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Revisiting Aunt Hannah: African-American Folk Humor in Nineteenth-Century Lancaster County

Lancaster County is generally considered the heart of the Pennsylvania Dutch country. As such it offers a treasure trove of the products, practices, and perspectives associated with the German and Swiss German settlers who found a new *Heimat* near the Susquehanna River after 1700. Despite its commercialization beginning in the twentieth century by the tourism industry, Pennsylvania German culture has enjoyed a history of nurture, collection, and analysis by several generations of dedicated scholars. One aspect of Lancaster County's culture which has received only minimal attention is the existence of an African-American culture that has coexisted with Lancaster County's Pennsylvania-German culture.

African Americans and Germans have been, at times, uneasy neighbors in Lancaster County since at least 1726. Few scholars have, however, examined the ramifications of this coexistence. In 1937 Heinz Kloss recommended the analysis of this relationship as a future direction for German-American Studies but also warned against a too facile or superficial approach.¹ Among scholars of German-American history it is generally accepted as a given that the German settlers of Pennsylvania were opposed to slavery as demonstrated in the Germantown Protest of 1688 and the extensive missionary work among African slaves, freedmen, and Native Americans done by representatives of various German Pietists. Overlooked are the admittedly scattered but undeniable German ownership of slaves and German involvement in the urban riots of the Antebellum Era that were intended to eliminate free Africans as economic competitors.² German complicity in slavery and discrimination against African Americans should not, however, diminish or denigrate the important contributions of German Americans such as Carl Adolph Douai (1818–88),³ Carl Schurz, and others to the abolition cause. Also it is important to note, as I have indicated elsewhere,⁴ African-American intellectuals have had a special affinity to the German-speaking world when its values and

perspectives coincided with their own hopes and aspirations. The relationship between local African Americans and German Americans is not easily reduced to a common denominator.

A productive area for inquiry is folk culture. German folkways including customs, language, and crafts have had an impact on Lancaster's African-American population. Extensive genealogical investigations will undoubtedly reveal intersections of local racial and ethnic communities but spatial proximity has also had an impact. One aspect of local German-American culture that holds a special attraction is folk medicine. Powwowing is a practice that, even in our skeptical age, still attracts scholarly attention. Eminent folklorist Don Yoder has identified in powwowing the confluence of African, Native American, and European healing traditions.⁵ It is noteworthy that a powwower of the last century who gained a reputation in Lancaster County was an African-American.

Harriet Sweeny (1816–88) was a resident of Conestoga Township in Lancaster County and long-time residents of that area recalled a number of stories about her exploits over a century after her death. Her medical skills were used not just for her own profit. Sweeny became a philanthropist who supported her church, Conestoga's African Methodist Episcopal Church. As is the *modus operandi* for powwow doctors Doctress Sweeny, as she was called, taught others her skills.

The subject of this essay, however, is another nineteenth-century doctress. Columbia Boro's Hannah Prosser Bosley (1812–95). Her medical skills are documented in testimonials published by *The Columbia Spy* in 1857 that attested to the efficacy of her:

HEALING SALVE

For Chronic Ulcers, Abscesses, Burns, Scalds, and the
Radical cure of Corns, Bunions, & c

SPICED LIQUORS

For the Speedy Cure of Diarrhea, Dysentery, Summer
Complaint, Cholera Morbus, and other disorders of the Digestive
Organs generally,

COUGH MIXTURE

For the Speedy Cure of Coughs, & c

Not for her medical skills but for her wit Hannah Bosley achieved a certain degree of celebrity. In 1912, seventeen years after her death, a series of articles was published in Hampton Institute's *Southern Workman* bearing the title "The Aunt Hannah Stories."

The editor of these stories was Ellen Dickson Wilson, the self-proclaimed literary executor of Hannah Bosley. In her foreword Wilson introduces Aunt Hannah:⁶

Aunt Hannah, or 'Ole Pross,' as she was familiarly called, was born a slave on Passaic Island, Maryland, in 1812. She and her mother were the property of Commodore John Rodgers, who gave her to Mrs. Polly Goldsboro of Havre de Grace. She married Thomas Prosser, also a slave. They purchased their freedom in 1841 and moved to Columbia, Pennsylvania, where she died at the age of eighty-three.

