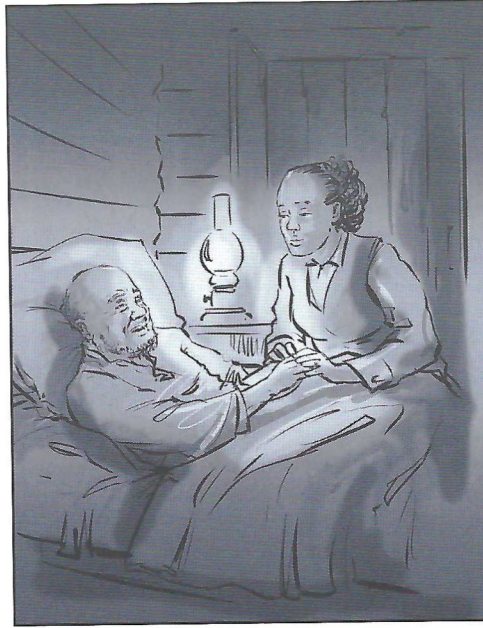


## The Misremembered "Uncle" Wallace and "Aunt" Minerva: Establishing Father-Daughter Kinship



By R. B. Ward\*

*Faint beams of the dawn's light permeate through the door frame of the small log cabin. The home fills with Monday morning sunshine adding to the love already present. Wallace Burton, two years past eighty, is weak. He reclines to rest. Wearing her Hickory shirting dress, forty-five-year-old Minerva watches her elderly father. She cares for him like she would care for a child. Wallace's condition had deteriorated over the weekend. Even so, he sang his favorite hymns with his sweet singing voice. Minerva sits with her dad. Wallace reaches out to Minerva and takes her hand. "My daughter, it will be but a little while and I shall be in 'Bright Glory, Bright Glory Land,'" he tells her. Minerva knows her father alludes to one of his favorite songs. Over the course of her life, Wallace sang spirituals and led prayer. These days are the last living moments Minerva hears him singing. Wallace enters "Bright Glory, Bright Glory Land" the next day.*

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

“Uncle” Wallace and “Aunt” Minerva contributed a musical legacy to Oklahoma and beyond. They created and performed negro spirituals during the Indian Territory period before the Civil War. The Fisk University Jubilee Singers popularized some of Wallace and Minerva’s songs in the 1870s. In 2011 the state of Oklahoma designated a song credited to them as the state gospel song. Their musical contributions have not been forgotten. But the nature of Wallace and Minerva’s relationship with each other has been misremembered.

Mainstream history of Wallace and Minerva defines their familial relationship as a married couple, but that history is out of step with their actual kinship. I am a sixth-generation descendant of Wallace. I realized something was off in the historical narrative of my ancestor after comparing the family genealogy to common history. Upon examination of four records about the lives of Wallace and Minerva, it is established that they were parent and child. A letter by a known acquaintance, the probate file of a former owner, Wallace’s obituary, and a genealogy of Wallace’s descendants extracted from Dawes Rolls records support the conclusion that Wallace (Burton) Willis is the father of Minerva (Burton) Willis. Confirming that Minerva is a daughter of Wallace confronts a historical mistelling of their narrative and disrupts the slave couple stereotype applied to their musical work.

The records establishing their kinship provide snapshots of Wallace and Minerva’s lives. Even within an oppressive slave system, Wallace and Minerva were a part of a “social universe” where enslaved persons created music.<sup>1</sup> Each record is paired with an illustration displaying a scene from the life of Wallace and Minerva. Some creative license was taken, but the illustrations and the narratives that accompany them are inspired by written sources.

### A Letter from Alexander Reid

*Outside the slave cabins of Spencer Academy, a music lesson takes place. “Steal away . . . steal away . . . steal away to Jesus,” seventeen-year-old<sup>2</sup> Minerva sings. She wears her hair in plaits and has a simple, cotton dress made of homespun fabric. Thirty-seven-year-old Alexander Reid repeats Minerva’s melody in his native Scottish accent. He loves music, but lacks musical talent. He struggles to maintain a beat as he loosens the collar of his white dress shirt. Minerva is patient. She has the gift of music. Her dress moves with her body as she sways with the music.*

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Reverend Alexander Reid's letter discussing Wallace and Minerva does not conclusively establish that they were a couple. Reid was the superintendent of Spencer Academy from 1849 to 1861 and a leader of the Presbyterian Church in Indian Territory.<sup>3</sup> Wallace and Minerva worked at Spencer Academy as hired-out enslaved persons during the antebellum period. Reid knew Wallace, Minerva, and their music from those experiences.<sup>4</sup> He provided details on how he shared the music of Wallace and Minerva with the Jubilee Singers in a January 15, 1884, letter that he wrote to fellow missionary Reverend John Edwards. A portion of this letter was later republished in the 1929 book *Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People*, Volume II. A periodical called *The Presbyterian* reprinted a full version of the letter in 1890 upon Reid's death, along with a column from Edwards. I referred to that 1890 reprinted version of the letter for this article after locating a copy in a university repository.

Reid discussed Wallace and Minerva in the letter several times. In the one instance, he indicated, "Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva could beat the best of them [in singing]."<sup>5</sup> Here, Reid credited Minerva without specifying her relationship to Wallace. In a following portion, he provided more detail:

If Uncle Wallace has a grandson or a granddaughter really worth sending to Fisk, I believe they would be received there and educated gratuitously for his sake and Aunt Minerva's sake, from whom I learned "Steal away to Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

Later, Reid indicated that the president of Fisk University, Erastus Milo Cravath, was "anxious . . . to get all the facts connected with Uncle Wallace and the songs I gave to Professor White and his 'Jubilees.'"<sup>7</sup>

