

Billy Simons: The Black Jew of Charleston

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Like whites throughout Antebellum America, Jews on occasion had participated in slave traffic and ownership, though evidence does exist of the limited acceptance of blacks by some Jews in South Carolina, witness the marriage of Anna Cohen of Georgetown to John Mitchell, a founder of the black mutual aid Brown Fellowship Society, and the union of Jacob Cardozo with a black woman who bore their son Frederick, founder of the Avery Institute, a black Reconstruction era school in Charleston. Nevertheless, only one instance of a black Jew in all of the Old South has been recorded—Billy Simons of Charleston. What follows is an attempt to revive his memory, to give life to a unique individual.

Only a handful of “facts” remains concerning the life of Billy Simons, known on the streets of Charleston as “Uncle Billy.” Though occasionally speaking of his birth in Waccamaw, South Carolina, the ritual scars he bore testified to his African origins.¹ Born about 1780, his years in Madagascar came to an end when he was sold into slavery, reaching the United States by way of the Barbary coast.² Sullivan’s Island, characterized by Peter Woods as the Ellis Island of African immigration,³ was the likely site of

¹ “Death of an Old Servant,” *The Charleston Daily Courier*, December 12, 1859.

² Maurice Mayer’s article in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, 1857, vol. 21, p.339; translated in Charles Reznikoff’s *Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950), p. 279.

³ Peter H. Woods, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stone Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974), p. xiv.

Uncle Billy's first steps on American soil. Whether he went first to Waccamaw, thereby explaining this element in his reminiscences, or directly to Charleston is uncertain.⁴

Uncle Billy spent most of his adult life working for several Charleston newspapers. Purchased by A.S. Willington, owner of *The Charleston Courier*, from the estate of James Johnson in about 1840, Uncle Billy passed the years until his death on December 10, 1859, as a newspaper carrier, and working at times as a fireman for the *Courier* presses. A familiar sight on the streets of Charleston, Billy Simons struck an imposing figure (as seen in a contemporary sketch by A.C. McGillivray), while further enhancing his reputation by delivering what came to be known as the "New Year Carrier Addresses." A journalist who first came to the *Courier* in 1848 later recalled with vivid detail the physical presence of Billy Simons as he made his daily rounds:

He wore a high-crowned hat on and off duty, as carrier. That hat worn in all weathers had the appearance of a "Roman ruin," but on Sundays and holidays he donned a hat in perfect style and condition. In his later service as carrier he used to separate his papers, a few in his hat, others in pockets; of course, his main supply was under his arm, but as he said: "Dis make me 'member" the turnouts on the route, Court House Square, Ladson Court, etc. . . . It was a curious sight to see Billy on Sundays and holidays, when he would appear on Broad and East Bay streets in his shining silk hat, full suit of black and a frill in his shirt bosom of great size, snowy white, four inches wide, and extending from his chin to his waist. He was highly esteemed, quite popular, and with his New Year's Carrier Addresses was ever smiling at the success which fell to him in collecting six-pences and quarters.⁵

As he advanced in age, Uncle Billy refused to be pensioned and died on the job from "natural causes," as it was reported. In tribute to his former slave, Willington lamented in the *Courier* that

all readers in this city, and many who have removed from our city limits, will feel as if each has lost an old acquaintance in learning that "Old Uncle Billy" has departed. . . . He has delivered his last paper and tendered his last greetings

⁴ "Death of an Old Servant."

⁵ Charleston News and Courier, *Centennial of*. . . (Charleston, 1903). Billy Simons appears on the tax rolls, unnamed of course, as one of three slaves owned by A.S. Willington & Co., the tax being \$3 per slave (*List of Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1859* [Charleston: Walker, Evans, 1860], p. 371).

for Christmas and New Years. "Old Billy Simons" was known to and by more of our readers we suppose, in this city, than any person of his condition, and to many of them was most favorably known. . . . He was in many respects a remarkable representative of his race—unusually intelligent, shrewd, and quick in learning, yet withal active, devoted and faithful—thrifty for himself and family, and scrupulously exact in all duties. . . . He died literally at work or soon after discharging one of his errands as a newspaper carrier. . . . He fell on George-street on Saturday evening, and before he could be removed to his home, life had departed . . . The old man has gone, and never more in response to question or nightly salutations, shall we hear in the *Courier* office his constant reply, "Bless de Lord, I's alive yet." Few reach his age with more claims relatively to honorable remembrance.⁶

The *Return of Deaths within the City of Charleston* makes no mention of Billy Simons' place of burial. For nearly all those whose deaths are recorded in these several volumes, a cemetery or other burial site is listed. Apparently, some question arose as to the proper arrangements for his burial—for Uncle Billy was a Jew and had repeatedly spoken of his desire to be buried among his co-religionists. A number of "Colored Cemeteries," some existing as adjuncts of white churches, are mentioned in the *Return*. . . volumes; it is possible that Uncle Billy was interred in one associated with St. Philip's, the church in which A.S. Willington was a congregant. Described as a "just" man at the time of his death, and judging from the lengthy and sincere obituary eulogizing his deceased "servant," Willington was likely to have taken great care in finding a resting place for Uncle Billy. Yet, the fact that no place of interment was listed seems to indicate the possibility of unusual circumstances, or of a dispute regarding Billy Simons' religious identification. Willington's perception of him as a Christian would have clashed with Billy Simons' known ties to the Jewish community. A delay appears to have been inevitable before a final decision could be reached. And while a check of the burials in Charleston's Jewish cemeteries does not reveal the name of Billy

⁶ City of Charleston, South Carolina, *Return of Deaths within the City of Charleston*, 1858-1861 volume (manuscript). Billy Simons is listed as a resident of Meeting Street, a "slave, laborer" who died of "Old Age," and had been owned by A.S. Willington & Co.

