

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

**“THE GREAT COLORED EVANGELIST”:
A BIOGRAPHY OF REVEREND WILLIAM H. ROBINSON**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life of Reverend William H. Robinson. Robinson was born a slave in 1848 in North Carolina, and was freed during the Civil War. Robinson then became educated and worked in different jobs across the country. In 1877 he converted to Methodism and became a minister and speaker. These experiences are written about in his slave narrative *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery*. His lecture and preaching career ultimately led him to Eau Claire, Wisconsin where he spent the end of his life from 1910 to 1923. This paper covers his life in bondage and afterwards, most specifically his life in Eau Claire.

Introduction

Five Union soldiers stand in full uniform. They have come to honor one of their fellow brothers, William Robinson, who has died. Their blue uniforms and caps are looking old, yet the brothers remain resolute in their stature. A cannon fires from somewhere in the distance and can be heard miles from the cemetery on this cloudy and somber day in May. “The march of this soldier is over,” says the camp commander. “Let us remember Comrade Robinson here at rest under the blue skies of Heaven, guarded by the silent stars that in life watched over him where he bivouacked on the battlefields or lay down weary and foot-sore on the soil of the Southland.”¹ After the commander finishes his speech, the camp guard rests a wreath of evergreens, a rose, and an American flag on the grave of Comrade Robinson. Upon finishing, the bugler plays “Taps” and the honor guard fires more cannons to honor the fallen soldier. Finally, the commander yells, “Camp dismissed,” and the crowd that has gathered around the gravesite of Robinson disappears.

This memorial service did not take place in the years or even decades immediately following the Civil War. It occurred in Eau Claire, Wisconsin at Forest Hill Cemetery on May 27, 2004, nearly 142 years after the last battle of the War Between the States. It was in honor of Reverend William H. Robinson, a black soldier who fought for the Union after being emancipated. He eventually moved to Eau Claire where he ultimately died. And yet his grave was unmarked prior to this service in 2004.

So who is this man honored as a Union soldier in 2004? What is his story? Why was he not recognized earlier? These questions are hard to answer because most of what we know about William Robinson is what he told us in his slave narrative *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen*

¹ “Graveside Memorial Service of William Robinson Pamphlet, 2004,” (photocopy), p. 4, William Robinson file, Forest Hill Cemetery, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Years in Slavery first published in 1903. It details his early life as a slave, through his emancipation, and conversion to a Methodist minister. Unfortunately, Robinson’s narrative leaves out significant events in his life. The most significant is his move to Eau Claire and his life there as he became known as “the great colored evangelist.”² This paper will examine Robinson’s entire life, not only prior to 1903 which his narrative tells about, but also his life in western Wisconsin.

Figure 1: Picture of William H Robinson



Source: Robinson, William H. *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery*, 1913. Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/ransom/ransom.html>.

² *Eau Claire Leader*, 2 October 1912, 4.

William Robinson is an important figure both in historical literature and in the community of Eau Claire. Robinson's memoir is one of 6,006 North American ex-slaves who have shared their life stories between 1703 and 1944 in the genre of slave narratives.³ His importance as a historical figure among these many thousands of slaves can be seen through the fact that scholarly articles and monographs use Robinson's slave narrative as a primary source. This shows how his memories and actions have helped historians and the public alike to reflect on such an important time period of America's history. As an example, David Blight refers to Robinson's slave narrative in his book *Race and Reunion*, which studies how the Civil War has been remembered by Americans, both black and white. He says specifically of Robinson's narrative, "Robinson was a former slave, born in Wilmington, NC. His tale is one of a catalogue of horrors, blood, brutality, and family breakup during slavery, as well as his service, first as a servant to his Confederate master who is killed in the war, and then as a Union soldier."⁴ Additionally, in a book for children, pieces of William H. Robinson's story is used to show what it was like to grow up in slavery; his in particular is included because it has "long been forgotten."⁵ Another historian calls his narrative an "indispensable" autobiography to read.⁶ This shows why Robinson's recollections of the institution of slavery and the Civil War have become valuable to scholars.

³ Henry Louis Gates Jr, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), ix.

⁴ David W. Blight, *Race and Relations: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap University Press, 2001), 438.

⁵ Yuval Taylor, *Growing Up in Slavery: Stories of Young Slaves as Told by Themselves* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2005), 185.

⁶ David S. Cecelski, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 68.

William Robinson's life is also important when considering the history of Eau Claire. During the time Reverend Robinson lived in the area, he was one of only twenty-one black residents of the 21,000 in the city of Eau Claire.⁷ And yet, this paper will suggest that Robinson did not live a life of solitude or segregation, but in fact was a prominent member of the community. For this reason, his life should be known and celebrated by Eau Claire. Unfortunately, his life seems to have been forgotten in the city, remembered briefly in 2004 only for his Civil War service during the above mentioned memorial ceremony. This paper will attempt to address this oversight by looking into Robinson's life, both before and after his move to Eau Claire.