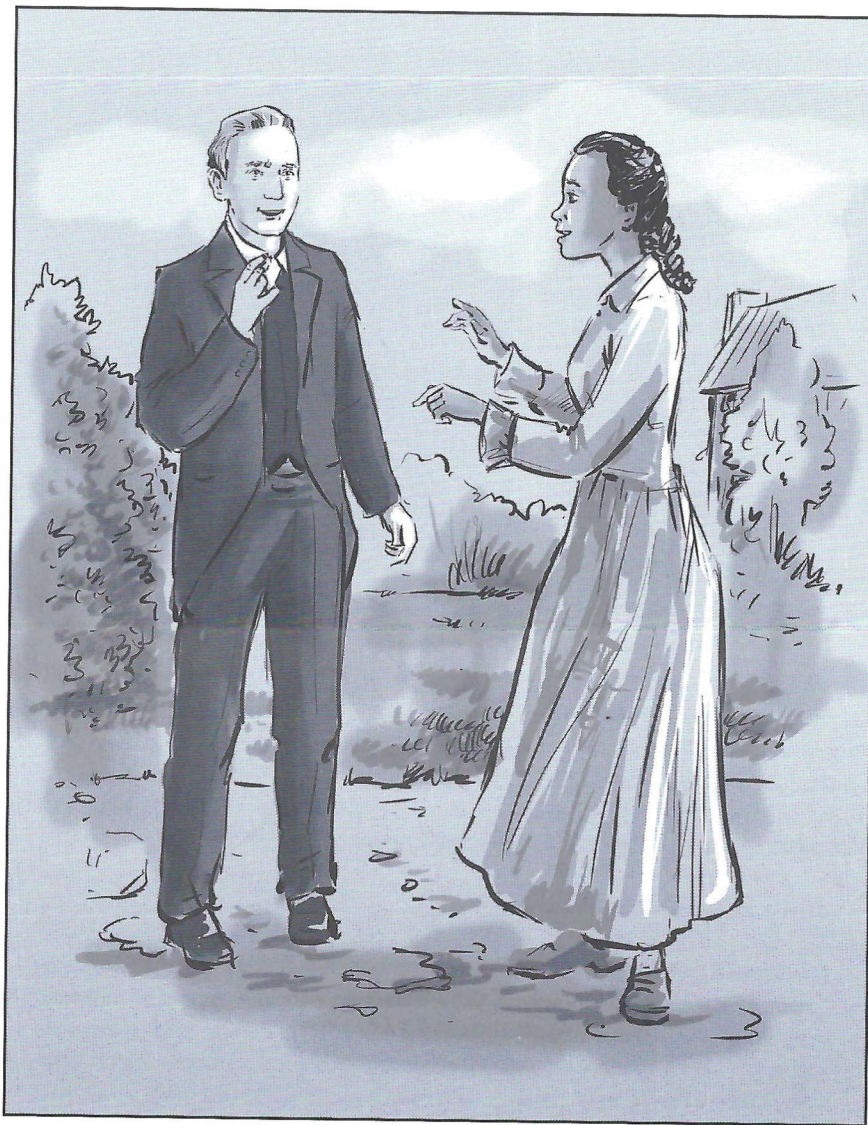
Nowhere in the letter does Reid allege that Wallace and Minerva are a couple. In the second mention, Reid does not say "Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva's" grandchildren, but mentioned Wallace's hypothetical grandchildren and mentions Minerva later in the sentence. When explaining that Fisk's president wanted the story of the songs, Reid mentioned Wallace alone.

Upon Reid's death in 1890, John Edwards mentioned in a published column that Reid had gone "to considerable trouble and expense to procure photographs of Uncle Wallace's children."<sup>8</sup> Minerva is not mentioned alongside Wallace in the discussion as one might expect a mother to be mentioned.

The letter provides limited information in establishing the specific kinship between Minerva and Wallace. The nature of the excerpted



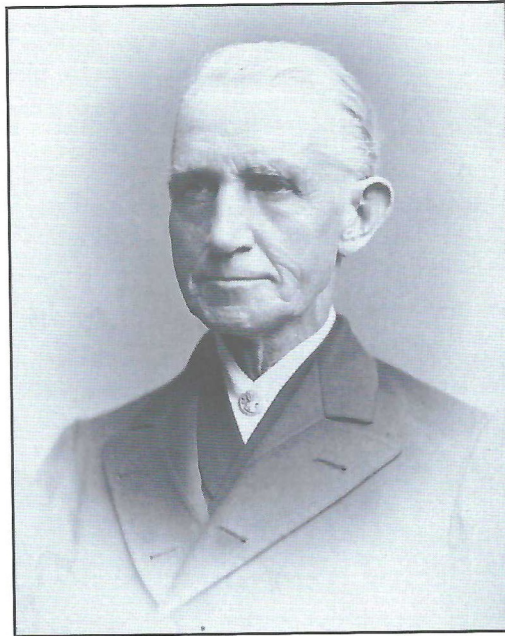
UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA



*Minerva teaches Reverend Alexander Reid "Steal Away to Jesus," c. 1855 (illustration by Leo Lätti, courtesy of the author).*



*Reverend Alexander Reid  
(2043, Constance E. Cas-  
well Collection, OHS).*



text make two interpretations possible. Wallace and Minerva could be cograndparents to the same potential grandchildren, or they could not cograndparents with the separate clauses representing such. Due to ambiguity, it was important to consider other sources that could shed light on the kinship between Wallace and Minerva. One source is the probate file of a former slaveholder named John B. Moore.

### **John B. Moore's Probate File**

*Uncertainty fills the autumn air on the three-hundred-acre plantation. The head of household, John B. Moore, died six months ago. Today is appraisal day for his estate. The estate executor commands the enslaved people of the household to pause their garden and horse tending work. The group gathers together to await inspection. Thirty-eight-year-old Wallace stands with his family, friends, and community. Wallace stands next to his wife, Charlotte. She holds their one-year-old daughter, Charity. They stand shoeless on fertile ground.*

*Three estate appraisers pass the plantation's staked rider fence on horseback to enter the plantation. The appraiser panel examines*

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

*and assesses the monetary value of each enslaved person based upon gender, age, and physical appearance. The team examines thirty-nine-year-old Isaac first. They look at his feet, legs, torso, arms, hands, head, and teeth. In columns on paper, they keep track of their data.*

*Name . . . check.*

*Age . . . check.*

*Monetary value . . . check. On to the next human chattel.*

*The appraisers look at Wallace. They write a value for Wallace. Next, they move on to examine Charlotte and Charity. The appraisers decide the mother and child's monetary worth. Charlotte's nine-year-old son Joe is examined after his mother and baby sister. The appraisers view Jack (age eight), Jane (age seven), and toddler Minerva (age two) to assess them. The process continues with Maria, Sarah, King, and others—all forty-two enslaved people overall.*

The will and estate appraisal inventory of John B. Moore (collectively the "Probate File") suggest that Wallace and Minerva are parent and child. I came across the Probate File after reading through unindexed probate records of Marshall County, Mississippi, on FamilySearch. The cluster pattern of enslaved persons within the will of Wallace and Minerva's slaveholder and ages shown in the estate appraisal suggest that Wallace and Minerva are not a couple.

