

## Memorial to Herman A. Johnson (1916-2004)

By Landon H. Rowland

February 21, 2004

Herman Johnson was a modest man. But, he would be pleased by the “clouds of witness” which have celebrated him in the days since he died. He would be smiling on all who knew him and cared about him and his causes.

Herman’s wit is well known to many of you. Gwen has told you all about it. His wit was refined over the years of observing our personal and institutional pretenses and vulnerabilities. This occasion is not the one to review and revel in its many examples.

His wit came out of a great understanding of the self-important and the self-seeking, of the great and near great, and, at the same time, his understanding of the essential worth of the left out and the left behind, and how, with a “little bit” of help, a “little bit” of encouragement, the unlikely and the overlooked can succeed and do good things.

He had learned to beware the high and mighty and their claims to center stage, to watch out for those who are “on coming”, make sure they could have access to the resources and the right to use them that will ensure their good works and success.

So, Herman was a believer in mentors, those persons who come into your life and give that little push, that little bit of help that sends you on to better things, to better times for yourself, your loved ones and your community.

Herman was ahead of his time. We hear a lot about mentors today – how they are essential – as taskmasters, as muses – in overcoming barriers to advancement.

Herman had many mentors – persons who the dictionary tells us, “remember” and “give good counsel”. Herman, as a near fatherless boy, lived at one time with his uncle who ran a trucking operation in Elmira, New York where Herman was going to school to work on the dyslexia he thought he had. This uncle, as someone said, “wanted Herman to succeed”. But, this uncle, while he stands out in guiding Herman in early days, was one of several who in the words of another witness, “favored Herman because he wanted education”.

He attended Cornell University with a state subsidy. After graduation in 1938 and some graduate work at the University of Chicago, he came back to New York City. There were no jobs in 1940 for a talented young black man, even with an Ivy League degree. Herman had worked for a New York politician, later Senator, who helped him get a job at the “bottom of the pile” in the Post Office. He was there when WWII started, and he was drafted. His white colleagues with the Post Office said none of them would be drafted because their work was essential to the war effort. They were correct except for Herman – his draft notice stuck.

Posted to West Texas, he ran into trouble with his independent thinking and his clear advantages in education and self-awareness. He was saved once again by his friend, the New York Senator who secured a place for him in officers’ candidate school. He became a member of the Tuskegee Airmen and worked for General Benjamin Davis who set an example for the integrated Armed Forces of this country. After the war ended, he left the service to become Administrator of the historic Freedman’s Hospital, the teaching hospital of the Howard University.

It was this entire legacy he brought to Kansas City.

His ultimate mentor, Dorothy, met him here – the picture on our program today of the soon-to-be married couple says it all.

She is the exceptionally lovely and intelligent lady and Herman is the proud gentleman, who as a new comer had found the best match in town.

He began to learn the City. But, he also took advantage of an idea presented by Charles Schmelzer – to start a real estate appraisal business – the first of its kind for an African American in Kansas City.



Can one man mentor a city? Examples of mentors to Herman are the forerunners of those good works of Herman in which he becomes the mentor to others. Pete Levi has told you today of one such initiative. “POWER”, which Herman initiated just two years ago, when he was 85. After hearing a presentation at a LINC meeting, he challenged the Chamber of Commerce to create a program of successful entrepreneurs mentoring start ups and those beginning independent small

businesses. He watched over the program from its inception. You have heard of its impact and its success.

There is another among many that should be mentioned today. Tom Rhone talked about the Douglas Bank. When failure of the Douglas Bank was imminent, Herman Johnson was selected as a leader of a new Board of Directors, tasked with saving the Bank. He was picked because he was "reliable", "consistent" and, most important, "trustworthy in handling the affairs of other people".

He thus became a mentor to the entire city in saving and creating a resource of essential financial services for an underserved community. Without such a resource, many opportunities for financing new businesses, entrepreneurs, home owners and others in the black community would have disappeared.

Herman and his associates were successful in keeping the bank alive as Tom Rhone described. Herman recently brought in Lester Johnson, a proven manager, to solidify the bank's progress and extend its success. The fruits of his work were seen in two *Kansas City Star* articles earlier this week. The first was a picture Les Johnson celebrating the deposit of \$1,000,000 in the Bank by Truman Medical Center.



The second article pictured smiling, rejoicing church leaders celebrating their collaboration in making their own deposit of \$1,000,000 in the Douglas Bank. Herman, from his death bed, would have surely beamed at these achievements.



One last example of Herman's mentoring to the community at large involves children in the before and after school program of the Local Investment Commission. Herman believed in this program and its necessity for the working, poor families of Kansas City. He visited several of the schools where children stayed after school for more instruction, homework, and supervised recreation, among other things. Herman saw the risk of "latch key" children. They, in turn, responded to Herman's interest and concerns. In this letter, they appealed to Herman:

Thank you Mr. Johnson  
for working to keep  
our after school  
program  
open.

