Henry Baker by P.H. Polk, 1932

Read by: Stephen Petersen - Historian of Photography & Guest Curator

This dramatic portrait was made by P.H. Polk in 1932, when he was Official Photographer at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee Alabama. It was part of a series that Polk called the "Old Characters," depicting elderly African Americans in Alabama in the early years of the Great Depression. These were individuals who had been born into slavery in the 1850s and who had lived through the Civil War and Emancipation, through Reconstruction, and into the eras of Disenfranchisement and Jim Crow discrimination. The images are intended specifically to counteract negative stereotypes of rural blacks and to show the subjects with respect and dignity.

Henry Baker, the subject of this portrait, was born in 1854, and his story -- recorded in 1938 in an oral history by the pioneering African American agricultural scientist Thomas Campbell -- is at once typical and remarkable. Baker's mother died shortly after childbirth, and he was raised apart from his father who lived on a neighboring plantation. As a child he was tasked with being water-boy to the field workers. Virtually orphaned, he was looked after by the white Mistress of his plantation, who regularly brought him to church with her.

After the Civil War, Baker worked as a tenant farmer but always with the goal of acquiring his own land, which he succeeded in doing despite many forces working against him, including white tenant farmers who bitterly resented a black man owning his farm, when they did not. He and his wife of 60 years, Sally, had a large family, whose many descendants can be found today.

Baker greatly benefitted from his proximity to the Tuskegee Institute, whose founder, Booker T. Washington, himself born into slavery, was a national leader in education and self-determination for African Americans at the turn of the century. Although Baker never had a formal education, he met and befriended Washington, and gained useful farming techniques from Tuskegee Institute's resident agricultural scientist George Washington Carver. Baker eventually became a successful landowner and farmer. For several decades, he would donate his first bale of cotton harvested each season to Tuskegee Institute.

This portrait is nicknamed "The Saint." Baker was ordained a preacher in the primitive Baptist Church, and he had an abiding faith in God's will and in a heaven beyond this earth, where his gaze here seems to be focused. The photographer Polk had a special relationship with the rather opinionated Baker, who, as he recalled, would sometimes walk into his classes and start lecturing the students. For his part, Polk was committed to documenting photographically the generation that preceded his, those who knew firsthand both slavery, and freedom. P.H. Polk's "Old Characters" series stands as a visual testimony, analogous and parallel to the oral history of his life that Baker elsewhere provided.