

# ANSEL CLARK DIES AFTER LONG ILLNESS

## Born in Slavery, but Came North Near Close of Civil War

Ansel Clark, nonagenarian, everybody's friend, and known and respected by every man, woman and child in Portage, died Monday night, April 18, following several years of declining health. The end came at St. Savior's hospital where he had been confined for several months past. The remains were removed to Murison's chapel from where the service will be held at 2 o'clock Wednesday afternoon, conducted by Rev. J. V. Berger of the First Presbyterian church. For many years deceased was a member of the Wisconsin National Guard, enlisted with the Portage unit, and full military honors will be accorded at the burial which will be in Silver Lake cemetery. Friends desiring to do so may call at Murison's chapel until the hour of the funeral.

The appended tribute to his memory is written by Portage's noted authoress, Zona Gale Breese, who has known him since her earliest recollection:

By Zona Gale Breese

There is hardly anyone in Portage whose first recollections of the town do not include Ansel Clark. In his death last night at St. Savior's hospital, Portage lost a friend—lost, too, its most unique citizen.

Ansel had lived here for about seventy years. He was born a

slave, in Mississippi. He came here in the course of the Civil war. The span of his life ran back of that twenty-odd years. No one knows exactly how old Ansel was—he hardly knew himself—but he was well in his nineties.

As a young boy he was taken from his family on the Mississippi plantation where he was born, to work in the cottonfields of Tennessee. He never heard from or of his family after that. In Memphis he was put up on a block at the slave market and sold.

What things those first years of slavery held for him were buried with all the rest of his early memories. As he moved about the streets here—and watched generation after generation grow up, the picture of those first days were still in his mind. The lot of a slave—not by hearsay, but by suffering; the actual experience of the being who has been sold at auction. All these Ansel carried and buried in his silence.

When the war came, he was forced to take part against the hopes of his people, and to throw up earth works from plantation to plantation along the Mississippi river, from Greenville to Natchez. Here one of the most important battles of the Civil war took place. The hope that lay for him in that struggle, the tension of those days, the expectation of rejoining those who were dear to him—all this went about in memory with the figure whom the townspeople knew as "Ansel."

In the siege of Vicksburg, Ansel served as a nurse. He nursed a young lieutenant named Mix, who, on his recovery, brought Ansel north with him to Wisconsin, to his home in Adams county. There he stayed for a short time and then he came to Portage and to the family of Judge John T. Clark, where he worked for several years and then he went to the home of

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Ansel Clark, Former Slave, Soldier, Civil Officer and Respected Citizen of Portage

W. W. Corning. For years he drove the Corning carriage—early memories of Portage folk revive the picture of young Ansel, back of a fine team, the barouche filled with young people. When these families dispersed, Ansel remained here. When Co. F. went into camp it was Ansel who was "boss of the mess," and his skill in cookery was a by word. When the old steam "Silsby" fire engine was rushed to a fire, Ansel went with it, as a member of the Volunteer Fire Department. He was made constable, and his bearing and his presence were such that these themselves upheld the law. He had an innate dignity and poise, which everyone felt. A severity and a kindness too—he was made humane officer, and his love for

animals and sympathy with their lot expressed itself toward them and in his relentless following-up of any case of their suffering. As the years went by his background and experience ripened in a personality which no one forgot. His uprightness, his gravity gained respect, made him his secure place. A unique place. Living a life of peculiar loneliness, such loneliness as no one else in the community duplicated, he was yet contained, reserved, kindly and everyone was his friend. In time he became the owner of the W. W. Corning house on Wisconsin street, to which he had come as servant. He let the house, reserving a room for himself, and went into old age with the dignity of a citizen of substance. Per-

haps something of the dignity of those first citizens whom he served became and remained his ideal. The members of these two families remained his friends. When he was ill, Mrs. Anna Corning was here with him. Mrs. Nellie Corning Wright of Flint, Mich., is here now, and has attended him in his last illness. Mrs. F. M. Hoyt of Madison, who was Mollie Clark, Judge Clark's daughter, will be

here for his funeral. So far as Portage is concerned, Ansel solved the race problem. He was an accepted member of the community. When, in his eighties, he was ill at the hospital, everyone sent him flowers and fruit. Everyone mourns him now. His was a triumphant life. From slave to upright and respected citizen he moved—down his ninety years.

*Milwaukee Journal  
April 21, 1932*

## Portage Buries Former Slave

### Whole City Turns Out to Pay Last Honors to Old Negro; Flags Lowered

[Picture on Picture Page]

BY STAFF CORRESPONDENT OF THE JOURNAL

Portage, Wis. — Death gently showered Ansel Clark Wednesday with the gifts he had striven for in life — dignity, kindness, respect, friendliness and a noble ceremony by which a white populace did honor to the negro who had been one of them. Ansel lay in state in the Murison chapel here, beneath an American flag, which completely covered his gray coffin. Other flags were at his head and at his feet, borne by a color guard in khaki. Across his grave eight rifles cracked in the triple salute to a departed comrade. And in a distant corner of the sunlit Silker Lake cemetery a solitary bugler blew taps.

