

Entry for Francis Barber from
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Barber, Francis (c.1745–1801), servant, was born a slave in Jamaica; his birth name and family are unknown. He was brought to England by Richard Bathurst, father to Johnson's friend of that name, who had him baptized and named Francis Barber, and sent him to a school in Barton in Teesdale, North Riding of Yorkshire. Freed by the terms of Bathurst's will, the boy was placed in Samuel Johnson's service upon the death of his wife in 1752, and remained with him until Johnson's death.

There were two occasions on which Francis left Johnson's household. The first was in October 1756, when he went to work for a Mr Farren, apothecary in Cheapside, for about two years. 'My boy is run away', Johnson complained (*Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 1.145), but the relationship was not completely fractured: the boy returned to visit Johnson regularly. Barber returned to Johnson but soon ran away again, this time to join the navy on 7 July 1758. From the Deptford tender *Golden Fleece*, he was transferred on 10 July to the *Princess Royal*, and on 18 December to the *Stag*, on fishery protection duty at Yarmouth. Influence with the Admiralty was secured, aided by Smollett, who described Barber as 'a sickly lad, of a delicate frame' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.349n.). Barber was discharged on 8 August 1760.

Barber performed his domestic duties diligently, though friends doubted Johnson's need for his service: 'Diogenes himself never wanted a servant less' (Hawkins, 326). Johnson used to buy food for Hodge, the cat, himself so that Frank's 'delicacy be not hurt, at seeing himself employed for the convenience of a quadruped' (Hill, 1.318). Certainly Johnson's devotion to Francis had the tenderness of a parent—he prayed with him, gave him continual moral guidance, and paid for him to attend the grammar school at Bishop's Stortford for five years from 1767. Johnson's affection emerges from his letters to the school: 'Do not imagine I shall forget or forsake you', he writes, and in another 'You can never be wise unless you love reading' (*Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 1.350).

Barber proved an attractive young man: 'Frank has carried the empire of Cupid farther than most men' said Johnson after returning from Lincolnshire in 1764, where the lad had so impressed the local girls that Mrs Piozzi asserted that one followed him back to London (Hill, 1.290–91). On 28 January 1773 he married Elizabeth Ball (c.1755–1816). They had five children. In 1783 the whole family came to live with Johnson at his house in Bolt Court, London.

Barber was a continuous presence in Johnson's life, accompanying him on many of his travels. On Johnson's death in 1784 he was the principal legatee, receiving an annuity of £70. The Barbers moved to Lichfield following their benefactor's advice that Francis remove himself from the temptations of London, but through extravagance they soon sank into poverty, and were reduced to selling gifts from Johnson to greedy collectors. For the last years of his life Barber kept a small village school in the nearby village of Burntwood. He died in Stafford Infirmary on 13 January 1801, and was buried on 28 January at St Mary's, Stafford.

Sources

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