William Robinson's life spanned nearly a century, so many different types of sources will be utilized. The secondary literature used will cover the different areas of Robinson's life – slavery, Civil War, racism, Methodism, and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Since no biographical work has been done on Robinson, secondary sources will be chiefly about events surrounding his time period and experiences. Among the most important will be those concerning the organizations Robinson was involved with and the African American communities in the North.

Primary sources will be vital in order to fully understand Robinson's life. His slave narrative, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit*, will be most important in dealing with his life prior to 1903, when it was first published. While Robinson himself wrote the narrative, the validity should be questioned. Slave narratives need to be read with caution because they are written as social and political messages for mass audiences. Owen Whooley, professor at New York University, states that, "individuals [who write these narratives] attempt to carve out identity and oppose oppressive

⁷ US Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1922*, Vol. 3: Population by State, City of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1100.

systems” in their specific historical context.⁸ Essentially, Whooley suggests that while the narrative tells the truth according to the author, it still might flavor events so that the point of the narrative and narrator is more compelling. Another historian suggests that life events in slave narratives might be exaggerated due to the fact that these ex-slaves tried to imitate or repeat other slave stories they have heard. This is because, “there can be little doubt that when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading, the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them.”⁹ This has been kept in mind while reading Robinson’s memoirs and should be kept in mind by the readers because some of the stories Robinson tells are inconsistent with history. While his book will be my main source for his life prior to 1903, I have found verification from other records about Robinson’s life experiences after 1910, when he moved to Eau Claire. The primary source that will be vital to this portion of the paper is the *Eau Claire Leader*, Eau Claire, Wisconsin’s leading newspaper at the time. Articles from 1910 to 1923 will be used to show Reverend Robinson’s actions and connections while living in the city. These sources, both secondary and primary, allow a clear view of William Robinson’s life to develop.

Robinson’s Early Life (1848-1861)

William Robinson was born a slave, William Cowens in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1848. The last name Cowens came from the name of his master, Tom Cowens. William’s early life was filled with much heartache and adventure. He says he was one of five hundred slaves on two farms in which young William’s job was to wait tables at the “great house.” This seems unusual for North Carolina, and the 1850 census slave schedule confirms that a “Thomas Cowan” owned only seventy

⁸ Owen Whooley, “The Political Work of Narratives: A dialogic analysis of two slave narratives,” *Narrative Inquiry*, 16 (2006), 297.

⁹ Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, x.

slaves in North Carolina and the “Cowan” family adds another 121 slaves in Wilmington.¹⁰ It was in this atmosphere that William, at the age of ten, witnessed his father being sold and taken away from his family. He describes the scene such as:

He shook my hands and kissed me good bye through the iron bars. Then three sisters and two brothers climbed upon the wheel and bade him good bye. Now the most trying scene of all is at hand. Mother climbed upon the wheel and father said, “Rosy, I’m bound for Richmond, Virginia, and from there to some Southern market, I don’t know where. We may never meet again this side of the shores of time.”¹¹

Saying good bye to his father was not only an emotional event for William, but it also proved to be a catalyst for him wanting to get out of his bondage. After a dispute with Master Cowens, William tried to run away just weeks after his father left, but he was caught by slave hunters. At his return home, he faced serious punishment:

My master was standing very close to this [pistol] and the sight of it knocked all the manhood out of me, so I reluctantly pulled off my shirt with their assistance, and he tied my hands behind me, my feet together, and ran a stick between them. This left me in a doubled up position on the floor. He whipped and cursed me until he had cut my back to pieces... The next morning when I awoke the blood had dried to the shirt in the wounds on my back.¹²

These two experiences, both severe, happened when William was under control of Master Cowens. But a few months after the runaway incident, William was sold and taken to a trader’s pen.

William was forced to walk from Wilmington, North Carolina to Richmond, Virginia where the trader’s pen was located, a distance of 260 miles. According to Robinson, the auction pen he arrived at was owned by Robert E. Lee. While Lee was in Arlington during this time period, he was

¹⁰ US Census Bureau, *Seventh Census of the United States, Slave Schedule*, North Carolina. Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432_1,009, 735.

