

**Jordan Barksdale**

Jordan Barksdale was born in 1825 in Norfolk, Virginia. It is unknown when he arrived in Clarksville, Tennessee, but he is mentioned in the local paper as early as 1861 and seems to have been well-known in Clarksville for a while before that. The article announces the establishment of an eating house at the state line for railroad travelers opened by W. F. Bibb. The article states “Jordan Barksdale, the most widely known colored individual in the Confederacy, from his long connection with our best hotels, is a fixture, now, at Bibb’s and says he is going to work harder than ever before, to make that the model Railroad-house of the country. Jordan’s a good trump.” This is the earliest mention found on him in the local paper but it is one of twenty found so far. It indicates that Jordan was not a slave and had been a free man for quite a while. The paper seemed to take a keen interest in his employment and career. Jordan distinguished himself as a porter in the Franklin House Hotel and then as an agent and porter for the steamboats running the Cumberland River.

He married Janie or Jane who was born in 1840 in Tennessee. They had five children together but only two of them, William and Peter, survived to adulthood. The only description of him deals with his personality not his looks. In June 1866, a correspondent for the Clarksville Chronicle wrote a letter/column on a trip he took on a steam boat going to Paducah. In the last paragraph of his description of the trip, he said this about Jordan Barksdale: “Our old friend and distinguished townsman, Jordan Barksdale, is last but not least, of the excellent institutions of this worthy little craft, and is especially attentive to all the Clarksville people.”

The boat the reporter was on was the Steamer Tyrone on which Jordan was a porter until 1869. Apparently, steamboat travel had a season because Jordan is reported in newspaper articles dividing his residence between Clarksville and Paducah, Kentucky. On July 17, 1869, the paper noted that Jordan was no longer working on the Tyrone and was now working at the Southern Hotel. In December 1869, he was rehired to work on the Tyrone only to part ways again in April 1871. The Nashville Union and American Newspaper suggested that the President appoint him as Minister to Haiti in 1869.

The 1870 census list his age as 47, his residence in District 12, and his occupation as laborer. His wife Janie is 40, his son William is 11 and Peter is 7. Neither Jordan nor Janie can read or write, but both his sons can.

The Montgomery County Fair started on October 20, 1871 and the paper announced that Jordan Barksdale was working at the fair and would take care of anyone’s baggage if they left it with him. He was working in the area of Booth 3.

The January 3, 1873 Nashville Union and American Newspaper reported that Jordan, a colored Democrat, had established an intelligence office for the hire of servants at Clarksville.

On Oct 6, 1873, someone attempted to burn down Jordan’s house which was on the corner of Strawberry and First streets. The arsonist poured coal oil on the weather-boarding and set fire to it. It was discovered and extinguished before it did much damage. He probably did not own the house because a search of the county tax records failed to turn up his name.

An announcement in the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle on January 27, 1877 stated that Jordan “will notify passengers who may wish to take a boat, at any time day or night.” Two months later, he was reporting to the paper that a 15 year old deck-sweeper on the T.T. Hillman was drowned off the boat as it was landing at Hillman’s Rolling Mill on March 7, 1877.

Jordan was probably the first black Clarksville entrepreneur. Porter at hotels and on steamboats, agent for steamboats, baggage handler, and boarding house proprietor are just a few of his enterprises. The latter was reported on April 13, 1878 when the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle noted that “Two couples of runaway colored people have recently been married at Jordan Barksdale’s boarding house on Strawberry alley.”

In 1879 one of the important debates in Tennessee was called the Compromise. This proposed to settle Tennessee’s debt at once but at less than the full amount of the debt. It was put on a ballot for Tennessean’s to vote yes or no. The Democratic Party was in favor of it and the republicans were not. The paper noted on August 12, 1879 that Jordan voted for the Compromise and that this indicated the vote “of the intelligent class of colored people.”

On October 25, 1879, the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle published a letter calling for J.J. Causman to run for Mayor of Clarksville. The letter was signed by the most prominent black citizens of Clarksville. One of the men that signed the letter was Jordan Barksdale.

The 1880 Montgomery County Census does not record his occupation, but it notes that his wife Janie was a housekeeper; his eldest son, William, was a grocer; and his youngest son, Peter was still at school. It is possible that William worked in his father’s grocery because a September 7, 1880 article used Jordan Barksdale’s grocery as a landmark in an article describing an arrest.

In September 1880 Jordan started a new business. The newspaper announced that Jordan ‘owns an express wagon for hauling baggage and will see it properly checked on RR or steamboat.” In November 1880, the newspaper noted he was a porter on the Steamer Throup.

Both the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle and the Clarksville Semi-Weekly Tobacco Leaf carried his obituary. Both record he died suddenly on October 5, 1881. His tombstone records his death date as October 7, 1882. This tells us that there was a delay in putting a marker on his grave since the date recorded is in error.

The best description of Jordan Barksdale is contained in the obituary published by the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle on October 8, 1881.

“Jordan Barksdale, a prominent, reliable, and well-esteemed colored man who was known to everybody in our city, died very suddenly on Wednesday morning at five o’clock of supposed heart-disease. He was up and walking around the evening before, though complaining some, and his sudden death was a severe shock to his family and numerous friends.

No colored man in our midst was ever more generally liked than Jordan Barksdale. He was quiet, polite, and always attentive to his duties. For many years past he has acted as agent and porter for the steamboats running the Cumberland. He was aged fifty-four years. He was buried Thursday evening at the colored cemetery where his remains were followed by a large concourse of mourners.”

His wife Jane is listed in the 1900 census living at 531 Franklin Street with her son William and his family. Her occupation is listed as cook and there is some indication that she ran an eatery. She owned the house free of mortgage. The 1910 census shows her as proprietor of a boarding house. Her house number changed to 535. Jane Barksdale died on December 13th, 1911 of paralysis. She was 65 years old. Currently, her burial place is unknown.