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Introduction

Sam Nightingale was an herb doctor, a conjure man, and storyteller in Boonville, Missouri. He overcame the terrible experiences of slavery and raised his family in freedom after the Civil War. Sam used old traditions from Africa to help people who were sick or had problems in their lives. When people could not afford a regular doctor, they went to Sam. He mixed herbal medicines and held healing ceremonies for friends and neighbors. People came from all around the state of Missouri for Sam’s help.

He was also known for his storytelling, and his tales of magic are still shared. Sam was not a very famous man during his life, but he was a community leader and was respected by many people. When Sam died, he was one of the oldest African-American men in Missouri. This is his story. 🌹
History is based on recorded facts that help tell a story about a certain time, place, or person. But not everyone’s story was written down. When slaves were brought to the United States, they lost ties to their families and their traditions, and many of their stories were not saved for the future. Sometimes, though, historians can be detectives and discover clues about a slave’s life and experiences through newspaper
stories, interviews, and the stories of others who had similar experiences. Some slaves wrote down their stories or told them to someone who wrote them down. These slave narratives are very useful to historians. Sam did not write down his own story, but by reading stories Sam told about himself and stories by other people, historians can figure out many details of Sam’s life. That is how the story of “Guinea Sam” Nightingale came to be.

Drums have been used in songs and storytelling for thousands of years. The rhythm of drums mimics a heartbeat and connects listeners to the music.
Chapter 2

A New and Terrible Life

The voyage from Africa to America took many weeks. During the long journey, many of the villagers died from illness and bad treatment. Despite the terrible conditions, Sam survived. One day, the ship sailed into the port city of Charleston, South Carolina. Historians think that about half of the slaves brought into the United States came through the port of Charleston.
People came to the rich city of Charleston to buy slaves to work on plantations all over the South.

Sam was soon sold at a slave auction. He stood next to a man who told the crowd that Sam was young and healthy. People in the

Plantation owners wanted to buy young, healthy, and strong slaves for work in the rice and cotton fields. Before slavery ended in 1865, more than five million men, women, and children had been sold as slaves in Charleston, South Carolina.
Besides working in orchards and tending gardens, Sam was also a conjure man. The conjure man or woman believed that he or she used objects and herbs to ask the natural world, the unseen world, and the religious world for help to restore a person’s health or to fight against bad influences. Some people called this magic or “hoodoo,” but many cultures believed in calling on nature and
spirits to heal someone or to make life better. Many slaves believed they could use this magic to fight back against their mistreatment by slave owners or overseers, the men who made sure the slaves worked. After slavery ended, people might ask a conjure man or woman for help if they thought an enemy had cursed them. The conjure doctor might help people by giving them advice as well as magical cures.

One story about Sam told of his powers. On a cold morning near Boonville, a group of

Wood was used to heat homes, and it took a lot of work to chop down a tree and then trim and split it into logs. An old saying was “You warm yourself twice with wood—first when you chop it and then when you burn it.”
Despite many obstacles, Guinea Sam Nightingale contributed to his community. This was very difficult for a former slave. He did not speak English when he arrived in the United States. Sam could not read or write. He was poor. Even after being freed Sam struggled, because many people did not accept African-Americans as equals.

Sam worked hard until he was an old man. He raised a large family and owned his own home. He learned how to treat illness with herbs and practiced conjure work. He honored his African ancestors and helped his neighbors. Sam never forgot his homeland; he was proud of being one of the last African-born men in Missouri. Sam had many friends when he died. The local newspapers reported his death, which was very unusual for a former slave. Sam’s stories are still shared and we can enjoy his stories.
1787–1797: Sam Nightingale is born in Guinea, West Africa.

1803: The United States buys the Louisiana Territory from France. The territory included land that became Louisiana, Arkansas, Florida, and Missouri.

Early 1800s: Sam is taken from his home, brought to South Carolina, and sold as a slave.

1808: The United States officially outlaws the import of slaves.

1810s to 1840s: Sam works on plantations in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana.

1817: Fugitive slaves in Florida join with Native Americans to fight against the United States. When Sam is an old man, he tells people that he learned about healing from Native Americans.

1821: Missouri becomes a state. It allows slavery.

1856: Sam is brought to Boonville, Missouri, from Louisiana. He works on a fruit farm. The same year, a slave named Dred Scott sues in a Missouri court for his freedom. He loses.

1859: The last slave ship arrives in the United States.

1861: Southern states begin to leave the United States, and the Civil War begins.

1863: President Abraham Lincoln frees American slaves.

1864: Slavery ends in Missouri. Sam is free. Sam lives in Boonville with his wife, children, and grandchildren. He does odd jobs around town. He is also a conjure man.

1887: Sam dies in 1887 and is buried in Sunset Cemetery. No one knows the exact location of his grave. He was believed to be between ninety and one hundred years old when he died.

Today: Stories about Sam and his magic are still told in Boonville.
For Further Reading

For Young Readers


Websites


video.pbs.org/video/2179596560/.


Sources

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Image Credits

No images of Samuel Nightingale are known to exist, but he was described as “one of them little bitty dried up men and he walked with a long, crooked, twisty cane and had big gold earrings and the blackest eyes I ever did see…” He was also described as wearing a suit of jeans cloth (referring to the weave).

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As a boy, Sam Nightingale was taken from his home in Africa and brought to America to be a slave. He lived many years as a slave, but after the Civil War, Sam raised his family in freedom in Boonville, Missouri. Sam became a healer, using old African traditions and lessons he had learned from Native Americans to help people when they were sick. Sam became known as a wonderful storyteller and as someone who used magic. The tales he told, and the tales told about him, are still being heard today.

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