

BETWEEN THE COVERS RARE BOOKS

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Matthew A. Johnson

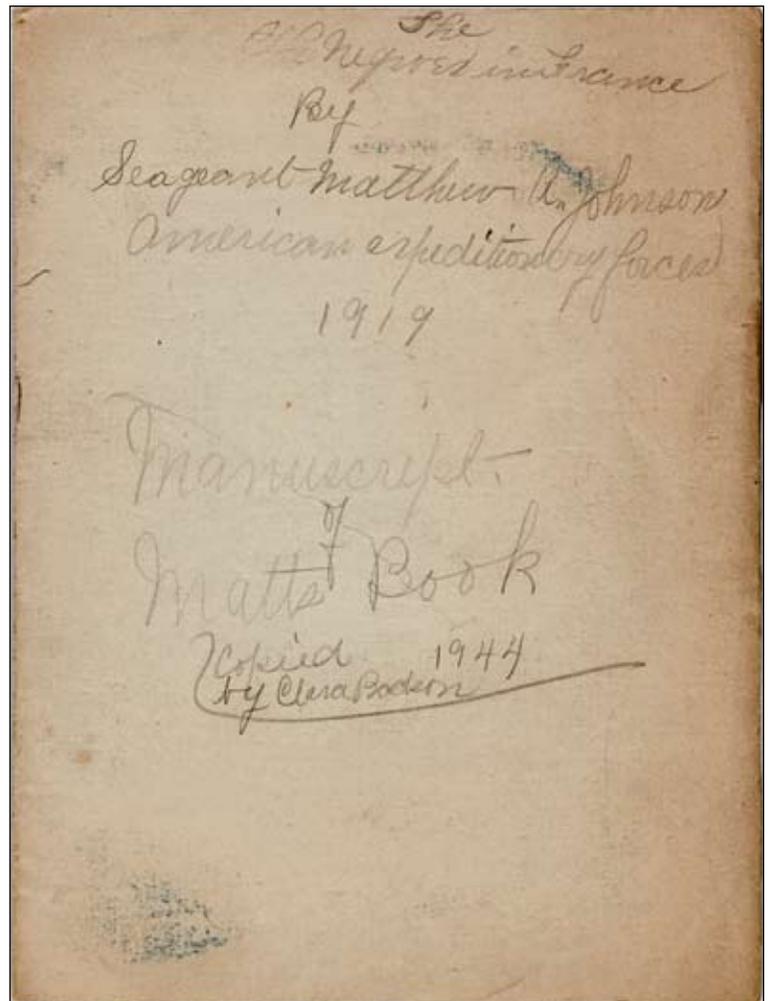
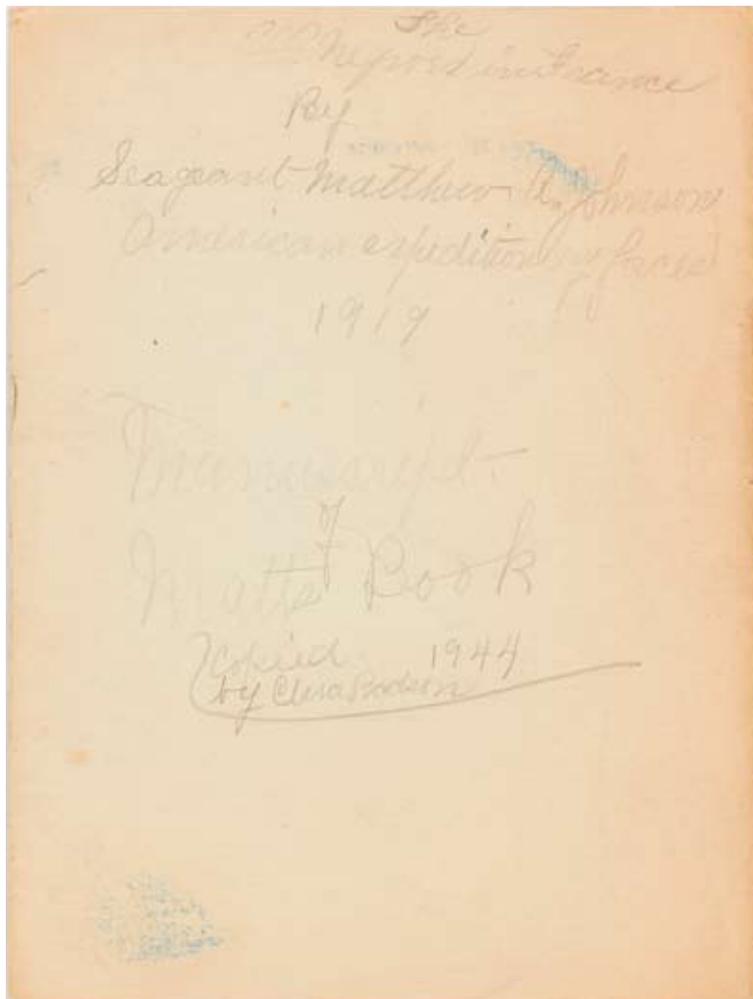
[Manuscript]: "The Negro in France by Sergeant Matthew A. Johnson. American Expeditionary Force 1919. Manuscript of Matt's Book. Copied by Clara Bodson 1944" [with] Photograph of Sgt. Johnson at Quentin Roosevelt's Grave in France

\$3500



Manuscript in pencil. Five leaves of slightly irregularly sized paper folded to make 20pp. Several of the leaves are on stationary printed "En Route Pennsylvania Railroad". Handwritten title page and 17 additional pages tightly written in pencil (numbered 1-16, but with the page number 14 used twice, thus totaling 18 pages including the titlepage), the pagination is irregular, but the manuscript is complete and the pagination easily decipherable with slight effort. Some rubbing to the pencil writing but all is easily legible and readable. The narrative totals approximately 2500 words. Note: in the passages quoted below we've made a few minor corrections to errors of spelling or punctuation solely to enhance the clarity of the narrative.

