

Joseph Fossett, an enslaved blacksmith

Reading Level: Elementary School

Joseph Fossett was born in 1780 in Richmond, Virginia. When he was twelve, he went to Monticello. He learned to make nails. He also fetched wood and water and waited tables in the main house

When he was sixteen, Joseph trained to be a blacksmith. He put shoes on horses and sharpened hoes and plows. He was described as “a very fine workman.” Unlike most slaves, Joseph received a share of the money paid to the shop.

Joseph Fossett married Edith Hern, who was Jefferson’s cook. They had ten children. When Thomas Jefferson died, his will freed Joseph. He was given tools and an acre of land. Jefferson’s will did not free Joseph’s wife and children.

As a free man, Joseph continued to work as a blacksmith. He bought a shop in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1837, he was able to free his wife, five of their children and four of their grandchildren. Around 1840, the family moved to Ohio, a free state. Joseph died in 1858.



Partial horseshoe uncovered by archaeologists at Monticello.