Prior to May 1840, Moore owned both Wallace and Minerva.<sup>9</sup> He executed his last will and testament on September 29, 1839.<sup>10</sup> Within the will, Moore bequeathed "Wallis, Charlotte, Joe, Manerva, Jane, & Jack & their increase" to Colbert Moore for the benefit of John's daughter Harriet Moore Mosby.<sup>11</sup>

Within the will, Moore bequests groups of enslaved persons to six of his other children in addition to Harriet (see Table 1). All seven of the bequests to his children list adults first and six of the seven bequests list a male-female pair before other persons in the group.<sup>12</sup> Three of the seven groups indicate that the second person listed is the wife of the first person listed. Moore gave Daniel and Delphia (Delpha)<sup>13</sup> "his wife" to Caroline Colbert, and then bequeathed Isaac and "his wife" Elly (Alsey) to Eliza Moore. He also gave King and Molly "his wife" to George Moore.<sup>14</sup> Further, each Moore child is given specific named individuals as well as their "increase." This suggests that the reproduc-



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*Wallace, Minerva, and other enslaved persons experience appraisal, 1840 (illustration by Leo Lätti, courtesy of the author).*

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

Relative (relation to John)	Bequeathed Enslaved Persons
Caroline Colbert (daughter)	Daniel & Delpha his wife, Mariah, Sarah & Melvin
Harriet Mosby (daughter)	Wallis, Charlotte, Joe, Minerva, Jane & Jack
Mary Moore (daughter)	Matt, Malipa, Jane, Lovi, Amicly & Jacob
Eliza Moore (daughter)	"Negro" Isaac and his wife Elly, Crave, March, Jim & Margaret
John B. Moore (son)	Rafe, Adeline, Lucinda, little Malepa, Dick & Nai
George C. Moore (son)	King, Molly his wife, Henry, Polly, Black Jane & Wade
Martha Jane Moore (daughter)	Judy and her son Tom, Albert, Vina, old Molly's son Isaac, Lewis & Judy's youngest child
Delila Moore (wife)	"Negro woman" Charity

*Table 1: Clusters of enslaved persons as bequeathed to John B. Moore's spouse and children (table courtesy of the author).*

tive capacities of each cluster was considered when Moore divided his estate among his children.

Moore's estate appraisal inventory provides more detail about the nature of enslaved household members by providing age information. As a part of the probate process, the court appointed appraisers to assess the value of the estate's goods, chattels, and personal property.<sup>15</sup> The appraisal took place in November 1840.<sup>16</sup> The appraisal inventory included enslaved persons<sup>17</sup> by name, approximate age, and appraised value (see Table 2).<sup>18</sup> The cluster pattern seen in the will is also seen in the appraisal inventory with some variation. For example, Negro Isaac is listed next to Elly (Alsey) like in the will. Daniel, Delphia, and Sarah are listed close together along with two others that may be in their group. But there appears to be new adults in the inventory since the will was created.

Within this inventory, more details about Wallace and Minerva's cluster are present. Wallace is about thirty-eight years old. Charlotte is around thirty-five years of age and her baby Charity is one year old. Minerva is a two-year-old toddler. Joe, Jack, and Jane are nine years old, eight years old, and seven years old, respectively. The ages of each person in the cluster suggest that Wallace and Minerva are not



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Name	Age (years, unless otherwise noted)	New Owner
Negro Isaac	39	Eliza
Alsey (and child Rufus)	38 (3 weeks)	Eliza
Clovey	7	
Hannah	6	
March	3	Eliza
Wallace	38	Harriet
Charlotte (and her child Charity)	35 (1 year)	Harriet
Joe	9	Harriet
Polly	8	
Malicy	5	
Minerva	2	Harriet
Negro Daniel	27	Caroline
Delphia (and her child [...] Andy)	25 (11 months)	Caroline
Maria	8	Caroline
Milvina (Melvin?)	4	(Caroline)
Sarah	2	Caroline
Mat (Matt)	25	Mary
Maliera or Melecca (and her two children Jane and Lui)	20 (unrecorded ages for children)	Mary
Edward	25	
Becca	25	
King	25	George
Ike	25	
Wade	4	George
Henry	18	George
Ralph	22	John
Lewis	20	Martha Jane
Jack	8	Harriet
(Charity?)	35	Delia
Margaret	16	Eliza
Annaca	14	
Vina	10	Martha Jane
Judy (and child named Francis)	24 (18 months)	Martha Jane
Albert	6	Martha Jane
Tom	3	Martha Jane
Dick	6	John
Jane	7	Harriet
Molly (with a child)	30 (1 week old)	George

*Table 2: Summary of enslaved people with ages from the estate inventory of John B. Moore, with the new owner name added by the author (table courtesy of the author).*

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

a couple due to the age gap. Wallace and the woman named Charlotte are a more likely pair.

Order also suggests that Wallace and Charlotte, and not Wallace and Minerva, are a couple. Except in the case of the enslaved people Moore bequeathed to his daughter Martha Jane, the ordering within each cluster of persons suggests that the first two persons listed are adults, and that those adults constitute a couple.<sup>19</sup> In the cluster of persons given to Harriet Mosby, Wallace and Charlotte are listed first.

Concerning the children in Wallace's cluster, how are they related to Wallace or Charlotte? The inventory indicates that Charity is Charlotte's "1 year old daughter." Are Joe, Jack, Jane, and Minerva also children of Charlotte? Or Wallace? Or both?

The will and estate inventory appraisal of John B. Moore have some limitations in establishing kinship between Minerva and Wallace. Ages and cluster patterns provide indirect evidence that Wallace is Minerva's father. This cluster pattern is also seen in a subsequent county courthouse record related to Harriet Moore Mosby.<sup>20</sup> But Wallace and Minerva's relationship is not confirmed. John Moore owned a minor named Minerva, but is she Wallace's child or someone else's? Wallace's obituary provides direct evidence that establishes he is Minerva's father.

