

Sing Us Home

DOES A SPIRITUAL THAT MANY CONSIDER A NATIONAL TREASURE HAVE ORIGINS IN INDIAN TERRITORY? A CHOCTAW SLAVE-TURNED-FREEDMAN MAY HOLD THE KEY.

By SUSAN DRAGOO

SOME THINGS IN life—anniversaries, birthdays, and taxes—are certain. In others, mystery beckons with whispers of possibility and glimmers of resolution. Its shadowy lanes sometimes lead to answers and other times to more questions. As does history—full of unknowns, its people and events are veiled by layers of time. Absolute proof can be elusive, and embracing mystery can be a way of honoring the vagaries of truth. Close to home, one such instance involves a beloved spiritual and a nineteenth-century man who lived on the land that became southeastern Oklahoma.

Wallace Willis' final resting place is uncertain. Some claim he is buried in an unmarked grave at the abandoned Wilson Cemetery near Old Boggy Depot, where his granddaughter Frances Banks also may be buried. Wallace and his wife Minerva were reported to be living in Old Boggy Depot after 1861.

SUSAN DRAGOO

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.*

POWERFUL NOTES ROLL from the throats of an African American quartet from Fisk University on a scratchy 1909 recording of one of the best known songs in the American folk canon. Its release marked one of the first times a record label presented a performance of serious music by a black ensemble. The Victor record label's wide distribution of the song elevated its popularity, but "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" already had a nearly four-decade public history, first appearing on the Fisk Jubilee Singers' concert program in the early 1870s.

It was one of many spirituals born of the union of American slavery, African

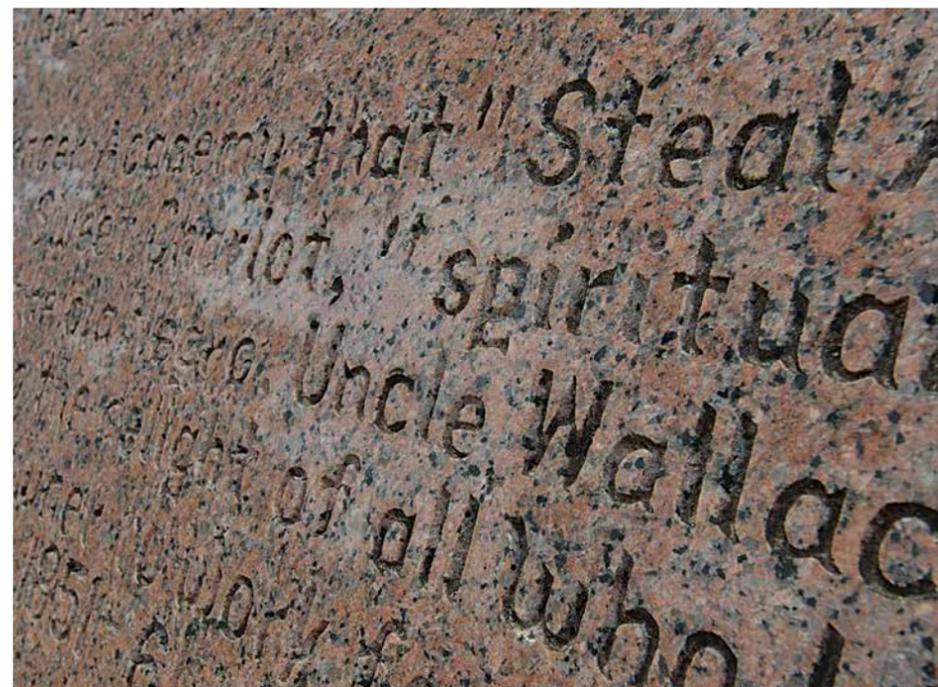
"SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT" WAS ONE OF MANY SPIRITUALS BORN OF THE UNION OF AMERICAN SLAVERY, AFRICAN TRADITION, AND THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

tradition, and the Christian religion. First known as slave hymns, cabin songs, and plantation melodies, this music emerged primarily through word of mouth, since few slaves were given the opportunity to learn to read and write. As a result, the words and tunes of spirituals tended to change depending upon the singer or singers.