Managing Hannah Bosley's literary estate was obviously a task which Wilson relished since she characterized Prosser's sayings as "wise and beautiful and witty" and regretted that she had not transcribed more. Real affection speaks out of Wilson's description of Prosser:⁷

Like most gifted people, she had no small self-consciousness, and she took it placidly for granted that her 'spe'ances' would be useful to other wayfarers. It is with no apology, nay, rather with pride to have had a share in their preservation, that I offer her cheerful and pungent observations on men and things to a discerning public, and dedicate them to the black people of our land, whom I love and in whom I believe.

This statement places Hannah Prosser and her literary executor in an interesting historical context. Before examining that context, however, more information about Hannah Bosley can be found in her obituary which appeared on 12 July 1895 in *The Columbia Spy*.

There we learn that Bosley died at her home, 508 Union Street in Columbia, after a lengthy illness. Unusual for a former slave, her birthday is identified as 7 June 1812. Her marriage to Thomas Prosser, their purchase of their freedom, and removal to Columbia are dutifully reported but also that after Thomas's death, Hannah married Isaac Bosley on 9 January 1853. From the third of the texts published in the *Southern Workman*, "Mendin' My Faith," it is clear that this second marriage was one of convenience and proved to be unpleasant. In her characteristic wit Hannah summed up the relationship thusly:⁸

I jest hed to marry dat man fer to git rid ob him. My husbn' he borrow two hun'ed dollahs f'om him to buil' our house. Atter my husban' died dar wa'n't no papers fer to show dat he hed borrow' dat money. I study hit over a bit. I know'd dat 'cordin' to de law de right owner couldn't lay no claim to hit. Den I study mo' 'bout de Jedge dat don' need no papers to tell wedder money's yo'rn or anudder man's. An' I know'd dat de Almighty was de Jedge I was boun' to keep my' Counts clar wid.

Well, dat man come an' seen how de lan' lay, an' he tol' me he'd take de debt out in boadin' wid me. Dar I was wid a fambly of chillens and' me

trying' to bring 'em up modes' and 'spectabul, an' a man no kin to nob'dy livin' wid us. Dat couldn' be, Mis', I had to marry dat man fer to settle up dat bill and make things straight in de sight o' de Lawd. Atter 'bout eight yeahs, w'en de Lawd seen I couldn' stan him no mo,' He tuck him outen my way. No, honey, No 'ooman ever gits two husban's; maybe she marry fo' men, de Husban may be de fus' ur de las', but de res' 'll be *jes men*. Don' tell me nothin' 'bout marryin', honey, I done has had de 'spe'ance uv it.

Hannah Bosley's worldly wisdom permeates this description of her second marriage.

Isaac Bosley apparently was quite an adept criminal who was also known as "Laughing Isaac." In the 1860s he was arrested several times because of numerous robberies.⁹ Although he had ostensibly lent money to Thomas and Hannah Prosser and she married him to cover that debt, there was little love in their arrangement. Hannah's obituary mentioned that Isaac died in the county hospital. In 1890 when Hannah apparently spoke about her life and made the memorable remarks about her second marriage she ventured that Isaac had been dead about thirty years which would place his death after 1865.

The final bits of information that can be culled from her obituary give an impression of the life style she created for herself. She was survived by four children, Rev. George T. Prosser of Georgetown, Kentucky, Mrs. H. E. Jones, of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, Sarah Bosley, of Philadelphia, and Mrs. Mary R. Richards, of Columbia. She also had ten grandchildren, and one great grandchild. In her will Hannah requested that after her debts were settled that her estate be divided into sixteen parts.¹⁰ The obituary's final statement is an candid summation of Hannah's life:

'Doctor' Bosley was intimately and favorably known here and in Philadelphia. She was a chiropodist and worked principally in the latter city. She was greatly interested in the welfare of Mt. Zion A.M.E. church, and was one of its main stays, and the congregation will feel her loss greatly.

This is a fitting summation to a life which as the caption to the obituary read:

**Born A Slave
She Bought Her Freedom and Has Done Much Good**

With that background information it possible to begin an examination both of the "Aunt Hannah Stories" and the significance of their place of publication.

Ellen Dickson Wilson was not an African-American. She was an Irish-American resident of Philadelphia and the widow of Colonel William Potter Wilson. A Civil War era officer who had served at Fort Union, New Mexico, an important outpost during the Indian Wars. Wilson died on 26 January 1914

and her obituary printed in *The Southern Workman* provides a modest and tantalizing glimpse of this extraordinary woman's life.

