

Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Savannah Biographies

Special Collections at Lane Library (Armstrong)

5-24-1991

My Intriguing Search for William J. Cleghorn

Carol Linskey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sav-bios-lane>

This book is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections at Lane Library (Armstrong) at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Savannah Biographies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

My Intriguing Search for William J. Cleghorn

History 300

May 24, 1991

Carol Linskey

Scanned 2011 from The Savannah Biographies Volume 20

Special Collections. Lane Library. Armstrong Atlantic State University. Savannah, GA 31419-1997

William J. Cleghorn
1822-?

William Cleghorn was born in Savannah to Harriet Clark in 1822. A black man, skilled in the baking profession, was given his freedom, along with his wife and two children in 1846. Cornelia, his wife was a seamstress and Francis M. Stone was her guardian. In 1850, Mr. Cleghorn began to be noted in Savannah for his fine catering to social gatherings hosted by white society members. His reputation grew and more opportunities for his services were presented throughout his career.

In 1855 Mr. Cleghorn approached Reverend Sherod Kennerly to offer his large bakery as a temporary home for the congregation of St. Stephen's Chapel, newly formed from a merger of two black missions of Episcopalians in Savannah.

Before The War, Mr. Cleghorn was represented by S. Yaster Levy and his daughter by Dr. F.H. Ormer.

The last evidence I have found is when his house caught on fire in 1877. He survived, according to the newspaper. His daughter Eliza is buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery. She died in 1937.

Intriguing is the word, I think, that best captures the essence of my discovery of a man, a black man, who lived in the 19th century, significantly amongst the most dynamic of times for members of the Black race. My format of writing is like that of a journal. I have brought the past, which seems so distant, closer to the present, like something forgotten, but now remembered.

I was given his name, his approximate date of birth (1822), and his profession (Master Baker). Also given was the fact that he was black. With this information, I had hopes for the prospect of an interesting individual.

Right away I checked the Census of 1850¹ considering the probable recording of Mr. Cleghorn as an adult. Yes, he was there along with his wife, Cornelia, and their two children, Mary E. and Williamina, ages 6 and 2, respectively. I reached for the 1860 census² where the seed of my obsession was fertilized. He had 4000 dollars worth of real property and 2000 dollars in personal property. I had come across a prosperous Black man who lived in Savannah just prior to the Civil War! This alone raised my brows, but he had, in his residence, four white bakers that I suppose worked for him. The profundity did not escape me.

Three of the bakers were from Germany. Andrew Zimmerman, age 29, arrived here from Meintz. John Fisher, age 25, and Louis Turner, age 18 were both from Hanover. Thomas Stone, age 24, was originally from Derbyshire, England.

I searched chronologically previous records of the census', needing to find his roots. Unfortunately, previous census' were not recorded with any other objective in mind other than numbers.³ I still know nothing of his childhood with the exception that his mother's name was Harriet Clark. This I found much later.⁴

The next entry by the census taker was a man originally from St. Augustine, Florida, John E. Hernandez who with his family lived on the corner of Liberty and Habersham⁵ streets near Mr. Cleghorn's bakery.⁶ I assume they had relations with each other, but my search for further evidence was fruitless, other than the fact that their professions were very similar. I found in the City Directories of the same year that Mr. Henderson was a partner in the business of Dickson and Hernandez, confectioners, addressed at 146 Broughton street in Savannah in 1860. Mr. Cleghorn's home was 209 Bryan street, near Fahm, now in the midst of what is called Yamacraw Village.

I found in the Directories that mistakes can be made and printed. In 1866 Mr. Cleghorn is listed as a jeweler. He is also omitted from all available Directories following 1877. This is significant because it coincides with the latest date of mention of him in the newspapers.

While journeying through the Savannah newspaper indexes, I discovered a diversity in the spelling of his name. He is listed both as Cleghorn and Claghorn. Fortunately, he is the only William (or W.) listed after 1831.

