The Curse of Caste

The dramatic title Collins gave her novel, "The Curse of Caste," was in keeping with the drama of the story she tells. Lina, a beautiful dark-haired woman, is the daughter of Richard, the son of a New Orleans slave owner, fallen in love, Richard discovers that Lina actually is a slave. Richard and Nina marry despite this fact, and Richard's irate father discontinues his son. The newlyweds flee north to Connecticut, where Nina dies in childbirth while Richard is back in New Orleans trying to make peace with his father. Richard is deceived into thinking that his baby daughter died along with his wife. Their daughter Claire grows into a dark and beautiful woman, never knowing which of her parents were — or even her race or her. The story shifts back to New Orleans, where a chance discovery may change Claire's true identity and reunion with her roots. But the readers of "The Curse of Caste," who eagerly followed the weekly installments of the novel, were never able to find out how it ended.

Who Was Julia C. Collins?

Who was this young woman, beyond being a writer, mother, and teacher in the small town of Williamsport during the Civil War? What was her motivation — the auditory — to write and publish her essays and novels in a national newspaper? What brought the thousands of readers, across the country? How did she feel about her work, with such a talent? What was she teaching her skill? How did she learn about the landscapes and life in Connecticut and New Orleans? Where did she get the courage to put her story about slavery and free blacks and the clash of cultures when two people of different races fall in love? Just as we are looking for a new way, we are now looking for Julia.

As is typical for the time, we know more about Julia's husband than we do about her. Reginald Pitts, a well-respected genealogist who has done extensive research on Julia, discovered most of what we do know about Stephen Carlisle Collins was black, born a free man in Potomac.

He lived in Williamsport with his mother and stepfather. During the Civil War, Stephen was a servant for two white officers, and when African Americans were permitted to serve, he enlisted in the 6th U.S. Colored Infantry. After the war, he was a barber with a shop on West Fourth Street.

He was very active in his community and was a commander of the Fribley Post of the G.A.R., the veterans' organization for colored Civil War soldiers in Williamsport.

When and where Julia was born and the identity of her parents remain a mystery. Scholars' best guess is that she was born a free woman in the North. Since she left young children, she might have been in her twenties when she died, in which case she was born around 1840.

Census records

There is just one African American woman named "Julia" in the 1860 census for Williamsport. A 17-year-old named Julia Green who was living with the family of Enoch Gilchrist, an African American abolitionist who had been a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

It was Enoch Gilchrist who announced the Johnson that Julia had been appointed the teacher for Williamsport's black children. Julia had already attended a school in the building that was used as a church.

Julia would have made her home in the mostly African American section of Williamsport, on Mill Street, near the Susquehanna River in an area that would have been at the foot of the present-day Street. She and the other African American church members would have to live there. Julia and her parents lived there, and most likely, Julia and the children lived with them while Stephen was serving in the Civil War.

Motherless Children

The notice of Julia's death in the Christian Recorder said that she left motherless children. Research by Pitts and others has determined that Julia left two children — the older, Sarah, probationably was about eight when Julia died, was Stephen's child by a previous marriage, the other, Annie, would have been Julia's natural child and would have been about three when her mother died.

Census records indicate that Annie was raised in Williamsport by Stephen Collins's parents; she worked as a domestic in 1860. In 1864 married John L. Caution, a lumber worker originally from Maryland. They had four children, but tragically both parents died while the children were quite young. John Collins's brother took the children to live in Cambridge, Mass., and eventually they were adopted by different families.

One of those children, Ethel M. Caution, a 1912 Wellesley graduate and a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, made multiple trips to Williamsport wanting to learn more about her family history, and particularly about her grandmother, the illusive Julia Collins.

Searches of the local newspapers for an obituary or death notice for Julia Collins have turned up nothing, and there are no burial records in Williamsport for that time period.

Regardless of how much or how little we know of Julia Collins's life, it is a story that needs to be celebrated.

She is an important part not only of our local history, but also of women's history, state and national history.

The placement of the historical marker on the River Walk is fitting; hundreds of walkers and joggers and cyclists pass the marker every day.

And to quote the words on the marker itself, her life and legacy "provide a window to the past, to the documented experiences of nineteenth-century African American women, their families and their communities."