Johnson starts with his arrival in France: "The French were watching us as the train pulled up to the station. The dark faces aroused their curiosity. The rural population, not well informed, knows well the Negro of Africa, but not from America. The country of classical types, characterized by the cold, smooth white face - that from America could come this dark group, none could believe his own eyes." He discusses their initial peaceful camp and making friends with white soldiers, before heading forward to take artillery target practice: "How we wish they may be only 'survivors' until we meet again."



After completing target practice they are moved to the front at the French town of Atton: "...where we put our 75s into action against the Germans." He notes that "When the news of the signing of the Armistice came it found the 92nd Division defending what is known as the Marbacher sector with divisional headquarters in a little French town near the devastated city of Pont-a-Momson. Probably had the war lasted a little longer we would have been strolling the avenues of Metz today. Here on the front, with 75s no longer breaking the monotony and nowhere to go..." He continues: "You have heard a great deal about 'No Man's Land' and the front. I wonder what those vague terms mean to you.... Technically speaking 'No Man's Land' is that strip of land between the enemy front line trenches and our own, some times it may be measures in meters or feet; and sometimes in kilometers." After discussing the towns at the front: "One could hardly exaggerate the conditions of these shell-eaten towns... Apparently many of the occupants made hasty exits and were forced to leave many valuable things behind from which the Huns made careful selections..."

Johnson waxes philosophical: "Any nation that chooses an existence with disregard for the various values of life chooses for itself a dangerous pathway and one which must end in darkness, defeat, or disaster" and applies this philosophy to Germany, with a relatively sophisticated explication on ethics and civilization. He also discusses the French: "The French have no place in their big hearts for race antipathies and race prejudices. Here a man is a man and he is treated accordingly; it is character not color that wins in France. And the lack of character that loses. What is it in America?"

Johnson discusses the French unpreparedness for the War and suggests ways to improve their seacoast and harbor facilities, and discusses Brest in some detail, most of it unflattering. "Many of the people of Brest are ignorant, vulgar and coarse. The children are dirty and ragged and annoy the strangers by their persistent begging. Houses of Prostitution legal and illegal, provised and improvised may be found..."

Rather belatedly, but effectively, in the narrative Johnson addresses the War itself: "The battle of Soissons, where America's crack national guard outfits won a victory. It was here that America's first Negro troops included in the famous rainbow division came forth and lived up to what was expected of them. And every succeeding battle delivering the goods. At Soissons the terrible Mustard Gas was used unsparingly by the enemy. One who has been mustard gassed affords a pathetic sight, his speech often leaves him, he may lose his sight, teeth, legs or arms. To use the words of a soldier, 'He may cash his last check'. Many times our ranks were refilled but never did the men falter. When the 15th New York Boys and the 8th Ill[inois] Boys went in besides outfits from Massachusetts and the Ohio Boys, Huns began to fall on all sides. The first unit of the 92nd Division to be called into the greatest battle in the famous September drive was the 368th Infantry. It was about the 16th of September when the road leading to the Argonne Forrest became clogged with anxious dark faces that showed no sign of distress or fear. In its initial encounter the 368th did all that was expected of it and went 'over the top' with little difficulty, capturing prisoners and capturing objectives. So pleased were the officers in command of the allied troops in this section with the success of the first attack of the colored infantry that the 368th was ordered to another objective in the face of heavy machine gun fire..." Having stalled in their advance: "In the meanwhile the 367th Infantry came forth and the commanding officer asked 'How many of you will come back or not at all?' Whereupon the whole regiment replied by immediately raising their hands."



After a further discussion of action he concludes the narrative: "When your blood has been spilled in the soil of France, making the world safe for Democracy are you going to let those men die in vain? If you are not, then protect the flower of the future Negro race, which is the female sex. I pray that the day will soon come when the stars and stripes will wash over America as one nation and God for us all."

The manuscript is accompanied by a sepia-toned gelatin silver photograph, 5¼" x 3¼", of Johnson and three other uniformed African-American soldiers, at the grave of Quentin Roosevelt. Small chip on one corner, very good, on the verso is the stamped mark of the photographer Ehrhard of Chateau-Thierry, with penciled note: "Teddy Roosevelt's Son's Grave. Sgt. Matthew A. Johnson."



Obviously many Matthew Johnsons were enlisted in the Army in WWI. Seemingly the most likely candidate to be our Matthew Johnson is Matthew Aaron Johnson from Newark, Delaware, born in 1894. His draft application states he was both short and stout, and that might indicate that the shortest and stoutest man on the far left of the photograph is Johnson. The 1930 census denotes Johnson as a janitor at a “College”, presumably the University of Delaware. We also found a Clara Bodson living in Newark; both are noted as being African-Americans in census data. Despite the note that this was “Copied by Clara Bodson 1944”, we cannot confirm that this isn’t the original, as it feels earlier than 1944; and it is conceivable that the note was appended by Bodson to denote a separate copy that she made. All that said, we can find no other trace of this narrative and as such it is a primary resource of the African-American experience in WWI. [BTC#402878]