I began with the papers published in 1860,⁷ assuming his establishment in the community. The first report I came across heightened my hopes for finding an interesting person. The journalist highlighted the attendance of a supper held at Masonic Hall.

The supper at Masonic Hall, on Monday night, was very handsomely gotten up, and did much credit to the caterer on the occasion, William Claghorn, an old resident of Savannah, and well and favorably known to most, if not all, of our citizens. There is one fact connected with the supper attended to above, which is worthy of mention: nearly everything on the table was the handiwork of either Cleghorn, or some member of his family. The fancy confectionery, the ornamental icing of the cakes, (some of which were as beautiful specimens as we ever saw,) were made in Savannah, and in the family of the caterer.

We learn that it is Claghorn's intention, at no distant day, to become a contestant for the furnishing of a supper in a sister city, and we must heartily commend him to the good people thereof.

I found it odd that the reporter neglected to put more emphasis on the occasion, per se, but rather concentrated on the efforts of Mr. Cleghorn. He, too, must have found Mr. Cleghorn's skills and demeanor creditable.

Most of the newspaper accounts of Mr. Cleghorn dealt with his professional attributes; credited as early as 1850 for the catering of such functions as a reception at the Savannah Gymnasium.⁸ Other accounts took place throughout the 1850's; Washington's birthday party at Oglethorpe Hall,⁹ the May Ball at the Barracks,¹⁰ the Lone Star Ball at St. Andrew's Hall,¹¹ a supper at the Savannah Volunteer Guards¹² and the new Masonic Hall dedication (Mr. Broughton was credited for this occasion on the 11th but on the 12th a correction was made).¹³ I would venture to say that Mr. Cleghorn made many important contacts with the more prominent citizens of Savannah during this decade.

One sad event was recorded in 1856. While making a delivery one morning from his bakery, Mr. Claghorn's horse broke away for some reason throwing him from his carriage. Mr. Claghorn suffered both his legs being broken.¹⁴ The Bakery was closed for business from August 1st until December 3rd. On the 2nd of December, a notice appeared in the local newspaper informing clients he would be taking orders.¹⁵ The next day a warm article was printed from "friends" welcoming Mr. Cleghorn back to work.¹⁶ I was enchanted by the compassion of the community and drawn closer to a sense of The Man.

One curious article I found puzzles me. In 1875 an announcement was printed in the Savannah Morning News which reported that W.J. Claghorn and Emmanuel Sheftall were called upon by Thomas Churchill to examine and appraise two stray cows in the White Bluff district. I do not know the circumstances surrounding the event.¹⁷

Following my search of the newspaper articles , I went to the Courthouse to find out more about some legal disputes mentioned in the newspapers in 1875¹⁸ and 1878¹⁹. I was unable to come up with more information.

I was also interested in his estate, but I found nothing under his name and, by some strange humor of chance, his ward was missing in the Kearney files.²⁰

After searching the courthouse, I became aware that I had little vital information about Mr. Cleghorn. I was informed the Chatham County Health Department may have something, but it didn't surface in my search. In fact, the records of his birth, marriage, and death are a mystery. I searched the cemetery records of Laurel Grove. Although I was unable to find him, I did find his daughter, Margaret Eliza (whose name is Mary in the census records). She was 6 in 1850, 15 in 1860 and 87 in 1937, the year of her death; a discrepancy of only 6 years. She died on April 4, and her residence at the time was 1106 E. Duffy street²¹. She still bore her paternal name, and after 1860 she is the only member of the family still residing with Mr. Cleghorn. From this I presume the end of the genealogical line.

Exhausting (and exhausted from the pursuit of) the basic sources, I took a break and went to the Antiques Mall on West Bay near Jefferson street to browse and reflect. I was looking at some antique baking and cooking utensils when I inquired to the curator if she had heard of Mr. Cleghorn, a black baker from a century ago. She hadn't, but directed

me to another proprietor in the Mall who may know. Downstairs, I found a charming, helpful woman who had not heard of him but directed me to "the opening of a new door!" She said Mr. W.W. Law at the Beach Institute may be able to help me. Grateful and re-inspired, I took up again my journey.