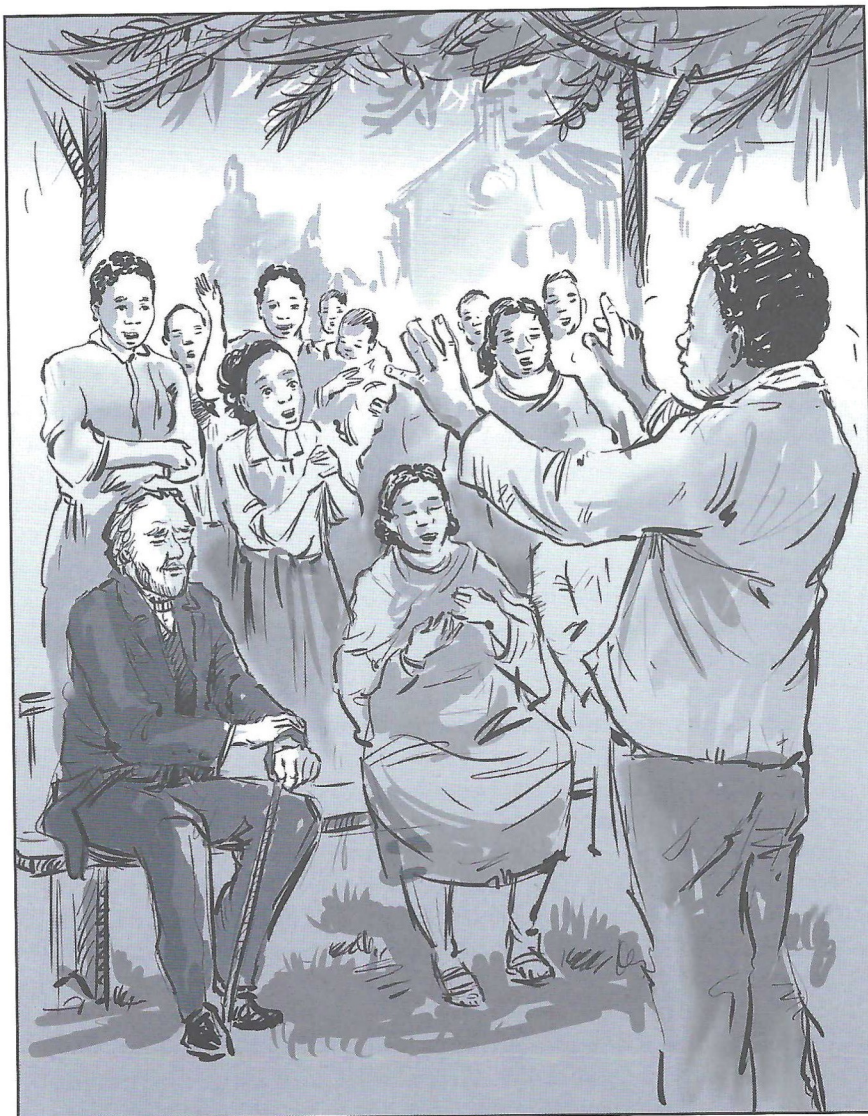
### An Obituary of Wallace (Burton) Willis

*Majestic pine trees cover the ridge beyond Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church. Church members of Chickasaw, Choctaw, European, and European-Indigenous descent worship inside the church building. They are out of view. The Church of African-Descent sits outside the church building in a brush arbor. The open-sided structure of vertical, pine poles and a cut conifer branch roof frames their worship.*

*The small group of captive Christians attend church often. Men and women, young and old—listen, sing, and pray. Forty-eight-year-old Wallace stands at the front of the brush arbor. He leads the group in Presbyterian hymns. He lines out a hymn and then a song. His wife, Charlotte, and two daughters, Minerva and Charity, are present. Twelve-year-old Minerva sings along. Their hearts are rich in faith. They are heirs of the kingdom of God. Their white pastor, sixty-four-year-old Cyrus Kingsbury, sits in the front corner of the structure. He listens. His eyes are closed.<sup>21</sup>*



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*Wallace leads prayer and song, c. 1850 (illustration by Leo Lähti, courtesy of the author).*

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

Wallace's obituary establishes that Wallace and Minerva are parent and child. Reverend Alexander Reid wrote an obituary column titled "Sketch of the Life of Uncle Wallace: From whom came the Jubilee Song 'Steal away to Jesus'" after Wallace died in 1883.<sup>22</sup> When I visited Fisk University's John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library in January 2020, special collections librarian DeLisa Harris shared a copy of the obituary column with me.

In the obituary, Reid provided intimate details of Wallace's life and a specific account of his last days. He began the obituary with this line, "Wallace Burton was born in 1802." Reid indicated that slave speculators brought Wallace to Holly Springs, Mississippi, from Charleston, South Carolina, when Wallace was a young man. It is in Holly Springs where "[Wallace] **found his wife—Charlotte—the mother of his two daughters, Minerva and Charity.**"<sup>23</sup>

After Charlotte died around 1874, Wallace moved near Boggy Depot to be closer to his daughters.<sup>24</sup> In detailing the days before Wallace's death, Reid shared this scene:

The night Uncle Wallace was taken sick he sang: "O the strict account to give, Of my behavior here," etc. When he finished singing, he remarked: "There are many who desire to see the Son of Man and shall not see Him." On Monday morning he took hold of aunt Minerva's hand and said: "My daughter, it will be but a little while and I shall be in 'Bright Glory, Bright Glory Land.'" <sup>25</sup>

Wallace took Minerva's hand and called her "my daughter" before he died. It is unclear whether Reid was present in these last moments, but within the column he claims to have spoken with Minerva about some of the obituary's subject matter.<sup>26</sup>

Reid went on to write that "Aunt Minerva is now the wife of Charles Anderson, a preacher of the African Methodist Church."<sup>27</sup> He also shared details about their lives including their daughter.<sup>28</sup> Reid referred to Minerva's sister as "Aunt Charity" and mentioned Charity's nine living children.<sup>29</sup> Her children included two daughters, Charlotte Williams and Minerva Williams, likely named for their grandmother and aunt.<sup>30</sup>

The obituary of Wallace Willis presents few limitations in establishing that Wallace and Minerva are parent and child. The author of the obituary is Reverend Alexander Reid himself. Reid is a personal acquaintance of both Wallace and Minerva. They worked at the academy he oversaw, and Reid claimed to have seen them perform music and that Minerva taught him "Steal Away to Jesus." Reid is the author of



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the letter discussed earlier in this article, so Wallace's obituary clears up what Reid knew.

Within the obituary, Alexander Reid indicates that Minerva is Wallace's daughter several times in different ways. In discussing Wallace's grandchildren at length, Alexander also helps differentiate Minervas and Charlottes from different generations. The obituary corroborates the cluster information about Wallace, Minerva, Charlotte, and Charity gleaned from the Probate File. Jane, Jack, and Joe are not mentioned, so perhaps they are not Wallace's biological children.

Reid's obituary provides insight on how titles applied to Wallace and Minerva. Wallace and Minerva are referred to with their titles "Uncle" and "Aunt," but the parent-child kinship is made clear. In the obituary, Reid also uses the "Aunt" title to refer to Wallace's second daughter, Charity. In my case, Minerva is my actual aunt—my third great-aunt. To tease through any potential mistaken identities due to repeated names, it was important to account for Wallace Willis's known descendants. Providing a written genealogy of Wallace's descendants helps to further dispel the myth that Minerva was Wallace's wife. It is helpful in this family due to repeated names among Wallace's descendants.