**"A Landmark Passes"**  
Born a slave ninety-odd years ago — Ansel never could recollect just when his birthday was or how old he would be . . . "Mebbe 96, mebbe 99, come next April or May," he would scratch his grizzled head and smile when he was asked. He died a property owner, a holder of public office, a highly esteemed man of substance. . . . a landmark passes here; not a tree nor a house nor anything that can be replaced, but a man who exemplified for all time the worth of a human being," said the Rev. J. V. E. Berger, Presbyterian pastor, to Ansel's friends who crowded the chapel.

Bared white heads were many in the chapel, people who would say, "I couldn't tell you how old he was; he was here when I was born and nobody knows how long before." There were men in white collars, spats, and correctly tailored clothes. There were others in flannel shirts, mackinaws and faded, earth stained work shoes. There were women who came in limousines with chauffeurs. There were wrinkled faces that said to a murmuring child, "Sh-h, put your head on grandma's shoulder and go to sleep."

**Heads Bowed in Homage**  
Their heads bowed together for the minister's prayer and a woman's sweet voice singing "Lead Kindly Light" and then "Abide With Me." As death makes of man a common color and a common state, they lowered their eyes in homage to Ansel, who watched over them as children, keeping them from falling into watering troughs or under the feet of prancing horses, and, it is said, chaperoned their parties with a first beau or a first sweetheart. It was a quiet and simple service. No one sobbed. Only some one here or there wiped a tear away. Ansel had no kinfolks. Barter of human beings had torn him from his family in Mississippi when he was little more than a baby and taken him to the cotton fields of Tennessee. He never saw his kin again. It was during the war to free him and his race that Ansel came north with young Lieut. Mix, who had been wounded at Vicksburg. Soon afterward — it must be 70 years ago — young Ansel came to Portage as coachman to Judge John T. Clarke and later to the household of W. W. Corning, both of pioneer Portage families. In later years Ansel won the post of humane officer, volunteer fireman, mess chief of Company F of the Wisconsin national guard, constable, and guardian of the city's youth.

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A FIRING squad from Company F, Wisconsin national guard, escorted Ansel Clark, a former negro slave and pioneer of Portage Wis., to his grave Wednesday, fired a triple salute and blew taps for the man who had been their mess chief. Clark had lived in Portage for more than 70 years and had served as humane officer, volunteer fireman, deputy sheriff and soldier. The firing squad is shown in one of its volleys.—Journal Staff Photo.

**All His Family**  
In recent years he has occupied a single room in his own house on Wisconsin st., leasing the rest of it. He died in St. Xavier's hospital Sunday night after a long illness.  
"Such a lonely life with no family or relatives; I hope he's happy," one woman said to another as they filed out of the chapel when the service was done.  
"Lonely? No, I don't think so," the other said. "To him, we were all his family."  
A white haired man looked down the street with its flags at half mast in Ansel's honor. Rows of automobiles were parked close to each other at the curb.

**"Fine Folks Down South"**

"I'm glad I don't see a horse," he sighed. "I don't know what we'd do with one now without Ansel to keep people from being cruel to them."

"Remember how he never would admit that Washington was a great man?" another said. "Lincoln was a great man because he freed the slaves but Washington was no good because he was a slave owner. Wouldn't do any good to explain that emancipation hadn't been thought of in Washington's day. Ansel would say, 'If Washington's a great man, then he should have thought of it.'"

"Just the same, he held no grudge against the southerners," a woman protested in a soft southern accent. "He would always say to me: 'So you is from the south. Mighty fine folks down south, highty fine folks.'"

**Leaders His Pallbearers**

The cortege was approaching the chapel door. Aldermen, county supervisors and outstanding business men of the city were bearing Ansel to his last rest. They were Charles Van Aerman, J. C. Saxe, Guy Goodell, D. H. Abell, Leopold Heinz and E. A. Jones.

"Attention!" snapped the lieutenant of Company F. The khaki clad members of the official escort were suddenly erect, alert, eyes front.

Down the village street they marched before the hearse while all business stopped. People were standing on the pavement, in doorways, watching from windows.

A general might have been passing.

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**WAS 'LANDMARK'  
IN CITIZENRY  
OF PORTAGE**

Just as Ansel was respected in Portage, so Sam is respected in capitol circles in Madison. For years he has taken care of the visitors' room in the governor's office, and has been pointed out as the picture of tact and diplomacy in arranging appointments and taking care of guests.

**Services for Ansel Clark, a  
Former Southern Slave,  
Held Wednesday**

Pallbearers for the deceased were Jack J. Saxe, D. H. Abell, Leopold F. Heinze, Charles A. Van Aerman, E. A. Jones and Guy F. Goodell.

One of the city's most prominent citizens was laid to rest yesterday when funeral services for Ansel Clark, former county humane officer and town constable, were held Wednesday afternoon from Murison's chapel.

Mrs. Charles J. Kutzke, accompanied by Mrs. David Bogue, sang "Lead Kindly Light," and "Abide With Me" during the funeral services.

In his funeral oration Rev. J. V. Berger of the Presbyterian church said that one of Portage's "landmarks" had been erased. Even more than a landmark had been lost, he said, because Ansel could not be replaced.

Military honors were given Mr. Clark, who had been a member of Company F, Wisconsin National Guard. The military escort preceded the hearse from the Murison chapel, and fired a farewell salute over the grave at Silver Lake cemetery.

Paying homage to one of the most respected citizens of his race Sam Price, major domo for many administrations of governors in Wisconsin, came here yesterday from Madison for the funeral.