⁷ Tombstone inscription, "The memory of the just is blest," from St. Philip's Churchyard, quoted in Elizabeth Marceil's *Tombstone Inscriptions from Charleston Churchyards* (Charleston, 1936—Typescript), p. 189.

Simons,⁸ it is not inconceivable that some place was found for him among the Jewish deceased, perhaps a pauper's grave with a long since crumbled wooden marker.

That Uncle Billy was admitted to membership in Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim⁹ is testimony to the ability of individuals to disregard the unjust rules they themselves have formulated. The congregation's Constitution explicitly stated that:

this congregation shall not encourage or interfere with making proselytes under any pretence whatever, nor shall any such be admitted under the jurisdiction of their congregation, until he or she or they produce legal and satisfactory credentials, from some other congregation, where a regular Chief [Rabbi] or Rabbi and Hebrew Consistory is established; and, provided, he, she, or they are not people of color.¹⁰

The admission of Billy Simons to the congregation was ostensibly in violation of this rule against accepting proselytes without proper credentials, and particularly if they were "people of color." But Uncle Billy claimed Jewish ancestry as a descendent of the biblical Rechabites, a family who, in following God's commandment to live ascetically, "shall not be cut off . . . [but] stand before Me for ever" (Jeremiah 35:19). Commanded "not to build houses" (35:9) but to dwell "in tents all your days" (35:7), no permanent Rechabite place of settlement was ever recorded. Uncle Billy related how his father frequently told of their descent from the tribe of Rechabites that had settled in Africa. Identifying himself as a Rechabite, he further claimed to have been purchased in Africa and brought to America by Jewish masters.¹¹ This latter claim may in fact explain Billy Simons' Jewish identity, there being little likelihood of Jewish settlement in Madagascar.

Given the rules of the congregation, their acceptance of Uncle Billy tells more of the membership's respect for him as an individual than of its certainty of his Jewish past. An obituary appearing in San Francisco's Jewish *Weekly Gleaner* noted that Billy

⁸ Barnett A. Elzas, *The Old Jewish Cemeteries at Charleston, S.C. A Transcript of the Inscriptions on Their Tombstones, 1762-1903* (Charleston: 1903).

⁹ Mayer.

¹⁰ Rule No. 23, "Constitution of the Hebrew Congregation Kaal Kodesh Beth Elohim, or House of God, Charleston," 1820.

¹¹ Mayer.

Simons “was universally respected by his coreligionists . . . He, in his earlier days, attended Synagogue every Yom Kippur. Of late years he attended quite regularly, and the managers of the Hazel Street Synagogue very commendably honored the old man with one of the most respectable front seats.”¹² An article appearing three years prior to this in the same journal gave the following account of a conversation with Uncle Billy:

One day, it was during the glowing heat of an intertropical mid-day, he was observed walking the burning pavement barefoot. A gentleman approached him, and humanely invited him to call at his house, where he would supply him with shoes and apparel. The old man gratefully received the offer, but in very polite language declined accepting it, stating that the Jews of Charleston had on other occasions offered him substantial aid, which he likewise had declined; that he never would accept charity while he was able to work; that he lived in quite easy circumstances, and that his humble appearance was the mere result of choice and habit. He however begged for some religious books by means of which he might learn more of his religion, of the principles of which he had but vague ideas.¹³

Whatever his origins, however it was that he had come to seek a place among the Jews of Charleston, Uncle Billy was an accepted congregant of Beth Elohim. His “exemplary devotion,” his being “wrapt in thought” at synagogue services, was witnessed by all in attendance. Maurice Mayer, the congregation’s rabbi, noted that he was “the most observant of those who go to the synagogue.” Held in the highest esteem by those among whom he prayed, Billy Simons attained a most unusual status:

Although in the South, as well as in the free North, blacks and colored persons sit apart from the whites in all public places, churches, theatres, and the like, Uncle Billy sits in the nave of the temple among his white coreligionists.¹⁴

¹² Quoted from *The Weekly Gleaner* in an article entitled “Death of a Worthy Man” (London), *Jewish Chronicle*, May 11, 1860.

¹³ “Jewish Negroes,” *The Weekly Gleaner*, January 16, 1857. While city ordinances barred slaves from being educated, a good number acquired some degree of literacy, either from masters, free-black run schools, Sunday schools, slave-to-slave contact, or on their own (Richard C. Wad, *Slavery in the City* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964], pp. 173–76). The opportunity to acquire reading skills must have been great as a newspaper owner’s slave.

¹⁴ Mayer.

It was only fitting that Uncle Billy should wish to lie beside them in death, and that the man who so greatly admired his "devotion" should seek to fulfill it:

Only one thing worries him, as he has often told me, namely that, when he has passed away, by some oversight, he may not be buried in the Jewish cemetery. If God lets me survive him and if it is only in my power, he shall rest among his co-religionists instead of among the slaves or the free persons of color. To show how worried he is about this he has let all the Christians of the city know that he is a Jew and would like to be buried among his co-religionists.¹⁵

This great concern of Billy Simons may not have been unfounded. But while the physical remains of an African-born slave are lost to the past, his memory, despite the paucity of detail, lives on. To have been so highly regarded by his owner, to have achieved so singular a position within the white Antebellum Jewish community, speaks volumes about the man who was to so many Uncle Billy.

¹⁵ Ibid.