### A Genealogy of Wallace's Descendants

*On a cool October day, Minerva Anderson arrives at the Dawes Commission office in Colbert. She is sixty years old. After the commission is ready for her, she takes her seat in a hard, wooden chair. Commissioner Archibald McKennon swears Minerva in before she provides testimony.*

*She provides current information.*

*Name? Minerva Anderson.*

*Sex? Female.*

*Children? One—Tabitha Abram.*

*She recalls the past.*

*Her former slaveholder? Harriet Willis, Chickasaw.*

*Parents? Wallace and Charlotte Burton, deceased.*

*She considers her family's future.*

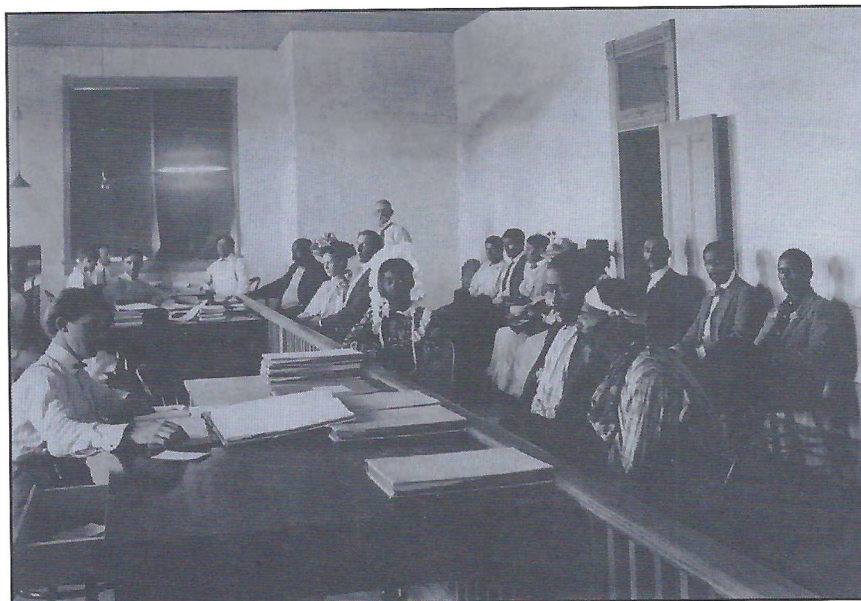
Genealogy derived from Dawes cards and applications of Wallace Willis descendants affirm that Wallace and Minerva are parent and child. Children and grandchildren of Wallace participated in the en-

UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA



*Minerva applies for a land allotment before the Dawes Commission, 1898 (illustration by Leo Lätti, courtesy of the author).*

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*Chickasaw freedmen filing on allotments at Tishomingo, Indian Territory, c. 1900 (3759, W. P. Campbell Collection, OHS).*

rollment process under the Dawes Act of 1887 as Chickasaw and Choctaw freedmen.<sup>31</sup> These individuals included Minerva (Willis) Anderson, Charity (Willis) Williams, and Joe Freeman. During the process, they outlined kinship among family members. Over the years, I had spent time documenting family groups and lineage from these Dawes records. A three-generation family chart (Figure 1) outlines kinship from these Dawes records.

### Wallace's Biological Children

The Dawes cards of both Charity and Minerva indicate that their parents' first names are Charlotte and Wallace. Minerva's parents are listed as Wallace and Charlotte Burton.<sup>32</sup> Her Dawes card indicates that she was born in the 1830s.<sup>33</sup> Minerva's owner and the owner for both of her parents is Harriet Willis (formerly Harriet Moore Mosby), a Chickasaw.<sup>34</sup> Dawes records for Charity indicated that her parents are Wallace and Charlotte Willis.<sup>35</sup> Britt Willis, Harriet's last spouse, is listed as Charity's owner and the owner of both of her parents.<sup>36</sup>



## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

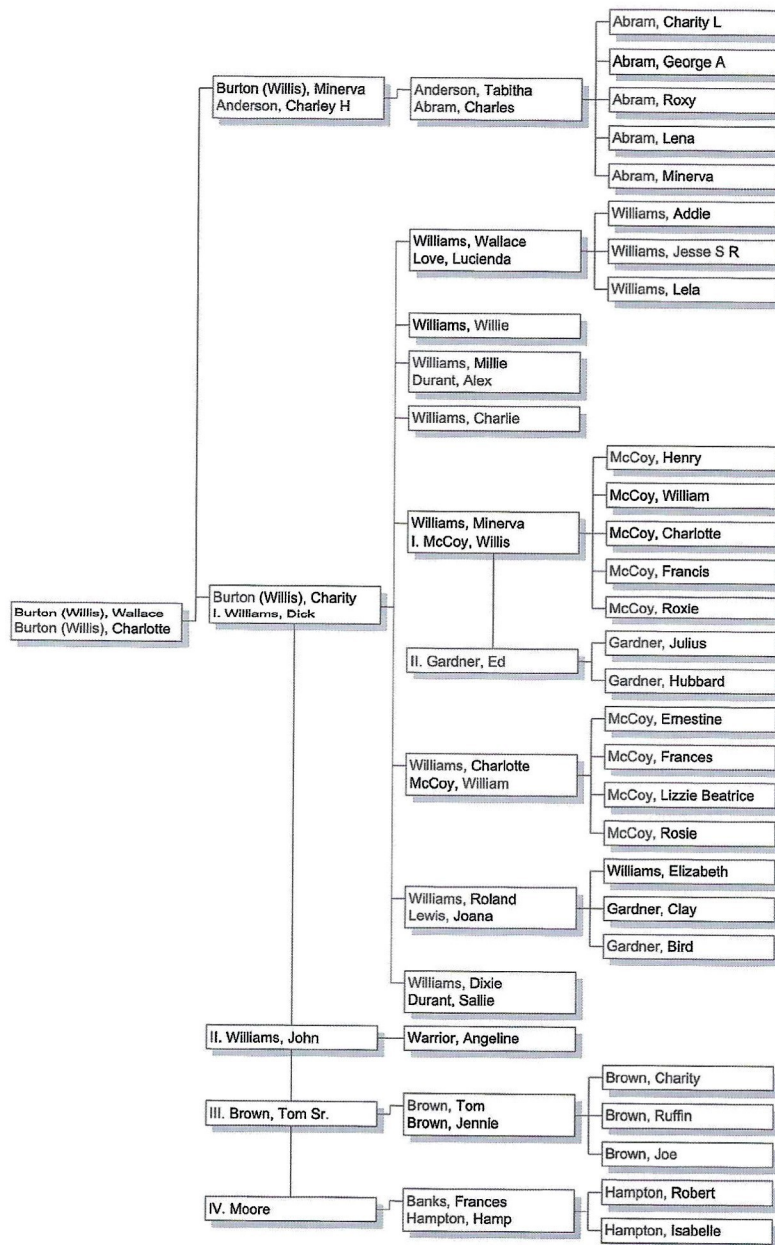


Figure 1: Three generations of Wallace and Charlotte Burton (Willis) descendants (figure courtesy of the author).