My brief interview with Mr. Law was charging. There is an electricity about his presence I am at a loss to describe. He knew almost right away Mr. Cleghorn was a baker and I heard him say that Mr. Cleghorn founded a church. Mr. Law didn't elaborate; instead, he directed me to Reverend Charles Hoskins at St. Matthews Episcopal Church.

I called Reverend Hoskins from the nearest telephone booth. He told me he had written Black Episcopalians in Savannah¹², and that I would find the book at Armstrong State College in the library, and Mr. Cleghorn is mentioned on page 11 or 12.

I found Mr. Cleghorn, in print, among the context of St. Stephen's parish, established in 1855 for free urban Blacks. Reverend Sherrod W. Kennerly, the newly stated minister from the Diocese of South Carolina, was given the task by the Rt. Reverend Stephen Elliott to organize a chapel in Savannah under the Diocese of Georgia. Reverend Kennerly is quoted as stating, "In the winter of 1855 I procured a place of worship-- a large workshop above the longest bakery in the place. The proprietor was a colored man among the most respectable in the city."¹³

Reverend Hoskin's bibliography referred me to another source for Mr. Cleghorn's role in his community. Printed in 1874 by the chapel minister at the time, J. Atwell's A Brief Historical Sketch of St. Stephen's Parish,²⁴ is an invaluable source of information about the community of Savannah as it participates in the growth of this chapel.

In Rev. Atwell's work, he addresses the eminent concerns of the members of the congregation and their current of growth and establishment.

The history of the Parish began with the merger of the Ogeechee Mission, which was established in 1845, and the Savannah River Mission (est. 1852). Bishop Elliot founded these two missions to "launch a vigorous 'blitz' to evangelize the slaves...."²⁵ Mr. Cleghorn, along with his wife and mother, were members of the Savannah River Mission.²⁶

The primary concern of the members was the education of their children. The movement of the mission from the site, (across the Savannah River, opposite the city) to town, and the appointment of a new minister, facilitated the autonomy of the worshippers, previously under "colored sectarian teaching, principally Baptist."²⁷

The establishment of the congregation in Mr. Cleghorn's bakery helped not only the congregation but Mr. Cleghorn as well. Reverend Kennerly observes: "... being anxious for the services of the church, (Mr. Cleghorn) took an active interest in the matter; this drew others with similar feelings. Soon we had the workshop cleared out and fitted up

with all that belongs to an Episcopal Church, including
gaslight." ³⁰

In 1856, "seven worthy colored men (were) chosen to
serve as wardens and vestrymen." ³¹ No doubt Mr. Cleghorn was
among these men. Also among them was a gentleman named James
Porter, a free black man whom I think is worthy of
mentioning.

Invited to Savannah from South Carolina by Reverend
Kennerly, Mr. Porter was an accomplished musician. He
started a choir and taught music at St. Stephen's. At the
end of the Civil War, Mr. Porter, who by this time was Senior
Warden of the Parish, was invited along with other members
of Savannah's black community (Mr. Cleghorn as well, no
doubt), to meet with General Sherman and Secretary of War
Stanton. ³²

Curious as I had become about the cultural context in
which Mr. Cleghorn is living, I sought out some records of
the Freedmen's Bureau. I found, in the Lane Library at
Armstrong State College, microcard reproductions of The
Condition of Freedmen, ³³ printed in 1870. Mr. J.W. Alvord, the
writer, mentions the Beach Institute. Remembering the aims
of the congregation, I delved in. Mr. Alvord, looking for an
interview,

called together the old colored educational
committee (these are the men whom Secretary
Stanton met and conferred with when at

Savannah in 1865) for examination of these

schools....I visited the private schools taught by colored men. They are quite respectable, with, in all, about one hundred and twenty pupils.

Mr. Alvord never named Mr. Cleghorn; in fact, he neglected to name anyone, so I was driven to find a concrete mention of Mr. Cleghorn's connection to the Beach Institute.

