



Video Story Transcript

FINDING JOSEPHUS

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/UMpfIJEU5x4>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Lyn Ford and I wanted to share a story about my childhood with my father who was my favorite storyteller. His name was Edward M. Cooper, but his nickname was Jake and he would tell me stories. Sometimes we would be riding to help someone with some chore, and sometimes we would be riding to do an errand for someone else, my father helped everybody. Sometimes he shared stories late at night with me that I wouldn't have heard on those rides. He was trying to help me, I know that now.

It would be after a hard day at school and everyone would be asleep except for my father who has just come in from work and he would hear me crying and I would be by myself and he would tell me a story, because he would know I had a hard time during the day, being the only child of any color in a classroom that was called the fast learners, what we call now call "gifted". And being the only African American, child in those days what was called a colored child, I was teased and taunted both by African American children and European American children and called names that hurt and I didn't understand.

My father would get me up and tell me a story. One of them I remember very well. He would tell me these stories and he used to say you need to know these stories. You won't find them in the history books. They don't put our stories in those history books; they might put Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglas, but not these kinds of stories. You need to know them to know who you are.

One of them was about a young man called Josephus, who was a slave from the time he was born and for many many years and he remained enslaved, the so-called property of a ferry man on the Ohio River, so that he could help others to escape to freedom. Well, as my storytelling career progressed I wanted to share the

stories of the underground railroad, not the big stories that everybody knew but those little stories that came from my father.

I was trying to research them and I couldn't find anything about that story that I remembered so well and so I thought maybe my dad had made it up, that it was one of dad's legends and I was going through the work of Mr. Henry Burke, who is an African American folklorist and historian in Marietta, Ohio. I was sitting in the library reading some of his work and there were a few sentences about someone called Josephus.

My heart just stopped and I felt goose bumps up and down my arms and I know that I started to cry, I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes as I saw that name and read that that was a code name for a slave on what was then the Virginia side of the Ohio River who helped folks to escape across the Ohio River for 50 years until Emancipation Proclamation came into place. That area is the mouth of Duck Creek, State Route 77, it goes from Ohio into West Virginia now across a bridge and in the history of Josephus it is said that he carried folks, two or three every month, across that river at the mouth of Duck Creek, so that they could be free before he was.

But my father's story went a little differently. He said that Josephus was purchased by a ferry man in that area when he was about 10 years old and the ferry man told him what he would do. "You help folks, get on the ferry. You put their bags on the ferry, help them off on the other side, and put their bags off on the other side. You do what I tell you to do and don't worry about anything else because you are too stupid to do anything else".

And this went on and on and Josephus grew from a boy to an adolescent to a young man. When he was grown and matured, an abolitionist from Marietta came across the waters at some other point in the Ohio River and said to Josephus, "Why don't you take the ferry yourself and escape to the other side? I could help you if you need, but why are you staying here? When, if you just take the ferry, you could be free?"

And my daddy said that Josephus said to that abolitionist, "Well, sir, I can't. I am too stupid to know what to do. At least that's what that man keeps telling me. But at night, when it gets dark, I must get a little smarter, because I have been helping folks run away across this part of the river for the past 20 years and that man ain't caught me yet. So he can call me what he wants to call me. I know who I am".

And then my daddy would say words that helped me to remember this story even if I had lost many of his other tales. "You got to know who you are, you got to remember that an adjective – like stupid – is not your name, you got to know these little stories to know who you are."