

# The Happiest Day of My Life

June 1865

In mid-April, twenty-year-old plantation owner Samuel Dawson learned of the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War. Though the Union victory thrilled Samuel, he felt great uncertainty about what that meant for himself and more than one hundred slaves on his plantation. Would Texas rejoin the Union? he wondered. If so, would slavery remain legal?

Early in the afternoon on June 19<sup>th</sup>, twenty Union soldiers rode onto Samuel's plantation. Samuel went outside to meet the soldiers, apprehensive about their purpose. Will, an enslaved boy who had been his best friend for eight years, accompanied Samuel to meet the soldiers.

The strapping young men stood just under six feet tall. Samuel's brown hair was shoulder length, while Will kept his hair close-cropped. Both were clean shaven. Samuel's lightly tanned face was a stark contrast to Will's ebony complexion. Their brown eyes exuded an intensity that many found uncomfortable, yet those same eyes sparkled with benevolence.

One man dismounted from his horse and handed the rein to the rider beside him. "Good morning, sir," the man said. "I am Major General Gordon Granger of the United States Army. I would like to speak to the master of the plantation."

"That would be me," Samuel said. That such a young man would own a plantation shocked Granger. "I am Samuel Dawson. I inherited the plantation four years ago, when I was sixteen. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I am here to deliver an announcement to your slaves," Granger replied.

"What is the nature of that announcement?" Samuel asked. Granger handed Samuel a piece of paper. As Samuel read, a tear trickled down his cheek. "May I... May I have the pleasure of making this announcement?" he asked emotionally.

Granger was visibly shocked. "Well, I guess that would be acceptable."

"Will, please gather everyone under the Grandfather Tree." Years before, Samuel bestowed that moniker on the largest oak tree on the plantation.

After Will set out on his errand, Granger looked at Samuel. "Mr. Dawson, why do you want to make the announcement?" he asked. "Today, I visited two dozen plantations, and each owner angrily and belligerently reacted to the news of their slaves' freedom. You are the first to be happy about this development."

"I have dreamed of this day for years," Samuel said solemnly. "I didn't know when it would arrive, but I knew it would happen someday. Let's walk out to the Grandfather Tree so that I can make this the happiest day of my life."

Samuel and Granger walked in silence, with the other soldiers riding behind them. They reached the Grandfather Tree to find nearly everyone on the plantation assembled. Will and his family stood front and center, with other leaders of the community standing on each side of them. Everyone grew nervous when they saw the Union soldiers and whispered among themselves.

When the last men walked up, Samuel spoke. "I apologize for interrupting you in the middle of your day, but I believe you will find what I have to say to be worth the interruption. This gentleman

standing beside me is Major General Gordon Granger of the United States Army. He has delivered to me a proclamation from the President of the United States. I will read it to you.

I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free. Such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States. And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

Everyone stood in stunned silence, unsure whether what they had just heard was true. “You are free!” Samuel shouted. “You are finally free!”

Will stepped forward and hugged Samuel. “You always said this day would happen. I certainly wanted you to be right, but it seemed like a fantasy. Thank you.”

Will’s parents, Buck and Mima, and Will’s sister Thelma, encircled Samuel, smothering him with hugs as tears streamed down everyone’s cheeks. And then the other men and women surged forward, eager to thank Samuel for all he had done for them in the preceding years. Everyone wanted to shake Samuel’s hand or hug him.

Granger and his men watched silently. Nothing remotely close to this occurred on any of the other plantations that they had visited. On the other plantations, the slaves seemed to have understandable animosity toward their master. Here, the negroes genuinely adored Samuel. When the last of the men had thanked Samuel, Granger said, “Mr. Dawson, that was remarkable. Your negroes seem to truly like you. How is that possible?”

Samuel smiled. “Even before I inherited the plantation, I quit treating them like slaves. I began treating them like human beings. I paid them a wage. The first year I did it, our production soared. Each year since, I have given them more freedom. Many of them own a business. We have a carpenter, a blacksmith, a brickmaker, and more. Each person gets to choose who to work for and negotiate a wage that is mutually acceptable. To the extent possible, I created a wage system. Nearly everyone owns their home. In addition, Will and I have taught most of them to read and write. Many know arithmetic. The entrepreneurs know accounting.”

“Why? Why did you do that?”

“I have abhorred slavery for as long as I can remember, but I couldn’t set the slaves free. It was illegal to do so. I could, however, give them as much freedom as possible here on the plantation. I hoped that someday I could set them free. However, I realized it would be cruel to set them free and be unprepared for freedom. For their whole lives, they’ve been told what to do. There were very few decisions that they could make. To put them in a position where they had to make important decisions about their lives without the knowledge and skills to do so seemed almost as cruel as slavery. So, I began preparing them for the day that they would be free.”

“You are an amazing young man,” Granger said. “My superiors need to hear what you have done. I suspect they will want to talk to you.”

“Will deserves to share the credit,” Samuel said while pointing to his friend, who stood ten yards away. “I couldn’t have accomplished what I have without him. He was the first that I taught to read and write, and then he helped me teach others. And he helped me convince everyone on the plantation that my intentions were sincere. As you might imagine, they were skeptical when their master started being nice to them.”

As the soldiers rode away, Will and Buck approached Samuel. Buck carried a box. “Samuel,” Will said, “I have a request.” Samuel nodded. “Can we rename the Grandfather Tree? I think calling it the Freedom Tree is more fitting.”

“That, my friend,” Samuel said, “is a wonderful idea.”

“Today seems like an appropriate day to give you this,” Buck said as he gave the box to Samuel. Samuel took the box and removed the lid. Inside were two carved chess pieces, both kings. Early in their friendship, Samuel had taught Will how to play chess.

“Look at their faces,” Will commanded. Samuel picked up the white king and studied it. The face of the king bore a remarkable resemblance to his own face. He picked up the black king and saw that it had Will’s face. “My father made these for us,” Will explained. “He said that we are both kings.”

*Dawson Town* is available on [Amazon](#).