Thank God for Divine Intervention-- there is no other way it could have happened. A colleague, who knew of my task, excitedly told me she happened to run across a mention of Mr. Cleghorn in a footnote in a compilation of Richard Arnold letters. I probably would never have found it on my own.

Dr. Richard Arnold, the first President of the Board of Education in Chatham County, was determined to bring the Beach Institute under the care and direction of the Board. In a letter he wrote on August 30, 1872, to the Reverend E.M. Cravath, the field secretary of the American Missionary Association in New York he describes:

On the 14 August, I, as President, addressed an invitation to meet Mr. Wm. Cleghorn (Claghorn?) and William Pollard (a negro veterinary surgeon of Savannah. Cleghorn ((Claghorn?)) and Pollard were thrifty men, respected by the leading whites of the city), 'to meet a committee of the Board of Education tomorrow evening at 8 o'clock,

to take into consideration the subject of providing schools for colored children in the city and county. ³⁴

I searched the original Arnold letters in the Georgia Historical society, but did not find the letter dated 14 August 1872. I infer from the evidence given that Mr. Cleghorn held a prominent position on the committee of the Beach Institute; and his 1855 aspirations and motivations seem here to have been manifested.

I know not the course of his life afterwards, with the exception of one event. In 1877, a fire erupted in his home. No one was hurt, however, but this finding in the Savannah Morning News is the latest printed reference to him I could find in my 9 week search. ³⁵

The remains of Mr. Cleghorn's life are indelible etched in the history of Savannah. He was not a Davenport, a Low or a Mercer, but what I have found leads me to believe he was a big man. I found a quote, not referring to Mr. Cleghorn but someone else, that provokes and captures my image of him.

He represented, as I believe, the best that America has tried to do, ...and he was in himself a representative American, yet sufficiently non-typical to be a distinct and memorable individual. ³⁶

Selected Bibliography

Reference note: Georgia Historical Society, 501
Whitaker Street. Savannah, Georgia.

Census of Georgia, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860.

Laurel Grove Cemetery Register. Georgia Historical Society.

Registers of Free Persons of Color. Georgia Historical
Society, Collection number 5600CL-130. Books 2-5.

Savannah. City Directory. 1858 etc. through 1879. Georgia
Historical Society.

Reference note: All newspapers in chronological order

Daily Morning News. (Savannah) 20 May 1850. p.3 col.1.

Ibid. 24 February 1851 p.2 col.2.

Ibid. 5 May 1852 p.2 col.1.

Ibid. 4 January 1853 p.2 col.1.

Ibid. 15 April 1853 p.2 col.6.

Ibid 12 January 1856.

Ibid. 1 August 1856. p.2 col.1.

Ibid. 2 December 1856 p.2 col.4.

Ibid. 3 December 1856 p.2 col.2.

Ibid 11 February 1859 p.2 col.1-2.

Ibid. 12 February 1859 p.2 col.1.

Ibid. 10 January 1860 p.2 col.1-2.

Ibid. 11 January 1860 p.2 col.1.

Ibid. 3 May 1861

Ibid. 11 August 1864.

Daily News Herald (Savannah) 17 May 1866.

Ibid. 1 January 1868 p.3 col.2.

Savannah Morning News (Savannah) 1 November 1872.

Ibid. 5 June 1875 p.3 col.5.

Ibid. 4 November 1875 p.3 col.6.

Ibid. 28 July 1876 p.3 col.4.

Ibid. 7 April 1877 p.2 col.1.

Savannah Evening Press (Savannah) 12 September 1870.

Savannah Tribune. (Savannah) 25 May 1877.

Reference note: Chatham County Courthouse, 133
Montgomery Street, Savannah
Georgia

Schreck Files. "North Oglethorpe Ward" Superior Court of
Chatham County.

Kearney Files. "North Oglethorpe Ward" Superior Court of
Chatham County.

Grantor/Grantee Index Volume 1. Superior Court of Chatham
County.