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First Name	Person   Relation to Wallace Willis   Approximate Birth Year
Charity	Charity   suspected relative owned by Delia Moore   1805
	Charity Willis or Burton   daughter   1840
	Charity Abram   great-granddaughter   1901
	Charity Brown   great-granddaughter   1888
Charlotte	Charlotte Willis (Burton)   wife   1805
	Charlotte Williams   granddaughter   1875
	Charlotte McCoy   great-granddaughter   1903
Minerva	Minerva Willis (Burton)   daughter   1839
	Minerva Williams   granddaughter   1870
	Minerva Abram   great-granddaughter   1897
Wallace	Wallace Willis   self   1802
	Wallace Williams   grandson   1861

Table 3: Repeated first names in Wallace’s family with specific person, relation to Wallace Willis, and approximate birth year (table courtesy of the author).

Wallace’s Stepchildren

A Joe Freeman is documented as a Choctaw freedman.<sup>37</sup> His mother is listed as Charlotte Freeman and his father is listed as unknown.<sup>38</sup> Britt Willis is listed as the owner of both Joe Freeman and his mother, Charlotte.<sup>39</sup> These details are consistent with Reid’s obituary of Wallace mentioning both Minerva and Charity as children, but no mention of Joe. Likely candidates for Jane and Jack within the Dawes cards have not been identified.

Wallace’s Grandchildren and Great-Grandchildren

An outlined genealogy of Wallace’s family reduces confusion about which Minerva or Wallace (and the relationship between them) is the one associated with negro spiritual development. Charlotte, Charity, Minerva, and Wallace were popular names in Wallace’s family generation after generation. A summary table of repeated first names (Table 3) and a table of three generations of women named Minerva (Table 4) graphically display the pool of people with repeated names. For the

## UNCLE WALLACE AND AUNT MINERVA

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Minerva Burton (M<sub>1</sub>)</i>	<i>Minerva Williams (M<sub>2</sub>)</i>	<i>Minerva Abram (M<sub>3</sub>)</i>
<i>Year of Birth</i>	c. 1838	c. 1870	c. 1897
<i>Place of Birth</i>	Marshall County, Mississippi	Likely Pushmataha District, Choctaw Nation West	Likely Pushmataha District, Choctaw Nation West
<i>Father</i>	Wallace Burton (or Willis)	William "Dick" Williams	Charles Abram
<i>Mother</i>	Charlotte Burton (or Willis)	Charity Burton (or Willis)	Tabitha Mary Anderson
<i>Marriage Years</i>	bef. 1884	bef. 1898 c. 1898	1919
<i>Spouse(s)</i>	Charles H. Anderson	Ed Gardner Willis McCoy	Alex Duncan
<i>Children</i>	Tabitha Mary Anderson	Julius Gardner Hubbard Gardner Henry McCoy William McCoy	n/a
<i>Year of Death</i>	aft. 1910	1952	Bef. 1960
<i>Place of Burial</i>	-	Tulsa County, Oklahoma	-

*Table 4: A synopsis of three women named Minerva (table courtesy of the author).*

purposes of this article, grandchildren and great-grandchildren with family first names are centered.

As seen in Table 3, Wallace's grandchildren include Wallace Williams, Minerva Williams, Charlotte Williams, and Frances Banks. Researchers have confused Wallace Williams with Wallace Willis, but Wallace Williams was born too late (c. 1860) to be "Uncle" Wallace. Wallace Willis, identified as the father of Minerva Anderson and Charity Williams, is "Uncle" Wallace. Wallace's great-grandchildren include Charity Brown, Charity Abram, Minerva Abram, and Charlotte McCoy.<sup>40</sup>

Table 4 provides details about three generations of Minervas. Minerva Williams (M<sub>2</sub>) and Minerva Abram (M<sub>3</sub>) were too young to be "Aunt" Minerva, because they were born after the Civil War. Minerva Burton (M<sub>1</sub>) is the viable candidate for "Aunt" Minerva because she was born in the right place (Mississippi) and time (c. 1838).

Considering the parentage details of Minerva, Charity, and Joe's Dawes cards, Wallace was paired with a woman named Charlotte and had children with her. These children would include at least Minerva and Charity. Examining Dawes records, written correspondence, probate records, and Wallace's obituary led me to uncovering Wallace and Minerva's actual kinship.



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### Conclusion

Wallace and Minerva are parent and child. Reid's letter suggests that Wallace and Minerva were not cogradparents. The Probate File identifies Wallace and Minerva's social cluster and approximate years of birth. Wallace's obituary provides a credible narrative account of his life and familial relationships. The obituary is direct evidence that Minerva is Wallace's daughter. Wallace's family genealogy extracted from Dawes records affirms his parentage of Minerva.

Wallace and Minerva's kinship challenges historic stereotypes about them. Secondary sources about Minerva and Wallace were created during a period of open romanticism of the antebellum south. The image of a quaint, musical slave couple was elevated well into the twentieth century. In a dramatized play about Wallace from the 1930s, he is portrayed as a lazy and superstitious negro. In a cotton harvest scene, the Minerva character even comments that she had "[n] ebber seed such a good for nuthin' day dreamin' ole nigger in all mah life" as Wallace.<sup>41</sup> A fictitious version of Wallace's owner also referred to Wallace as "about the laziest old coon in all the Choctaw Nation."<sup>42</sup> The play was performed at least once at an Oklahoma City YMCA in 1938.<sup>43</sup> In an 1966 oral history interview published in "Smoke Signals from Indian Territory," Jimmie Kirby, a descendent of Wallace and Minerva's slaveholder R. B. Willis, characterized Wallace and Minerva as a couple.<sup>44</sup> Jimmie's account is secondary information as she had no firsthand knowledge of Minerva and Wallace's kinship,<sup>45</sup> but she referred to them as "[h]umble old slaves" and "[g]ood all-around field workers of the long ago."<sup>46</sup> In commenting about how they created songs, she said, "An old-time Southerner will tell you that a well-mated Negro couple has the ability to think as one without any special, conscious communication."<sup>47</sup>

Contrary to magical attributions, Wallace was a part of a community that used music to communicate—while working and during religious worship. As musicologist Eileen Southern noted, "The enduring feature of black music is . . . communication" and black musicians have and continue to have much to say to others and to God.<sup>48</sup> Wallace's granddaughter Frances Banks knew about her family's music legacy and mentioned that Wallace was a "sweet singer" who "made up songs and sung 'em."<sup>49</sup> She indicate that her grandparents "would pass de time by singing while they toiled away in de cotton fields."<sup>50</sup> By lining out hymns, Wallace would have chanted one or two lines at a time to set the tune for his fellow church members to sing religious music.

