

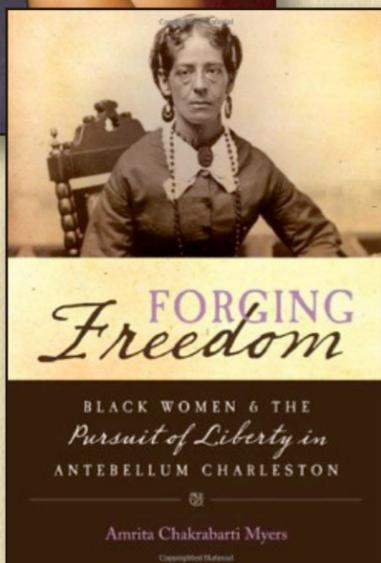
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RISKY BUSINESS: RACE, SEX, AND POLITICS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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Most people today have no idea who Julia Chinn was. Nor do the majority of Americans recognize the name Richard Mentor Johnson. Johnson, who captured the national spotlight in 1813 after supposedly killing the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, became Vice President of the US under Martin Van Buren in 1837.

In Kentucky, Johnson was a plantation owner and slaveholder, serving in state politics before becoming a senator and then Vice President. He also had complicated relationships with Native Americans and African Americans. Rising to fame as an “Indian killer,” Johnson maintained a boarding school for Choctaw boys on his plantation. And while he never legally married a white woman, Johnson engaged in long-term sexual relationships with at least three different black women over the course of his life.

Julia Chinn, whom Johnson called his wife, was the second of these women and mother to Johnson’s two daughters. Chinn, who openly lived with Johnson at his plantation, oversaw many of his affairs while he was away in Frankfort and Washington. This included transacting basic plantation business and interacting with the students and officials of the Choctaw boarding school.

Utilizing a variety of public and private records, this project examines an interracial family in a time and place where white persons claimed such relationships did not happen, but that if they did, they took place between people from the lowest classes who lived in secrecy and shame, shunned from polite society. These parameters clearly do not reflect the lives of Chinn and Johnson, and it is precisely this chasm between rhetoric and reality that this project illuminates.

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