One of those singers was Wallace Willis, who was a slave when he was

first heard singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." He and his wife, Minerva, came from Mississippi in the Indian Removal of the 1830s with their Choctaw owner, Britt Willis, who settled on land south of Fort Towson.

For a few years, Wallace and Minerva worked at Spencer Academy, a Presbyterian boarding school for Choctaw boys north of Fort Towson. The Reverend Alexander Reid, a native



SUSAN DRAGOO

Delighted with the offer, White arranged for the Jubilees to meet in Brooklyn with Reid, who taught the troupe six songs he had heard Wallace sing. Reid specifically mentioned two, "Steal Away to Jesus" and "I'm a Rolling," in the letter to his colleague. White later assured Reid that they were the most valuable contribution made to Fisk by any one person.

The Jubilee Singers performed the spirituals throughout the country and in Europe, and they soon became standard material for the group, whose popularity grew. Various accounts suggest that Reid arranged to have photographs made—stories differ as to whether they were of Wallace and Minerva or of their children—which he planned to send to Fisk in honor of the couple's musical contributions to the university. Regardless whom the photos depict, they have since disappeared. Some doubt their existence, but one Oklahoma music historian does not.

"Many years ago, I was at Fisk University and visited the library," says Guy Logsdon of Tulsa. "I saw the photos hanging on the wall near the entrance. A few years ago, I returned to see the photos and make copies. They were not there. The librarians denied knowing anything about them, but I saw them."

WHAT HAPPENED TO the photographs? It is difficult to question their existence, given Logsdon's eyewitness account. This mystery leads to a larger one, because there are other origin stories for "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The best-documented comes from Ella Sheppard, one of the original Jubilee Singers. Born in 1851 the daughter of a Tennessee slave, Sarah Hannah Sheppard, Ella credits her mother with composing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and singing it to her as a lullaby.

In *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, a 2009 history of the Jubilee Singers, Andrew Ward attests that Ella Sheppard brought the song to White at approximately the same time Reid brought the six songs he had learned at Spencer Academy. Music

Scot, was superintendent of the academy from 1849 to 1861. At Spencer, Reid often heard the couple sing songs that spoke of hard times and oppression. It may have been there that they came to be known as "Uncle" Wallace and "Aunt" Minerva.

Interviewed by the WPA in 1938, Frances Banks, Wallace and Minerva's granddaughter, spoke of them passing the time singing while they toiled in the cotton fields. "Grandfather was a sweet singer," she said, mentioning "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away to Jesus" as songs he wrote.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Spencer Academy was temporarily closed. Wallace, Minerva, and some of their children were taken to Old Boggy Depot southwest of present-day Atoka. Reid continued to serve as a missionary

to Indian Territory until after the war, when he moved to New Jersey.

FISK OPENED IN Nashville, Tennessee, in 1866 to provide a liberal arts education to African Americans. Within five years, the school was in dire financial straits. George White, Fisk treasurer and music teacher, created a choral ensemble of students, the Jubilee Singers, and took them on tour around the country to raise money for the university.

Reid and his sons attended one of their performances in Newark, New Jersey, in late 1871. The boys thought the singing was good, but as Reid recounted in an 1884 letter to a colleague, they said they often had heard better at Spencer, "that Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva could beat the best of them." In the same letter, Reid wrote that White told the audience the Jubilee Singers had so few plantation songs, there would be no new program for the concerts later that week.

"It at once flashed into my mind that I could furnish him some pieces—genuine plantation songs—equal to any I had heard that night, and thus help on the good cause of education among Freedmen," wrote Reid.

