**Francis Barber**

(c. 1742/3 – 13 January 1801)

Francis Barber was born in Jamaica (then a British colony) around 1735. He was called Quashey suggesting he was born on a Sunday. His parents were also born in Jamaica however, his family heritage was probably the Akan people from the coastal region of modern Ghana. In 1750 he was baptized in London and received the name Francis Barber. This was the name he used at school and for rest of his life. His friend and employer Dr Samuel Johnson called him Frank, a common shortening of the boy’s name Francis.

In 1750 Colonel Bathurst, the owner of the sugar plantation where Francis had been born, sold his planation, moved to England and brought Francis with him. Francis was aged about 8 years old. For a year, Francis went to school in Barton, Yorkshire. Afterwards he worked for the plantation owner’s son Richard Bathurst who was a close friend of Samuel Johnson. In April 1752, two weeks after the death of Johnson's wife (Elizabeth Porter who Johnson married in 1735) Francis went to work as a valet for Johnson at his house in 17 Gough Square, London where Johnson lived and worked from 1748 to 1759. After this the Johnson household lived in rented accommodation at Staple Inn, Grey’s Inn, 1 Inner Temple Lane (1760), 7 Johnson Court (August 1765) and finally 8 Bolt Court off Fleet Street (until Johnson’s death in 1784).

In April 1755 Colonel Bathurst died, leaving Francis 12 pounds (equivalent to about £2000 in 2020) and his freedom. Francis stopped working for Johnson and moved to Cheapside in the City of London to work as an apprentice to Edward Ferrand an apothecary (pharmacist). He worked as an apprentice for about two years during which time he occasionally visited Johnson. On 7 July 1758, Francis enlisted in the British navy and went to sea. He served on the HMS Stag but was discharged at the insistence of Samuel Johnson on 22 October 1760.

In 1767, Johnson paid for Francis to attend Bishop Stortford Grammar School, Hertfordshire. The school was run by Mr Clapp, and when he died unexpectedly it was taken over by his wife. The school was housed in Windhill House, a 1600s building next to St Michael’s Church in the town. During his schooling, Barber stayed at Mrs Clapp’s boarding house. His time in Bishop’s Stortford ended in June 1772 when he returned to London.

Francis continued working for Samuel Johnson as a valet and secretary until Johnson died. Francis arranged trips, received documents and kept Johnson's diary. On January 28, 1773, Francis married Elizabeth Ball at St. Dunstan Church, London. They had three children (two daughters and a son) and the whole family lived with Johnson. Francis assisted Johnson in revising his famous Dictionary of the English Language and other works. Francis was also an important source for Johnson’s biographer James Boswell and told Boswell about events in Johnson's life in the years before Boswell knew Johnson. Francis had a group of friends from the African diaspora community in London. When the Baptist Minister Noel Turner visited Samuel Johnson one evening, Francis answered the door and explained that Johnson was out. Looking inside, Noel Turner saw a circle of Francis’s friends sitting around a fireplace in a small waiting room.

Samuel Johnson died on 13 December 1784. In his will, Johnson made Francis his heir. Johnson left Francis £70 a year (equivalent to £9,000 in 2020) to be given to him annually by a set of Trustees. He also expressed the wish that Francis go to live in Lichfield, Staffordshire; Johnson's native city. Barber was also left Johnson's books and papers, and a gold watch. Johnson left his wedding ring to Francis as a ‘memorial of tenderness’ for Barber’s companionship. Francis had the ring enamelled as a mourning-ring for Johnson and gave it to his wife Elizabeth Barber.

By October 1785 Barber had decided to leave London and start a new life in Lichfield, where he and his family lived in a rented terraced house. Francis became a minor celebrity locally with people eager to hear him talk about his friend Samuel Johnson. In March 1787 John Hawkins, a friend of Johnson’s published his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. Hawkins did not like Francis and he was rude about Francis in the book. When Barber heard about Hawkins’s account, he was deeply offended. Another friend, James Boswell quickly wrote to Barber to express his sympathy.

In 1799 Francis and Elizabeth were living in Burntwood, near Lichfield, with their children - Elizabeth, Samuel and Ann. Francis set up a school in Burntwood, possibly making him Britain’s first black school teacher. Francis died in Stafford Infirmary on 28 January 1801 following an unsuccessful surgical operation at Staffordshire Royal Infirmary. After his death, the family moved back to Lichfield to live on Stowe Street. His elder daughter Elizabeth died in 1802. His wife Elizabeth and his younger daughter Ann ran a day school in Lichfield. His son, Samuel (1785-1828), became a Methodist preacher in Staffordshire. Elizabeth Barber in 1816 at the age of sixty, and Ann went to live with her brother Samuel.

A plaque in Barber's honour on the railings of his and Johnson's former home (now Dr Johnson's House) was unveiled in 2016, by his great-great-great-great-grandson, Cedric Barber.