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Williams, Samuel

(c. 1852–1946), author

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.79358>

Published online: 22 September 2022

who wrote under the name “Sam Aleckson,” was born enslaved in Charleston, South Carolina. He was the son of Susan and Alexander Williams, both of whom were enslaved by different families. Despite having a relationship with a relatively intact family in which his parents were both known to him and with whom he had contact, he was nonetheless largely raised in the household of his father’s white enslavers. Williams tells about how he was separated from his mother who worked far across the city and could not live with her children. His narrative weaves together a moving story of survival, community, and courageous perseverance. As Williams’s title reveals, while slavery was “Before the War,” carving out a life “After the Union” also demands recognition. His memoir is a rare account of the Civil War and its reconstruction aftermath from the perspective of a man who was raised as property but survived to proclaim his own life story as testament to his humanity. It ends with tales about his life as the head of a family newly relocated to Vermont at the turn of the 20th century. When he wrote his memoir nearly sixty years after emancipation, Williams was an elderly man far from the site of his childhood in South Carolina, but his memories and analysis were keen and veer from occasional fraught nostalgia to sharply bitter analysis, creating a fascinating American story of suffering and transcendence.

In his memoir, he tells of how he experienced childhood slavery—sometimes benignly and sometimes with tremendous suffering. He was, remarkably and illegally, taught to read by a trio of white sisters who were likely enslavers of his father and of whom he spoke of lovingly in his writings. Williams was trained as a child jockey, which, while it seemed exciting to his young mind, was actually a horrifyingly dangerous and exploitative enterprise concocted by his enslavers for the entertainment of white gamblers. Later, when the Civil War broke out he was forced to fill the place of his brother, who died of disease, as an “officer’s boy” in the Confederate encampment of Secessionville on James Island—another event that he recalls as an adventure of sorts, but which, in retrospect, he can view with horror. He bears painful witness to Charleston’s devastating great fire of 1861. During the Civil War, and after seeing his mother and sisters sold away, he was evacuated to a plantation labor camp outside of Charleston, which he calls “Pine Top.” Much of his memoir thereafter centers upon his experiences in suffering and striving to survive and resist as a member of the community of enslaved people of “Pine Top” under the power of “Mr. Ward,” the name Williams uses for the man who runs “Pine Top.” In his memoir, Samuel Williams uses fake names for most of the individuals and locations he mentions, and recent scholarship suggests that Williams was actually referring to Joseph Hall Waring II as “Mr. Ward” and that “Pine Top” was likely a “Pine Hill” location owned by the Waring family. After the Civil War, a teenage Williams was reunited with his family and stayed in Charleston to attend school.

Williams’s tale then goes on to bear witness to the hopes of the Reconstruction period to be soon followed by the devastation of the political, cultural, and economic backlash that arrested much of the civic and economic progress his family had made. While his father, Alexander Williams, had held a city position in 1870, by 1880 he was listed as a carpenter. Over time, young Williams found work running errands for local

Charleston businesses, and, as indicated by the 1880 census, he was working as a laborer and had married Mary Artson, a seamstress. However, this period of familial tranquility did not last long. Mary evidently died in the early 1880s, and, sometime in the mid-1880s, Williams moved north for better opportunities. Unlike many African Americans of this era who moved to large urban industrial centers, Williams followed a different path. His life trajectory took a surprising twist when he found an attractive position in Vermont. His move there testifies to the fact that African American migration at that time was always more varied than popular conceptions have held. Williams appeared to have remarried around 1888, and he sent for his second wife and children to join him in Vermont. As he aged, he took on work as a domestic servant for various prosperous white families in the region. By 1910, the census reported him as either widowed or separated from his second wife and living with his eldest daughter, Susan, within the Carter family household in New Hampshire and working as a domestic servant. It was around 1914 that he began work on his memoir, evidently eager to tell his story before his eyes failed him. Williams lived with his oldest daughter for the rest of his life, and he died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1946.

Further Reading

Ashton, Susanna. *Samuel Williams and His World*. Low Country Digital Library. <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/samuel-williams-and-his-world> <<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/samuel-williams-and-his-world>>.

Williams, Samuel. *Before the War & After the Union: An Autobiography by Sam Aleckson*. Edited by Susanna Ashton. Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2021.