Above: A stone marker commemorates the former location of Spencer Academy, where Wallace Willis worked and Spencer superintendent Alexander Reid first heard him singing spirituals, six of which he later gave to the Fisk Jubilee Singers. **Left:** In this photo from the Jubilee Singers' first year as a performance group, Ella Sheppard is seated at the piano. Her mother, Sarah Hannah Sheppard, sometimes is credited with writing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."



TENNESSEE STATE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES

THE JUBILEE SINGERS.
Original Company from Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.
1871. ELEVENTH SEASON. 1882.



SUSAN DRAGOO

While some claim Wallace Willis is buried near Old Boggy Depot, others contend that he and his wife Minerva rest in the unmarked slave and freedmen graves at the Old Doaksville Cemetery near Fort Towson, where members of Britt Willis' family are buried.

historian and professor Toni Passmore Anderson, who wrote *"Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus": The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers* in 2009, has read Ella's diaries and supports Ward's view.

Can both accounts be true? Perhaps. Music historians say it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the origin of individual spirituals because slave populations were not static and their songs circulated widely. Unlike the European concept of authorship, in which a song emerges in its entirety from one person and is written down, authorship of many

slave songs was likely the result of an individual or group amplifying or altering existing songs to make them their own.

"My hunch is that Reid did share 'Swing Low' with the Jubilees—who probably already knew the tune and sang some version of it—and encouraged the troupe to include it in their programming," says Anderson. "He may have truly believed Uncle Wallace 'wrote' the song. I believe the spiritual existed for who knows how long and had already been passed around from community to community. I imagine that both Sarah

tion's folk heritage. It has been sung by hundreds of artists—including Joan Baez, Etta James, and B.B. King—and the 1909 Fisk Jubilee Quartet version was listed on the Library of Congress National Recording Registry in 2002 because of its influence and impact across a century of recording.

In the genesis of one spiritual, a few things seem certain. Alexander Reid shared six songs with the Jubilee Singers in December 1871, and Wallace Willis' version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was likely among them. It was around that time that the ensemble began to include the song in performances. Reid's statement about the credit given him by George White for his contributions to the Jubilee Singers suggests a gift of great significance.

The mark Wallace Willis put on the song may well be reflected in the version sung today. And while it is unlikely he composed the song in one event, he did in a sense create the song, Anderson says.

"He probably changed it to sing it the way he liked to sing," she says. "Making your own version is a form of creation."

In recognition of Wallace Willis' contribution, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was named the official Oklahoma State Gospel Song in 2011.

WALLACE WILLIS PROBABLY lived into the early 1880s. The location of his grave is uncertain. Some

believe he is buried in an abandoned cemetery near Old Boggy Depot southeast of Wapanucka; others are convinced his remains lie in the African American section of the Old Doaksville Cemetery north of Fort Towson. Neither site includes his marked grave, making either theory impossible to confirm or dispute.

What is indisputable, even to Alexander Reid in his 1884 letter, is the legacy of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," a song with roots in hard times.

"How little did those . . . slaves realize that, in worshiping the Lord in their simple songs," Reid wrote, "they were contributing not a little to building up a great institution of learning for the benefit of their race." 🐾

The Old Doaksville Cemetery is located within the Fort Towson Cemetery. The older Doaksville graves are in the northern section of the cemetery. The cemetery is in the northwest part of town, approximately fifteen miles east of Hugo on U.S. Highway 70. The Willis family's Choctaw graves are well-marked; slave and freedmen graves are unmarked. The Doaksville interpreted archaeological site, operated by the Oklahoma Historical Society, is adjacent to the cemetery. okhistory.org/sites/ftdoaksville.php. The abandoned Wilson Cemetery near Old Boggy Depot is located on private property. To hear the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet's 1909 Victor label recording of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," visit loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/1797.

"MY HUNCH IS THAT REID DID INDEED SHARE 'SWING LOW' WITH THE JUBILEES... AND ENCOURAGED THE TROUPE TO INCLUDE IT IN THEIR PROGRAMMING."