

Julia Collins: Williamsport essayist, teacher, and author

By **MARY L. SIEMINSKI**
Special to
the Sun-Gazette

Julia C. Collins is both the best known and the least known of the Williamsport women in our historical series.

She is the best known because she wrote the novel "The Curse of Caste"; or "The Slave Bride", the first published novel by an African American woman.

In June 2010, a state

Williamsport Women



by MARY SIEMINSKI

historical marker was installed on the River Walk in Williamsport in her honor. Julia also is

the least known because 150 years after the novel was published, we still are not even sure of her

maiden name. 'Collins' is the last name of her husband, Stephen Collins.

Everything we know about Julia dates from 1864 and 1865. In 1864, she was appointed the teacher for the African American children in Williamsport.

"The Curse of Caste" was published over a period of eight months in 1865; individual chapters appeared weekly in the *Christian Recorder* and the national newspaper of

the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Julia also published a series of nonfiction essays, including an essay on teaching and another on African American womanhood.

Sadly, Julia died of tuberculosis in November 1865 before the novel was completed.

When her death was reported in the *Christian Recorder*, the editor noted that she left "motherless children."

Julia and her novel

seem to have been forgotten until Professor Mitch Kachun, of Western Michigan University, came upon Collins' novel while doing research for another project. This ultimately led to the publication of the novel in 2006, in book form.

("The Curse of Caste," William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun, eds.; or "The Slave Bride," Oxford University Press.)

(See JULIA, Page E-3)

Lifestyle

Williamsport Sun-Gazette, Sunday, February 10, 2013 E-3

Julia Collins: Williamsport essayist, teacher and author

(From Page E-1)

The Curse of Caste

The dramatic title Collins gave her novel, "The Curse of Caste"; or "The Slave Bride," is in keeping with the drama of the story she tells. Lina, a beautiful dark-haired woman, and Richard, the son of a New Orleans slave owner, fall in love. Richard discovers that Lina actually is a slave. Richard and Nina marry despite this fact, and Richard's irate father disinherits his son. The newlyweds flee north to Connecticut, where Lina 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 Clare grows into a dark and beautiful woman, never knowing who her parents were — or even their race or hers.

The story then shifts back to New Orleans, where a chance discovery may change lives, reveal Clare's true identity and reconcile the family. 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 wife, mother and teacher in the small town of Williamsport during the Civil War? What gave her the motivation — the audacity — to write and publish her essays and novel in a national newspaper, a newspaper with thousands of readers, across the entire county? How did this young woman, with such a talent for writing, learn 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 name to a story about slaves and free blacks and the clash of cultures when



two people of different races fall in love? Just as Clare was looking for her parents, 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. Stephen Carlisle Collins was black, born a free man in Pottsville.

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 in the *Christian Recorder* that Julia had been appointed the teacher for Williamsport's black children, a position that Simon Gilchrist, Enoch's father, had held a decade earlier. These connections make it seem plausible that "Julia Green" could have been Julia Collins, but there is no verification of that. There are some other tantalizing clues and connections to other local families, but nothing definite.

When Julia was appointed by the school board to teach, there was no school building in the city open to black children. As early as 1850,

African Americans petitioned for a school for their children but their request was denied. The school board did authorize a salary for a teacher, but the teacher was responsible for providing his or her own space and materials. Julia might have taught in her in-laws' home or perhaps 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 Hepburn Street. The African American church was there, Stephen Collins's 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,

who probably 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 and, in 1884, 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 Caution'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 illustrious 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' life, it is a life 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.

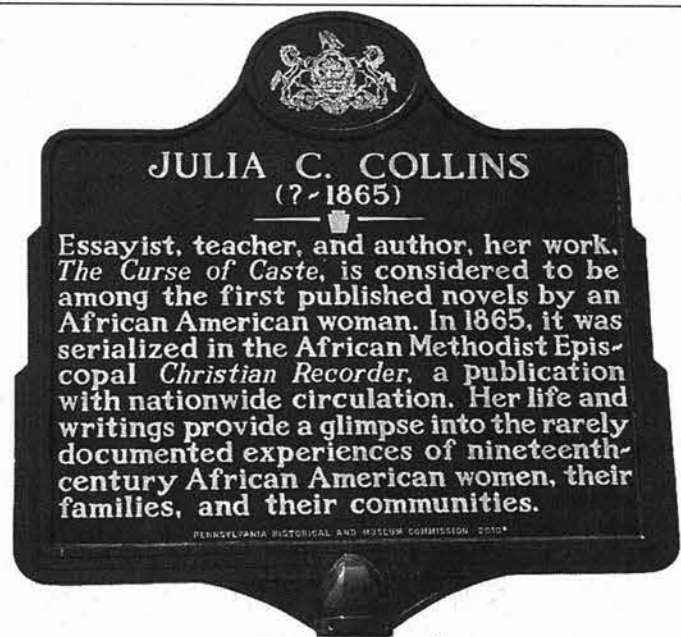
The placement of the historical marker on the River Walk is fitting; hundreds of walkers and joggers and cyclists pass the marker every day.

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

Sieminski is project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative community undertaking between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Her column will be published on the second Sunday of each month.

To contact her, email life@sungazette.com.



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Pictured, left, is a drawing of Julia Collins, and right, a historical marker that was installed in June 2010 on the River Walk in her honor. Collins is both the best known and least known of the Williamsport Women. She wrote "The Curse of the Castle" and "The Slave Bride," the first published novel by an African American Woman.