at a time with their drooping clusters of flowers mixed with short sprays of cedar. And whether following wy lead, or in accordance with a custom of their own I do not know, these they did not lay on the rounded sides of the mound as one would have expected. Instead they made small hollows in the earth in which they placed their bouquets, so that they stood upright also.

We stood a moment with heads bowed while the preacher pronounced the benediction, then made our way back down the hill and across the peaceful hay fields of Aunt Amy's "home-place." She had been returned to the soil from which she had sprung and was one with the land which she had loved so intensely.

Washington Copy

10/13/38

Library of Congress

L.H.