JULIE  
MELON  
DAVID  
LARRY  
MICHAELA  
TOS. POBETH  
AFTER

REGGIE  
JOHN

DOCK

BRITNEY DAVID

These stories demonstrate the power of one man in a city new to him and how that man, faced with many obstacles, can set an example for "one-on-one" mentoring and a higher example in mentoring an entire city in larger causes which can be shared by all of us.

Can one soul mentor a nation? In his later years, Herman took up the task of vindicating his father, Henry Johnson.

Herman's father served in the U.S. Army in World War I. His New York unit, however, because it was black, except for the commanding officer, was assigned to French military staff. Under that command Herman's father performed acts of admitted heroism in combat. Those acts earned him the Croix de Guerre, the highest French combat medal. The U.S. awarded him no medals, but did decorate his unit's commanding officer with the Congressional Medal of Honor. After the war, he returned to New York to a series of typical low income jobs, and was buried in an unmarked pauper's field.



Herman was tireless in his efforts to secure just recognition for his father. He found many allies and supporters in these efforts. Many of you here today helped him. So did State and national legislative and executive officials. Painfully, in the face of resistance and delays, Herman made progress.

His father's grave was found and the remains removed and reburied at Arlington National Cemetery. This picture from the Kansas City Star of January 11, 2002, represents the confirmation of part of Herman's task. Not too much

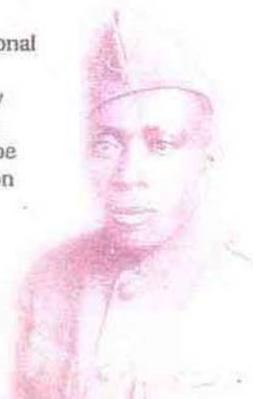
later, the Army and the Department of Defense agreed to award Herman's father the Distinguished Service Cross, our nation's second highest combat award. At his death Herman was still at work to get the award he deserved.

## Saluting a veteran's valor



KEN C. GREENE/The Associated Press

**W**ith New York Gov. George Pataki at his side, Kansas City's Herman Johnson (left) on Thursday placed a wreath of chrysanthemums and carnations beside his father's headstone in Arlington National Cemetery as a military trumpeter played taps. Johnson, 85, recently learned that his father, black World War I hero Henry Johnson, was buried in Arlington rather than an anonymous grave in Albany, N.Y. Pataki, Herman Johnson and others hope the grave's discovery will bolster their case that Henry Johnson deserves the Medal of Honor — recognition they say he was denied, at least in part, because of racism. "It was a lovely service and I was really moved by all the people who were there..." Herman Johnson said. "The governor spoke very nicely of my father and pledged that he is going to keep working until he gets the medal."



In this picture, he not only vindicates his father, but all black soldiers who served this often unworthy nation. Herman is buried at his own cemetery, here in Kansas City, even though entitled to be at Arlington along side his father.

Herman's success in seeking and securing the vindication of his father's war record was widely reported. His persistence was also widely known and respected. Herman's work on behalf of his father was work on behalf of all black servicemen whose contributions to the nation have been ignored or overlooked. The vindication of his father before a national audience is therefore vindication for all these men whose past heroism can now be celebrated. But, this vindication is also prospective for servicemen and women of the future. Herman's "gift" to the nation was thus a larger aspect of his role as mentor to all in this community: he was a mentor to our country.

Herman was a newcomer to Kansas City, but he made this City his own. He was given an inquiring and discerning heart and the courage "to will and to persevere". In the service for Herman at St. Augustine this morning, Father Shepherd used Psalm 27. It says in part, "I should utterly have fainted but that I believe verily to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living". He was speaking directly to us of Herman's example and its powerful effects to all in his community. Herman's fresh perspective made him see our city whole – its limitations, its injustices, its background and its prospects. He worked in large and small ways, in public and in private to make those projects bright and to include everyone in them. He is our example -- the example celebrated in the Book of Common Prayer, where the survivors give thanks for the good example and the encouragement to each of us of the example of dead. Again, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, we continue our course on earth, bound to follow the examples of their steadfastness. We give thanks for these examples, for Herman. We bless them and their legacy and carry on their mission. We will press on.

Amen

#### Addendum to Herman Johnson's Eulogy

On Labor Day, 2002, Herman and Dorothy Johnson were among many guests gathered at Ever Glades Farm to celebrate the national holiday of the working man. As was customary, various guests stood up to talk about some story or some lesson that should be remembered to honor men and women of American labor. After several had spoken, Herman came forward and said he wanted to tell a story about the Tuskegee

Airmen and how American men and women could reach across racial lines to accomplish good things in shared labor.

He told how the Tuskegee Airmen were organized in the course of World War II and posted at Tuskegee, AL. They were given moderate resources and facilities. They were well down the list for needed parts and supplies necessary for their training and full engagement. Somehow the word got out to the community around Tuskegee concerning the needs of the Tuskegee Airmen as to facilities, spare parts, and related materials. People in the surrounding countryside came to Tuskegee and said they would volunteer and provide the help Tuskegee Airmen needed to activate.

Herman described how these white people from around Tuskegee came to the rescue of the black aviators. He said there was a credit to the cooperation of black and white laboring people in a common cause.