

## Charles Sellers

The subject of my sketch is a stalwart colored man named Charles Sellers.

He is about two inches below the medium height; but what he lacks in this respect is made up in every other, for he is stout, thick-set, able-bodied. His massive frame gives an idea of solidity and muscular strength not unlike (this is said with respect) that suggested by a great mastiff, or a well-kept draught-horse. Though the straight lines of strength are here found at the expense of those curves which beautify the contour of the human frame, yet his figure is not altogether uncomely; simple, bold strength always commands, together with respect, something of admiration.

His dark ebon-brown color plainly indicates his pure African descent. He has all the characteristic features of the race he represents, and many of them in the superlative degree. His low, receding forehead is deeply furrowed, not with lines of age, but of care. His broad, flat nose suggests the Knickerbocker theory of that feature of his race, that when God made the black man, so pleased was he with the result of his labors that he laid his hand upon him, but too soon, thus flattening his nose. His eyes are small and the part about the pupils more nearly saffron than white. They lack expression, except a smoldering fire when angered, and a good-humored twinkle when he laughs—a low chuckling, or on rarer occasions a mellow, musical ha, ha. His thick projecting lips disclose, when parted, rows of large, even, yellow teeth.

In common with all his race, he is a very good singer. He is strictly temperate and honest, never drinks intoxicating liquors, though I think sometimes uses tobacco. He possesses an unlimited amount of good nature, and there is a spirit of true chivalry underneath his rough exterior. One of the most kindly of men, for his friends or even his acquaintances, no task too rough or hard for him to do, but against a very few people who have wronged him he cherishes the most bitter feelings. He is over overweeningly self-conceited about a very few things, just as humble about very many more. He is an industrious workman, and his services are eagerly sought after. He must be minutely instructed as to what is required of him, then no work is better or more thoroughly done by any one.

He is probably about thirty-five years old, but he does not know his exact age. He was born a slave, near Cheraw, South Carolina. As his mother was cook at the master's house, his life was not as hard as that of many of the plantation-hands; though, as he grew older, he was obliged to submit to many indignities. Sixteen brothers and sisters shared with him this life of slavery so terrible. There was a tannery on the place in which he worked some little time, when the war of the Rebellion broke out, and Charles was taken to war by the young master, an officer in the Southern army, as servant. During a slight skirmish, stealthily leaving his master's tent, he reached the Union lines and made good his escape. He traveled northward, scarcely knowing or caring where, so intoxicated was he with the one idea that he was free, and reached Philadelphia. Here a Friend from Bucks County, a prominent officer of the Underground Railroad, met with him, and took him home.

Though Charles appreciated the kindness of his new friends, yet he was not contented to remain there idle, while loyal men all about him were responding to the call of the war trumpets, and enlisted in a colored regiment. Here he remained until the war was over, not taking part in any great battles, nor distinguishing himself especially for account of his valor—it may be because he did not have the opportunity—but doing faithfully the humble service required of him. He saw none of his relatives during this time, having been marched down to Louisiana and Texas to the east [sic] of his old home, and returning by vessel.

After the war was over, he returned to Bucks County. He could neither read nor write, and now applied himself assiduously to the task of obtaining an education. He worked out in the summer, attending school only during the winter months, but at his leisure moments, he pored industriously over his primer. It was an almost hopeless task; it seemed as though he could not learn; but by dint of patient study from that time to the present, he can read some little, probably one-fourth of the words in the newspaper without spelling them out, and as many more by so doing. He is not dissatisfied with his progress, thinks he is getting along very well indeed, and who would rob him of this innocent delusion? He can write his name quite legibly now, after scribbling copy-books full of it, and can perform some of the simpler operations in arithmetic. A source of pride to him is this mathematical knowledge.

When he began to work and earn money for himself, he did not know how to take care of it and squandered it recklessly—no, not recklessly, it was usually for useful things, but, with lack of judgement, would buy them in great quantities. For instance, sometimes, he would have seven or eight hats and a dozen neckties at once. Now he better understands how to take care of money, and with the sum saved from his earnings has bought a neat house. He has a trusty white friend in whom he confides and who will not let him be swindled by unprincipled, better-educated people.

Strange to say, he has never revisited the scenes of his childhood. Perhaps the old associations are so distasteful, he does not wish to have them revived. He often talked about it several years ago, but now he seldom mentions it. He says his mother is probably dead, as she was an old woman when he came away, and the family must be scattered now.

He has a strong attachment for the neighborhood where he was so kindly used after his liberation, and will probably remain there all his life.

Sarah H. Gilbert

Millersville, Pa., Dec. 17, 1876

**Transcription Note:**

This paper appears to have been written for a school assignment while Gilbert was attending the Millersville State Teachers' College. The verso of the packet of loose leaf papers contains the title "A Biography," suggesting the prompt. Transcribed by Jesse Crooks, 2024.

**Source:**

Gilbert, Sarah H. "A Biography." December 17, 1876. Sarah H. Gilbert Papers. Mercer Museum Library (MSC 62, fol. 2). Doylestown, PA.