Index to Marriage Licenses, Probate Court of Chatham County.
Will and Marriage Records, Probate Court of Chatham County.

Index to Estates, 1742-1955. Probate Court of Chatham
County.

Reference note: Manuscripts found at the Georgia
Historical Society

Richard D. Arnold Papers. Georgia Historical Society Vertical
Files.

Waring Papers. Collection #1275, Box 22:307,328. Box
348-351.

Published Works:

Alvord, J.W. Condition of the Freedmen. Washington D.C.
Howard University Press. 1870.

Atwell, J.S. A Brief Historical Sketch of St. Stephen's
Parish, Savannah, Georgia. New York. Church Book and Job
Printing Establishment. September 20, 1874.

- Cleghorn, Reese, Climbing Jacob's Ladder. New York. 1967.
- Hoskins, Charles L. Black Episcopalians in Savannah. Savannah Georgia. St. Matthews Episcopal Church. 1983.
- Perdue, Robert E. The Negro in Savannah 1865-1900. New York. Exposition Press.
- Shryock, Richard H. ed. Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D. 1808-1876. Duke University Press. 1929.
- Tuchman, B.W., Practicing History. New York. A.A. Knopf. 1981.

Works Cited

- 1 1850 Census of Chatham County. Microfilm #M432-64 #1573.
- 2 1860 Census of Chatham County. Microfilm #M653-115 #2083-2083.
- 3 1840, 1830, 1820 Census of Chatham County.
- 4 Hoskins, Charles L. Black Episcopalians In Savannah. St. Matthews Episcopal Church; Savannah Georgia. 1983.
- 5 1860 City Directory, Savannah.
- 6 1859 City Directory, Savannah.
- 7 Daily Morning News. January 11, 1860 p.2 col.1
- 8 Ibid. May 20, 1850 p.3 col.1.
- 9 Ibid. February 24, 1851. p.2 col.2.
- 10 Ibid. May 5, 1852 p.2 col.1.
- 11 Ibid. January 4, 1853 p.2 col.1.
- 12 Ibid. January 12, 1856.
- 13 Ibid. February 11, 1859 p.2 col.1-2.
February 12, 1859 p.2 col.1
- 14 Ibid. August 1, 1856 p.2 col.1.
- 15 Ibid. December 2, 1856 p.2 col.4.
- 16 Ibid. December 3, 1856 p.2 col.2.
- 17 Savannah Morning News. July 26, 1875.
- 18 Ibid. June 5, 1875.
- 19 Ibid. May 11, 1878 p.3 col.6.
- 20 Superior Court of Chatham County Tax Assessment Office.
- 21 Laurel Grove Cemetary Register.
- 22 Hoskins, Charles L. Black Episcopalians In Savannah. St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. Savannah, Georgia. 1983. p.11

- 23 Ibid, p.12.
- 24 Atwell, J.S. A Brief Historical Sketch of St. Stephens Parish, Savannah, Georgia. New York. Church Book and Job Printing Establishment. September 20, 1874. p.7.
- 25 Savannah Evening Press. September 20, 1970.
- 26 Hoskins, Charles L. Black Episcopalians In Savannah. Savannah, Georgia. St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. 1983.
- 27 Atwell, J.S. A Brief Historical Sketch of St. Stephen's Parish, Savannah, Georgia. New York. Church Book and Job Printing Establishment. September 20, 1874. pp.4-5.
- 28 Ibid. p.4.
- 29 Ibid p.5.
- 30 Ibid p.5.
- 31 Ibid p.6.
- 32 Hoskins, C.L. Savannah Tribune. May 25, 1977. p.7.
- 33 Alvord, J.W. Condition of Freeman. Washington D.C. Howard University Press. 1870. p.13.
- 34 Shryock, Richard H. Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D. 1808-1876. Duke University, 1929.
- 35 Savannah Morning News. April 7, 1877. p.3 col.3.
- 36 Tuchman, B.W., Practicing History. New York, A.A. Knopf 1981.