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People in Wallace's community also created music together within new circumstances they faced in life.<sup>51</sup>

Wallace's relationship to Minerva is also an example of fatherhood in slavery. They were able to remain connected, even up to Wallace's death, despite Indian Removal and chattel slavery. A warm parental love is evidenced through Reid's obituary account. Wallace likely transferred musical skill and memory across a generation to his offspring as well. Such a transfer of knowledge is inspiring and warrants further study. Wallace and Minerva's legacy is a testament to the bonds of family that can persist through hardships and help to cultivate new songs.

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### Endnotes

\* R. B. Ward is an attorney, Choctaw freedman, community historian, genealogist, and lineal descendant of Wallace Willis. She is a cofounder of the Beck Genealogical Society (Knoxville, Tennessee) and the Oklahoma Freedmen Collective. Ward has trained Knoxville Family History Center staff on the subject of African Diaspora genealogy, history, and culture. She is a member of the Trail of Tears Association, Tennessee Chapter, and a life member of the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association. Ward is the 2019 recipient of the Midwest African American Genealogy Institute's Judge Lewis Nixon Scholarship. She graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Law and Howard University (bachelor of arts in history). She has appeared on *Native America Calling* and BBC Radio 4 to discuss topics related to the history of Choctaw freedmen and her family history. Currently, Ward lives in Lenoir City, Tennessee, with her husband and two children. The illustration on page 30 is a representation of Minerva and Wallace sharing final moments together, 1884 (illustration by Leo Lätti, courtesy of the author).

<sup>1</sup> Eileen J. Southern and Josephine Wright, *Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture, 1770s–1920s* (Abington, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2018), x. Southern notes that “the plantation infrastructure made possible, for most slaves at least, some small measure of freedom, at one time or another. . . . [d]uring this time they were free to create their own social universe, in which they had control of important events in their lives, if only temporarily.”

<sup>2</sup> Timing this music lesson is difficult. In his letter to Reverend John Edwards, Reverend Alexander Reid says Minerva taught him “Steal Away to Jesus,” but does not specify when. Sources suggest Reid became familiar with Wallace and Minerva’s music before the US Civil War. Evidence also suggests the song may have been created in or after 1855, so Minerva could be as young as seventeen and Reid would be thirty-seven years old.

<sup>3</sup> W. David Baird, “Spencer Academy, Choctaw Nation.” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 45, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 27; E. C. Scott, comp., *Ministerial Director of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. 1861–1941* (Austin, TX: Press of Von Boeckmann-Jones, 1942), 601, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89067533174&view=1up&seq=609.

<sup>4</sup> The Presbyterian Church allowed slave labor at Spencer Academy. Local Presbyterian missionary leadership explained that “for various reasons we agree in the expediency of our employing slave labor in other cases than those of manifest necessity it being understood that the objection of the [Presbyterian Church] to the employment of slave labor is to that extent only.” Choctaw Mission Records-Pine Ridge, 11, folder 9, box 1, 1982.061, Sue L. McBeth Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Reid to John Edwards, January 15, 1884, Doaksville (Indian Territory), *The Presbyterian*, 10 Sept. 1890, William Smith Morton Library, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA (hereafter cited as *The Presbyterian*).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Reid to John Edwards, January 15, 1884, *The Presbyterian*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John Edwards, “Indian Missions and the Jubilee Singers’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’” *The Presbyterian*.

<sup>9</sup> “Last Will and Testament of John B. Moore,” *Probate Court*, Records No. 2, June 24, 1840, 43–46, Marshall County, Mississippi, “Mississippi Probate Records, 1781–1930,” images, FamilySearch, accessed September 13, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89Q8-DZT8?cc=2036959&wc=M7MN-HTG%3A344537201%2C344572101.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44. See also Marshall County, Mississippi, Circuit Clerk Marriage Record 1836–1841, Marriage Record of Pleasant Mosby and Harriet Moore, 12, 24, April 1837, “Mar-



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riage Records, 1836–1916,” FamilySearch, accessed September 14, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C9B2-NQWN?i=23.

<sup>12</sup> “Last Will and Testament of John B. Moore,” *Probate Court*, Records No. 2, June 24, 1840, 43–46, Marshall County, Mississippi, “Mississippi Probate Records, 1781–1930,” images, FamilySearch, accessed September 13, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89Q8-DZT8?cc=2036959&wc=M7MN-HTG%3A344537201%2C344572101.

<sup>13</sup> County courthouse records related to the Moore family assisted the researcher in examining hard to read names of enslaved persons. These records included the guardianship papers of John B. Moore Jr. and Martha Moore.

<sup>14</sup> “Last Will and Testament of John B. Moore,” *Probate Court*, Records No. 2, June 24, 1840, 44, Marshall County, Mississippi, “Mississippi Probate Records, 1781–1930,” images, FamilySearch, accessed September 13, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89Q8-DZT8?cc=2036959&wc=M7MN-HTG%3A344537201%2C344572101.

<sup>15</sup> “Appraisal Inventory of John B. Moore’s Estate,” *Probate Court*, Records No. 2, November 1840, 133–35, Marshall County, Mississippi, “Mississippi Probate Records, 1781–1930,” FamilySearch, accessed December 2, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L9Q8-N753?i=8&wc=M7MK-SP6%3A344537201%2C344773701&cc=2036959.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–35. The entire appraised value for all enslaved chattel of the decedent is \$13,520. Together, they comprise 83 percent of the total value of John B. Moore’s estate.

<sup>18</sup> The order of persons within Table 2 is the same as the inventory as recorded in county court records.

