



Henry Johnson Realized His Dream

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JOHNSON CITY, Tennessee -- Henry Johnson, founded Johnson City in 1856. In middle life, the staunch pioneer of commerce and industry came from the Mother State of Tennessee--old North Carolina--who just 60 years before had ceded to the Government of the United States her own Washington County, and called it "Tennessee." Mr. Johnson slowly crossed the trail to the rugged Allegheny ranges, following the same trail blazed just 100 years before by Daniel Boone.

Henry Johnson's last camping place was a little cleared spot in the woods by the newly-built branch of railroad that reached the tremendous distance from Chattanooga to Bristol, and with a name as long as the road--East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad Company. Around Henry's camping place is now built the City of Johnson City.

Mr. Johnson started a town by building a home along a country road (present West Market Street) which served as a stage coach route from Washington, D.C. to Knoxville, and on beyond. He opened a store which served travelers and local settlers and also conducted a hotel. Henry is reported to have welcomed travelers at any time and persons without means to pay for lodging were welcome just the same.

Johnson consistently expanded his operations within his comparatively small tract of land he purchased from Tipton Jobe, and built the first railroad depot. He became the **depot agent, freight agent, ticket agent, express agent, and everything connected with the railroad at that time.** It is reported that he was a man of strong independent will and fearless action, and on one occasion, as the culmination of a dispute he had with railroad officials, he dumped all the freight and express out of the depot wareroom onto the ground until the railroad came to terms.

Henry's rail station very naturally became known as "**Johnson's Depot.**" Johnson's settlement became known all along the rail and stage lines and gradually

approached and passed the size of Jonesborough, the old state capital, located seven miles to the west.

Johnson's efforts secured the relocation of the local post office from "Blue Plum" located two miles south of the Depot, to Henry's department store. Henry became postmaster and handled all mail himself--and this was in connection with his duties as **storekeeper, ticket agent, hotel keeper, and probably a few other posts.** When the mail came, Johnson carried it to the back end of his store, and while the population of the village waited outside, would call off the addresses in a voice that approached a mezzo tenor. If the lucky recipient of a letter or a card or a package were present, it was delivered at once. If not, a neighbor who happened to be "waiting for the mail to open" might be asked to carry it out to the addressee.

It is reported too, **that when some late comer** drifted in after the mail was all opened and distributed, and asked for his mail; Johnson would berate him for not being on hand at the proper time; and not infrequently would have him wait until he got to a good stopping place in his game of checkers--provided it was the other fellow's move!

Henry Johnson took some part in politics. Like all men of that day, the political situation of the country was much discussed in gatherings, on the road, and around the cracker barrel. During the Civil War, East Tennessee was divided between Union and Confederate sentiments even though Tennessee had seceded from the Union. A portion of **General Burnside's** Union army passed through Johnson City during the latter part of the war, and engaged a detachment of the enemy near Watauga, five miles east of the city--then known as "Carter's Depot." It is said that firing of the cannon could be heard all the way to Henry Johnson's Depot.

In a heated political race for Congress, in which Henry Johnson supported the opponent of Landon C. Haynes, the friends of Mr. Haynes had the name of the village changed to "Haynesville." However, the name change was of short duration; for the name of the founder was later restored and the City was officially chartered as Johnson City in 1869. When the first city election was held on January 3, 1870, **the citizens of the new city unanimously elected Henry Johnson its first mayor.**

There is no question but that Henry Johnson conceived the city that was destined to spring from his little establishment. The energy, the forethought, with which he concentrated upon projects of building, of advancement and commercial and industrial expansion, show that he was constantly planning for better things, and was constantly bending his efforts to bring them to pass.

The photo above of Henry Johnson is the only one known to have ever been published. This picture was taken shortly after his arrival to the area. It was noted

that he greased his boots regularly, put on a high uncomfortable collar and wore a necktie--particularly on Sunday. He was married to Mary Ann Hoss, daughter of John Hoss, who was a grand-nephew of Daniel Boone.

Henry Johnson died on February 25, 1874, at the age of 64. On March 26, 1874, the *Jonesborough Herald and Tribune* gave a lengthy obituary. It stated in part: *"Eighteen years ago Johnson located in Johnson City, where he has since remained a prominent and respected citizen. He was the first citizen of this place and to his influence, untiring energy and undaunted courage does Johnson City owe its origin, ascribing to him the honor so justly inherited of proudly bearing his name. The respect, universal regret, and sorrow manifested on his burial day, was unlike any that we have here witnessed previously and told plainly that he was beloved and respected by all who knew him."*