It states that after her husband's death she settled in Philadelphia where she joined Holy Trinity Church and:¹¹

Largely owing to the influence of its then rector Dr. McVickar, she became deeply interested in the Hampton School. Although she had never known General Armstrong, the story of his soldierly life attracted her strongly and she became the devoted friend of his children. She was the guest of Mr. Ogden on a number of his Southern trips, when her Irish wit and wonderful story-telling power added greatly to the pleasure of her fellow-travelers. As long as her health allowed it, she was an annual visitor at Hampton where she was a universal favorite. Her 'Aunt Hannah Stories,' which have since been published in the *Southern Workman*, she was accustomed to tell at Hampton to the great entertainment of both teachers and students.

Also:¹²

She seldom went North from Hampton without carrying with her to a Northern hospital, some lame or deformed Negro boy or girl who needed care. She not only gave her help to these afflicted children, but to a wonderful degree she gave herself.

And finally:¹³

When she became too ill to take much part in the social life around her, her thoughts dwelt largely on Hampton. Like Bishop McVickar, she was continually endeavoring to persuade people to go and see Hampton. It was largely through her influence that Mrs. Grover Cleveland and other Friends visited the school. In her death Hampton Institute has lost a devoted friend.

This obituary provides some interesting clues to the identity of Ellen Dickson Wilson. Names such as General Armstrong, Rev. McVickar, and Mr. Ogden connect her to important figures of Post-Civil War America. General Samuel Chapman Armstrong (1839–93) had created Hampton Institute in 1868 and was the pioneer in using manual labor training as a technique to expedite the socialization of the freedmen and Native Americans. The "Hampton Model" was perfected by Booker T. Washington, a Hampton graduate, at Tuskegee. The model's emphasis on accommodation over social equality incensed intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois who believed that through educating a "Talented Tenth" social equality was attainable for African Americans.

The impact of Armstrong and his peers (e.g., Richard Henry Pratt at the Carlisle Indian School) was even more disastrous for Native Americans. Their children were not only uprooted from their communities but also underwent

an indoctrination designed to remove every vestige of their native culture. The psychological damage inflicted by this coerced Americanization and the living conditions Native Americans endured after the Civil War and the end of the Indian Wars have their results in the deplorable conditions on today's reservations that radicalized Native Americans to take a stand at Wounded Knee in 1973.

The Rev. McVickar mentioned in Wilson's obituary was Rev. Dr. William Neilson McVickar (1843–1910) who had been rector of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia before being installed in 1898 as the bishop coadjutor of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Rhode Island. According to his obituary in the June 1911 issue of *The Southern Workman* Bishop McVickar had been a member of the board of Hampton Institute since 1886. Therefore, it is probable that Ellen Dickson Wilson's visits to Hampton date from the late 1880s. Her other companion, Mr. Ogden, played a key role in the creation of educational opportunities for African Americans in the South.

Robert C. Ogden (1836–1913) was a noted New York merchant and philanthropist who mobilized the support of Northern capitalists for institutions such as Hampton and Tuskegee. Besides Ellen Dickson Wilson Ogden had also convinced John Rockefeller, Jr., to accompany him on a trip to Hampton where Ogden served on and also chaired the board of directors for a number of years. Ogden's support of the Hampton Model and its pro-accommodation stance were criticized by W. E. B. DuBois as support for "inferior education."¹⁴

Wilson herself apparently had an important role in mobilizing support for Hampton. Her success at getting the wife of a president (Mrs. Grover Cleveland) interested in Hampton is evidence of important social contacts. In fact, her sister-in-law, Catherine, was the wife of Pennsylvania's Civil War era governor Andrew G. Curtin. Her husband's great-grandfather was General James Potter (1729–89), who served as vice-president of Pennsylvania (1781–82) and for whom Potter County, Pennsylvania, was named. Ellen Dickson had married into this family in 1869 and apparently lived in Trenton, New Jersey, as late as 1886.¹⁵ She most likely met Hannah Bosley in Philadelphia.

There is no evidence, other than her selection of Ellen Dickson Wilson as her literary executor, that Hannah Bosley had any expectations of literary celebrity. The title of "Aunt Hannah Stories" is likely the invention of Wilson who most probably wanted to have the texts read in a specific context. To understand that context it is important to remember Hampton Institute's mission and the role of *The Southern Workman*.

