



Forewords

Message from Rev. Edward Scott

This is a most improbable story—and yet it's true, both in its particulars and in the sweep of national memory. The particulars here concern a child born into slavery not long before the tide would turn against the “peculiar institution” in an epic rending of national purposes, ideals, and meaning. The Civil War would test beyond measure what Lincoln had prayerfully called “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” He could not have known the slip of a girl upon whose hopes and aspirations for a life beyond the suffocating confines of slavery that promise might depend. And so the life of Lucy Simms was inextricably entangled with the life of the United States of America. What she might achieve for herself and those who came within her sphere of influence would confirm the deep-soul meaning of her country and her home.

Great women, and great men too, do not always shape their times in bursts of galvanic change. The shaping takes place in a more subtle and enduring way through the persistent application of their gifts and graces to the “least of these.” How Lucy Simms came to be a teacher out of the darkness of slavery is a tale every American should know. How she found Hampton University and how that college, in turn, had risen over the blood-soaked soil of Virginia at the war's end is a tale so richly layered in the rebirth



of freedom in America that no fiction could rival it for power and depth of sentiment.

Within the pages of the biography the reader now holds may be found an account of the strange system of law and custom that permeated every aspect of slavery. Any number of conditions had to be rigorously maintained to ensure its justification. What means must be adopted to coerce compliance and obedience from a slave? How must the slave be made to think or not to think at all about the nagging, haunting why of her bondage? What philosophy ought to be developed to make the necessary determinations that define what it means to be human? What classifications with regard to race, sex, and gender will assist us to categorically rank and scale human beings relative to power, liberty, and nobility? The answers to any of these questions had not been conclusively provided because the Civil War had ended and certainly not because the North had won that war.

The careful reader will see how the war required the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau to address the multiple concerns of the teeming multitude of slaves who walked away from their dreadful labors while the war was underway. The reader will also see with greater clarity how and why the historic black colleges came to be founded. It is even more revealing to see how the failure of Reconstruction precipitated a new system of law that birthed a rigid caste of race throughout the southern portion of the United States. Jim Crow laws reasserted racial supremacy for whites and racial inferiority for blacks. The right of women to vote would not be secured until after the world had been engulfed in the first of two terrible world conflicts.

If Lucy Simms was to achieve anything of consequence it would be done in the mind-numbingly difficult context of these troubled times bridging two centuries. If you knew nothing of Lucy Simms before reading this far you know that she prevailed and that she did so with



a force of character you surmise she possessed to an extraordinary degree. This biography profiles her life against the highly textured times that enveloped it. If circumstances seemed to conspire against her every initiative, in the end Lucy rose in quiet triumph.

I would urge the reader to take into consideration the complexity of the relationship that was maintained by Lucy and her family to the white family that had owned them prior to the Civil War. There is a record here of continuing interest of former masters, the Grays, in the affairs of their former subjects, the visitations, the letters of commendation to Lucy's college noting the inestimably good work she performed in the education of her young charges. The very notion of slavery upon first sight would breed contempt for slave holders, but the story here strikes us as odd and strangely devoid of malice and recrimination. The psychological implications invite a closer examination than the present volume can provide. And yet, one can not help but notice the admiration that swells in Orra Gray Langhorne to witness the care, affection, and skill with which Lucy Simms practiced the craft upon which she expended so much devotion.

That Lucy Simms lived out her life in a fiercely determined effort to educate the sons and daughters of former slaves, that she did so across fifty years without scarcely a day lost to illness, is cause for exclamation and exaltation. Her example is a shining light for all of us and particularly for teachers who may feel their finest efforts are underappreciated and little noted. Lucy Simms had her greatest reward in the outcomes she achieved for the more than 1,800 students who passed through her classroom. Their lives bore witness to the beauty of minds turned out toward the world around them. Their resilience in the face of social injustice is but the reflection of a woman born to slavery but ever undaunted.

Lucy Simms is the exemplar of what it means to be human, to think creatively, to free others in the learning of their letters and their



sums, and to see others as our kith and kin across the boundaries of race and color. The story told here of Lucy and her siblings, John, Ellen and Ulysses, reaffirms the character of the impulse toward freedom. That impulse is at once epic and romantic. It is the story of our nation in its struggle to perfect democratic values.

We pursue these values with dogged optimism and sometimes they are fretfully realized. Lucy Simms engaged the romance with her country through her service as teacher and mother for the children of others. She is our north star, our call to righteous citizenship, and she makes it clear at last in the radiance of her example what it means to be American.

Rev. Dr. Edward A. Scott
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Mary Baldwin University
Pastor, Allen Chapel AME Church
Staunton, Virginia