<sup>19</sup> Delpha (Delphia), Malissa (Melecca), Elly (Alsey), and Molly are adult women (age twenty-five, twenty, thirty-eight, eighteen, and thirty respectively). Daniel (Negro Daniel), Matt (Mat), Isaac (Negro Isaac), Rafe (Ralph), and King are all adults (age twenty-seven, twenty-five, thirty-nine, twenty-two, and twenty-five respectively).

<sup>20</sup> After Harriet Moore Mosby married Britt Willis on September 4, 1842, Britt Willis became her trustee under John B. Moore’s estate. An order from the Marshall County Probate Court appointed Britt as trustee “in the room of Colbert Moore who is trustee for petitioner of certain slaves to wit Wallace, Charlotte, Joe, Jack, Jane, Minerva and Charity.” “Mississippi Probate Records, 1781–1930,” FamilySearch, accessed July 22, 2020, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-99Q8-N7GC?cc=2036959&wc=M7MK-SP6%3A344537201%2C344773701.

<sup>21</sup> Composite scene derived from information from several sources including: A. Reid, “Sketch of the Life of Uncle Wallace,” *Fisk Herald*, 2, column 4, Special Collections, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, TN (Wallace’s musical role in services); Daniel F. Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen: A People Without a Country* (Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 17 (explaining segregated worship); Eileen J. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 28–29, 128, 178–89 (description of “lining out” music, worship services, and spirituals); Arrell M. Gibson, *The Chickasaws* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 233 (Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury mentioning that “the larger portion” of Chickasaw Church membership were enslaved persons and that “some of these give good evidence that they are rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom.”); “Diagram of buildings at Spencer Academy, Choctaw Nation in 1846,” 12694R, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK (example of school campus layout); Interview of Kiziah Love, August 16, 1937, no. 350097, vol. 13, Federal Writer’s Project—Slave Narrative Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, loc.gov/resource/mesn.130/?sp=197 (explaining black and white church leadership); Martha Jackson, “Old Spencer Academy as told by ‘Aunt Martha Jackson’ Negro freed woman,” interview by Hazel B. Greene, September 1, 1937, no. 7410, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries,

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Norman, OK, [digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/indianpp/id/2973/rec/1](https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/indianpp/id/2973/rec/1) (explaining that blacks were only sometimes allowed in church building after emancipation); Edna Hunt Osborne, "How a Little White Girl Grew Up Among the Choctaw Indians," interview by Hazel B. Greene, September 3, 1937, no. 7387, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, OK, [digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/ref/collection/indianpp/id/1141](https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/ref/collection/indianpp/id/1141) (description of pine trees near Pine Ridge Mission/Chuala Female Seminary).

<sup>22</sup> A. Reid, "Sketch of the Life of Uncle Wallace," 2, column 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Reid says that Minerva does not know the origins of "Steal Away to Jesus."

<sup>27</sup> A. Reid, "Sketch of the Life of Uncle Wallace," 3, column 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 3, column 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Freedmen tribal status was based on the tribal affiliations of slaveholders. John B. Moore, who had married a Chickasaw woman named Delia Love Colbert, owned Wallace prior to 1840. Moore's daughter Harriet Moore Mosby inherited Wallace in or after 1840 upon the probate of her father's will. Harriet married a white man from Kentucky named Britt Willis in 1842. Britt became trustee of Harriet's enslaved persons the same month Harriet and Britt got married. The Willis family removed to Indian Territory together along with Harriet's enslaved chattel. Upon Harriet's death in 1846, Britt retained possession of Wallace and his family. Willis later married Margaret Thompson, a Choctaw woman. According to the testimony of Wallace's grandson, Dixie Williams, "[Britt Willis's] wife owned the slaves; they came from Mississippi before I was born, when my mother was about four years old, she came to the Choctaw Nation." "Millie Durant, Application 1416 (Choctaw Freedmen)," Applications for Enrollment of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1301, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, image 14 of 29, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/55682151](https://www.fold3.com/image/55682151). With Willis's marriages, one to a Chickasaw woman and later to a Choctaw woman, and the subsequent transfer of some slaveholding to children recognized in the Chickasaw Nation, members of Wallace's family ended up as enslaved persons and later freedmen within both the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations.

<sup>32</sup> "Minerva (Ninerva) Anderson, Census Card 1107 (Chickasaw Freedmen)," Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225721131](https://www.fold3.com/image/225721131).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "Charity Williams, Census Card 1418 (Choctaw Freedmen)," Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225722892](https://www.fold3.com/image/225722892).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> "Joe Freeman, Census Card 1422 (Choctaw Freedmen)," Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225723035](https://www.fold3.com/image/225723035).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>40</sup> “Thomas Brown, Census Card 1003 (Choctaw Freedmen),” Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225735829](http://www.fold3.com/image/225735829); “Charley Abram, Census Card 840 (Chickasaw Freedmen),” Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225714687](http://www.fold3.com/image/225714687); “Charlotte McCoy, Census Card 94 (Minor Choctaw Freedmen),” Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914, M1186, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, record group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Fold3, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.fold3.com/image/225883283](http://www.fold3.com/image/225883283).

<sup>41</sup> *Swing Low*, play manuscript, II, unprocessed as of 2017, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK. References are to scene.

<sup>42</sup> *Swing Low*, play manuscript, I.

<sup>43</sup> Vagabond Puppeteers: Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre of Oklahoma, *Swing Low*, playbill, May 14, 1938, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, accessed December 2, 2020, [www.loc.gov/resource/musftppplaybills.200221899.0](http://www.loc.gov/resource/musftppplaybills.200221899.0).

<sup>44</sup> Frances Imon, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” in *Smoke Signals from Indian Territory* (Wolf City, TX: Henington Publishing Company, 1976), 15–18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Eileen J. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 609.

<sup>49</sup> T. Lindsay Baker and Julie Philips Baker, eds., *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 28. Frances mentioned her grandfather by name, but not her grandmother by name.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* The stylized dialect used in the final draft of Jessie R. Ervin’s interview of Francis Banks is maintained. Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters provided guidance on rendering Black speech dialect. Actual practice among WPA personnel varied, but emphasis was placed on denoting dialect (e.g. rendering “that” as “dat”) regardless of whether an interviewee spoke in standard or dialect English. Earlier drafts of Ms. Banks’s interview suggest that her dialect may have been stylized to conform to WPA guidance. See T. Lindsay Baker and Julie Philips Baker, eds., *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 8–9, 28–29.

<sup>51</sup> John Wesley Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University Press, 1915), 77–78, [archive.org/details/folkameric00work](http://archive.org/details/folkameric00work) (explaining how “Steal Away to Jesus” was created).