

## Reading *The Will*

These notes provide some background information about my play *The Will*. Since childhood, I had heard the story about an ancestor of mine named Israel who sassed a white man and had to be smuggled out of town disguised as a woman. According to the story, when the Ku Klux Klan came to the house looking for Israel, my great-great-grandmother Eliza refused to disclose his whereabouts. Just minutes before, she had hid Israel upstairs under a mattress. After his escape, no one saw or heard from him again.

I had been told often that my great-great grandmother, Eliza Webster, her parents Annie and Demps Cherry, and four others (all free blacks) had founded the first colored Baptist Church, Mt. Lebanon, in Tennessee in the 1840's. I also knew that Eliza and her husband Cyrus had had 22 children together, seven of whom died in the smallpox epidemic. That was all I knew. With what resources I had, I had been doing some research (snooping in attics, basements, churches, and talking to people) since 1989. On my trips to Columbia, Tennessee I went to churches, cemeteries, and courthouses. As a native of Tennessee and through family oral traditions, I knew that an African American free black community existed in middle Tennessee before the Civil War, one with ties to the free black community in New Bedford, Massachusetts. (Those black New Bedford teachers taught my great-grandparents and Flournoy Miller's father, Lee.)

I was anxious to find out any information I could about Cyrus and Eliza, so I made a trip to the Tennessee State Archives in Nashville. Doing work at archives can be time-consuming and unrewarding; you're lucky if you find anything at all. There wasn't much about African Americans there. Census records revealed that Cyrus had held farmland in Columbia before the Civil War. An 1850 record listed Cyrus, Eliza and a few of their children. Fascinated by the thought of African Americans of that era holding property in the South, and because of my desire to realize a full picture of the world of African Americans, I took a room at a motel downtown and spent days at the Archives. I think I spent half the time, trying to coax the microfilm readers or rewinding the rolls of film. I followed a number of leads but hadn't turned up much.

On my last day at the State Archives, a very hot summer afternoon about ten minutes before closing, I accidentally found the wills of my great-great grandfather and grandmother, documents that had not been catalogued or listed in the holdings of the Archives. As I read the two wills, I was awe-struck by their evocation of individuals and a way of life entirely different from the stereotypes about African Americans of their place and time. As I read, I was amazed by the beauty of the language and the care evident in each perfectly crafted sentence. My great-great-grandfather Cyrus's will showed great planning and care. He was the nurturer--revealing what we would consider today feminine qualities-- listing things like teapots, mirrors, and blankets; using terms of endearment for each family member--a gentle, loving man. My great-great-grandmother's will, Eliza's, on the other hand, concerned itself with the disposition of the land, down to the last foot.

I was startled to notice that both wills mentioned Israel. Cyrus's will left money and household items to Israel should he return. Eliza's will contained a touching bequeath to Israel pointing any reader of the will away from Israel's actual destination. Archives are even quieter than libraries, but you know when I read those two wills, I couldn't help it; I cried and cried. It was as if after all those years, there they were waiting quietly for me to find them.

I made copies of the wills and returned to Columbia that evening even more determined to find out everything I could about Cyrus, Eliza and Israel. I could still hear my grandmother (Flournoy Miller's cousin and schoolmate) Emma's words whenever the family drove by Greenwood Cemetery. "When are y'all going over to that cemetery? My grandpa's buried in that cemetery." There was never an answer. Greenwood was the old civil war cemetery. Until the early 20th century, all the white townfolk, an occasional black servant, and the free blacks who could afford burial there were buried in Greenwood. Not one of my mother's generation, had set foot on the place. When I was younger, I assumed it was indifference; interest often skips a generation. Now I realize that once the Black Codes were firmly in place, my folks no longer felt comfortable going to the white cemetery. New separate cemeteries had been built by that time; to this day, cemeteries in my hometown are segregated.

I desperately wanted to go to Greenwood. I knew there was no way my aunt was going to go with me, so I found a family friend, Mr. Herbert Johnson (His mother, Miss Rebecca, and my grandmother Emma were the end men in the local minstrel shows of their era.), and the two of us put on our old shoes and waded through the grass. Although Mr. Herbert, who was in ill health at that time, needed a cane to get around, nothing could stop this committed history buff from making the trip to Greenwood. We had looked at just about every tombstone we could find when we came to a group over in one corner that faced away from the rest. There they were, my family's graves, just like Grandma Emma had said--Cyrus, Eliza, Eliza's parents, Annie and Demps Cherry, seven little graves off in a corner, and next to Cyrus a very large monument with the name Anna Sanders at the top.

The inscriptions were barely readable. I had heard of people doing grave rubbings so we went to a nearby drycleaner's for some thin paper and to Kmart for crayons. Back then, grave markers could tell whole stories. After reading their wills at the archives, it was no surprise that the tombstones were finely scripted. We rubbed and rubbed, but were only mildly successful in making out dates for Cyrus and Eliza. For Anna, I was able to make out something that I didn't understand, the words "cousin of Israel Grant." Fresh out of paper, Mr. Herbert and I went to an auto shop next door. Maybe they had something we could use. I felt a little uneasy about announcing our purpose, poking around the white cemetery. A young white guy at the counter was casual about the whole thing. He had family over in Greenwood, couldn't help out with paper, but was on his way home for lunch; he'd bring back a local historian's book on the cemetery. Just look in the seat of my pick-up he told me.

Sure enough, an hour later, the car window rolled down, the book lay there on the seat, waiting. The section on Cyrus and Eliza listed their inscriptions and the names of the graves of their seven young children and no more. There was no information on Anna Sanders. I called the local historical society. The woman on the phone told me to go to the grocery store, get some cornstarch or flour, throw it on the inscriptions, and dust it off. I threw cornstarch on Cyrus's mother Anna's grave and contemplated

the words, “cousin of Israel Grant;” they just didn’t make any sense. My grandmother had always said we were related to Ulysses S. Grant. So was Anna the Grant connection? A light dusting revealed something I never expected to find: “Anna Sanders, 1790-1852, mother of Cyrus Webster and consort of Israel Grant.” Consort of Israel Grant! Cyrus had erected a monument over his mother’s grave, one of the largest in the cemetery. And he was proud of his ancestry, not only proud that a white man was his father, but that his mother was the common-law wife to this man, a relationship he cared enough about to inscribe on her tombstone. Here was Cyrus’s legacy, the example of a courageous man, courageous enough during slavery, 1852, to announce this relationship to a hostile world, and honest enough to show his love for his father by naming his first born son Israel.

I was fascinated by what I had seen of Cyrus, his eloquent will, his passionate assertion of his biracial identity; all that I knew about him went against stereotype. From that day on, I was fired with the ambition to write a play that would dramatize the people whose characters were expressed in these wills. A play that would be true to them would challenge generally held assumptions about African Americans of their era held by both blacks and whites--assumptions about education, gender roles, and much else. I knew, from family stories, that there were stories that had not been told. Placed in the era of Reconstruction, my characters would reveal a world turned upside down, informed by historical situation and the world of real people, not bound by racial stereotype, but portrayed in their actual circumstances, a way of life entirely different from the stereotypes about African Americans of their place and time. For these past five years, I Seaton/ 8 have been working to bring them to life. Cyrus, the head of the family, whose will is the source of the title, acquired considerable property as a free black before the end of the Civil War. He is determined to pass on not only his worldly possessions but also his spiritual convictions and his wisdom to his descendants. The rebellion of Israel, one of Cyrus’s sons, against racial inequities forces Cyrus to act to protect his inheritance in all its dimensions.