According to an article published on 11 April 1903 in *The New York Times* General Armstrong created the journal in 1872 and it was:

devoted to what may be called the current literature of those races [negroes and Indians], and to the description and discussion of their nature, their work, their needs, their life.

A desire to pursue what can be broadly described as an anthropological study of two marginalized groups motivated the authors of the journal. The selection of the title for Hannah Bosley's texts presents two possible interpretations. The pseudo-honorific title of "aunt" or "uncle" was frequently applied to African Americans to express a degree of affection colored by paternalistic presumption of social inferiority. A literary example that was put into a new context during America's Civil Rights Movement after World War II is, of course, Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom." Another possible literary antecedent and one that seems most fortuitous given *The Southern Workman's* mission is "Uncle Remus."

Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908) published *Uncle Remus: His Sons and His Sayings* in 1880 with the intent:¹⁶

to preserve the legends . . . in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect—if, indeed it can be called a dialect—through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family; and I have endeavored to give the whole a genuine flavor of the old plantation.

Although Harris denied any interest in ethnological research,¹⁷ his motives for publishing the stories and tales of the plantation South were similar to those researchers at Hampton who in 1893 organized the Hampton Folklore Society.

Organized by Alice Bacon, a Hampton teacher, the Hampton Folklore Society existed for six years and through the efforts of its members, students, alumni, and Hampton teachers collected African-American folklore from the communities in which they lived and worked. As Daphne Lamanthe asserts the difference between the work of the Hampton group and individuals such as Joel Chandler Harris was the emphasis on scientific investigation and scholarly presentation.¹⁸ Lamanthe and Donald Waters underscore that such research resulted in a tight-rope walk since the very premise of education at Hampton was the backwardness of the African American; African-American folk culture could thus be interpreted as further evidence of that primitive state or as the legitimate expression of a folk culture.¹⁹

There seems to be no evidence that Ellen Dickson Wilson belonged to the Hampton Folklore Society but she had to be aware of its work from her many visits to Hampton. The publication of the "Aunt Hannah Stories" in *The Southern Workman* suggests a comparison to the work of the emerging

field of folklore research. Lawrence Levine places Hannah Bosley's stories in the tradition of a humor of absurdity that:²⁰

worked through a straight-faced assumption of the rationality of the system and the belief structure upon which it rested. Events could then be unfolded which exposed the system and its underlying beliefs by accepting them with complete and faithful literalness.

The system which lent itself best to this type of humor, according to Levine, was segregation and he cites as proof one of Hannah Bosley's vignettes from the Antebellum Era when public conveyances in Pennsylvania were segregated.

Hannah related, how on a train trip to Media, Pennsylvania, in the winter she ignored a sign that directed all persons of color to take a seat either at the rear end of the passenger car or the front of the baggage car. Instead, she decided to warm herself at the stove placed in the middle of the passenger car. When the conductor confronted her, chastised her for ignoring the sign, and asked her destination, she replied "Media, sir." The exchange that resulted was classic Hannah Bosley:²¹

'All right,' says he, 'you mus' take de reah end o' de passenger cyar ur de fo'ard end ob de baggage cyar.' I jumps right up an' collec's my basket jes as quick as I kin, an' I tole dat conductor-man I'm 'bleeged fer his kin'ness in warnin' me. I tol' him I done s'posed bot ends ob de cyar wen' to Media, but ef its only de reah end, in co'se I'll take it.

This vignette is, of course, an excellent example of absurdist humor but it hardly subsumes the full range of Hannah Bosley's wit.

From the conductor's perspective, depending on his own intellectual gifts or the nature of his attitude towards people of color, Hannah's rejoinder might have been accepted as the typical buffoonery of a marginalized group. Her wit also had a barb as documented by her advertisement in the *Chester County Times* reprinted in the 12 November 1859 issue of *The Columbia Spy*.

Hannah Bosley desires to return thanks to the citizens of West Chester, for their liberal patronage, during her stay in this Borough. If Africans were not excluded from every place but the Kingdom of Heaven, she would vote for Hon. John Hickman for President, not only for his kindness in introducing her to customers in this place, but for his goodness and benevolence generally. She hopes Mr. Hickman will excuse her rude manner of returning thanks; they are prompted by a grateful heart.

Hannah Bosley

Hannah's target is not only segregated Northern society but explicitly the disenfranchisement of Black Pennsylvanians in the decades before the Civil War. In 1839, the new state constitution restricted the vote to white males. It was

not until the 15th amendment was ratified in 1870 that Black men in Pennsylvania could vote again. Hannah speaks here with the impunity of the court jester whose apparent deferent manner blunts the edge of her barbed remarks.

The editor of the *Spy* appreciated this side of Hannah Bosley and appended the following remarks to her ad:

The 'Doctor' is a character. Every one gives her credit for abundant mother wit,—in repartee. Bosley is equal to almost any occasion—but bare appreciation of her intellectual parts, does her character but scant justice. In the midst of a shiftless, worthless, abandoned negro population as ever [a.] town was cursed with, Hannah Bosley works faithfully to support two or three families in decency, and such comfort as her varying success justifies. When away from home she invariably remits money for maintenance of her parents and children, and when at home it is not her fault if any member of her family is not decent and orderly. Faithful and honest endeavor among her class and color is so rare (and shall we wonder at its rarity when we consider its encouragement?) that it deserves commendatory notice.

Because of her moral character Hannah's comments are somewhat blunted and relegated to the realm of witticism or quirk. The editor's obvious ambiguity about Columbia's Black population—he implies that the source of their degradation is external to their control—allows him to accept Hannah's wit.

Ellen Dickson Wilson may have wanted to draw attention to Hannah Bosley's particular wit by inviting the comparison to Uncle Remus. Even a superficial comparison of the two reveals the fundamental difference between the benevolent and almost color-blind humor of the Uncle Remus' tales and Aunt Hannah's sometimes acerbic commentaries on human foibles and inequities. The "Aunt Hannah Stories" deserve closer examination both as a document of the times and as a manifestation of an almost Eulenspieglian commentary on race relations in an area not known for its African-American traditions.

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Notes

¹ Heinz Kloss, *Research Possibilities in the German-American Field*, ed. with introduction and bibliography by LaVern Rippley (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1980), 222f.

² Cf. my article "The Germantown Protest and Afro-German Relations in Pennsylvania and Maryland Before the Civil War," *The Report: A Journal of German-American History* 61 (1990): 23–32.

³ Douai published the abolitionist *San Antonio Zeitung* (1853–56) until he was forced to sell his share in the newspaper and leave the state. Before he settled in Boston, African

Americans in Philadelphia reportedly offered to buy him a printing press so he could continue his campaign against slavery.

⁴Cf. my articles "Spiritual Fatherland: African-American Intellectuals and Germany, 1850-1920," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 31 (1996): 25-35; "Black Prussians: Germany and African-American Higher Education from James W. C. Pennington to Angela Davis, 1849-1967," in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 65-81.

⁵Don Yoder, "Hohmann and Romanus: Origins and Diffusion of Pennsylvania German Powwow Manuals," in *American Folk Medicine: A Symposium*, ed. Wayland D. Hand (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 244.

⁶Ellen Dickson Wilson, "The Aunt Hannah Stories," *The Southern Workman* 41 (January 1912): 40.

⁷Ibid.

⁸"The Aunt Hannah Stories," *The Southern Workman* 41 (March 1912): 164f.

⁹Cf. reports in *The Lancaster Intelligencer* for 23 April 1861 (Court of Quarter Sessions, April term) and in *The Columbia Spy* on 23 April 1864 and 25 November 1865. At least four arrests are recounted in these newspaper reports.

¹⁰According to her will (Lancaster County Wills, Book L, Vol. 2, 293) Hannah Bosley was survived by five children and 11 grandchildren.

¹¹*The Southern Workman* 43 (March 1914): 129.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴*The Correspondence of W. E. B. DuBois: Volume. I Selections 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 194.

¹⁵William Henry Egle, *Pennsylvania Genealogies: Scotch-Irish and Germans* (Harrisburg, 1886), 679.

¹⁶Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (New York: Heritage Press, 1957), xiii.

¹⁷Ibid., xiv.

¹⁸Daphne Lamanthe, *Inventing the New Negro* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁹Ibid. and also in Donald J. Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams: Afro-American Folklore from the Hampton Institute* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

²⁰Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 310.

²¹"Aunt Hannah Stories," *The Southern Workman* 41 (January 1912): 43.