¹¹ William H Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery*, 3d ed. (Eau Claire, WI: by the author, 1913), 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

in charge of supervising his father-in-law's slaves in 1859 so it is possible that Robinson might have had some connection to Lee at this slave pen. At this point in time, "Mary and Robert E. Lee came into legal ownership of hundreds of slaves at Arlington and other plantations."¹³ While at the auction, William saw slave families being split up, watched another slave being whipped to death for not requesting a pass to go to Church, and observed another slave being restrained and beaten to death for not finishing his work on time. When it was finally William's turn to be put up for public sale he was cleaned, examined, and put on the auction block. He was sold for 1,150 dollars to a man named William Scott from eastern Virginia. It was at Master Scott's house that William began really considering religion and freedom through talking with another slave. After some consideration, William thought it was best to try to run away again and find his mother and family. Unfortunately, this attempted escape proved just as unsuccessful as the first and he was returned back to the trader's pen of Robert E Lee. He was allowed to stay at the pen until another man purchased him, Mr. Hadley, who had already owned William's mother and family. While William was happy to be back together with his family, his time with Master Hadley was short lived.¹⁴

Only two weeks after arriving at Mr. Hadley's home, Joseph Cowens, the son of William's original master, had purchased him. During this time with Master Cowens, William heard talk of secession and Southern rights from his master and his master's friends. On April 12, 1861 William, age thirteen, remembered hearing the "booming of the cannons" that were being fired on Fort

¹³ Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 62.

¹⁴ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 45-50.

Sumter while traveling with his master.¹⁵ By his account, it seems that young William had just witnessed the beginnings of the Civil War.

Robinson's Civil War Service (1861-1865)

William claims to have entered the war with his master on April 15, 1861 when he became a cook for the Confederate Army. William did not stay with his master for long because, "before the expiration of the six months, my master was killed by a shell bursting at Greenville, Tennessee."¹⁶ Though his master had died, William remained a cook for the regiment. He stayed with the Confederacy until November 1863 when his troop was captured by the Union. At this point, William decided to stay fighting in the war, though this time with the Union Army. He received his freedom and the generals he was working for allowed him to go back home to see his family for a short time. He recalled this moment and remembered with nostalgia in his narrative, "This was my first day of freedom."¹⁷

For the Union, William joined the 54th Massachusetts Regiment for all black soldiers and remained there for nine months. He then transferred to the 28th Indiana where he stayed until December 1865. No evidence has been found verifying his service in either of these two regiments. On the National Park Service website for "Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War", thirteen William Cowens (spelled "Cowan" and "Cowen") were found in Indiana, and five were found in Massachusetts (spelled the same way), but none matched his specified troops.¹⁸ Robinson says of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸ *National Park Service*, "Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System," <http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/soldiers.cfm> (accessed 10 May 2008).

his service, “[I] was in the following regular battles: Battle of the Wilderness, Kennesaw Mountain, Chancellorsville, Virginia, Culpepper, Virginia, Antietam, Maryland, Blue Springs, Missionary Ridge, Nashville, and Greenville, Tennessee and many other skirmishes.”¹⁹ Though it is unlikely that William would have actually participated in all of these battles, he still must have felt connected to the War as a young teenage soldier. William understood the importance of the war too, as he says:

I recognize then that I was to take part in one of the greatest wars of modern times. The war of the rebellion was now on, when the numbers engaged in it, and the extent of territory affected are considered. It was primarily a war based on sentiment. The long, but peaceful and prayerful contest of the abolitionist against the slave power, and the earnest and faithful prayer of the slave himself, all crowded the throne of a just God, and had aroused the whole country, so that everywhere, in every state in the union, there was a sharp division of opinion among the people. It is true always, however, that God makes the wrath of man to serve him, and out of the wear of the rebellion the slave fought his way to freedom. What a glorious record the Afro-American made in that war! It is one of the brightest pages in all history.²⁰

William was proud of his service and of the war, and deservedly so. His service in the Civil War will be somewhat of a mystery later in the story. It is important, then, to remember how significant it was to him at the time.

Robinson’s Education, Careers and Conversion (1865-1910)

After the Civil War, William Robinson began searching for the purpose and meaning of his life. He worked for a short time as a fireman, and then became a member of the Tennessee Singers. He moved around the United States with the singing group for a while until they disbanded in November 1868. Shortly after that job ended he was hired for the Hanlon’s Wizard Oil Company at the age of twenty-one where he and seven others gave concerts to advertise for the oil. It was through this job that he was able to travel to London, England for nearly a year. While in London,

¹⁹ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 117.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

William saw an entirely different world than the one he was used to in America. He was able to visit cathedrals and see operas, and most of all, he was able to receive an education. A man William met in London hired two private tutors to help him learn. He learned to read and write, and “after getting rudiments in my mind I learned with surprising quickness.”²¹ After becoming educated, William believed he could make something of himself and that he would do something important with his life.

After leaving London in 1874 William tried attending school in the United States at Central Tennessee College. He found, though, that the course work was too hard for him and the other students were more advanced than he was. He spent a bit of time teaching in Tennessee, and then became a porter for a rail car company. During this time, William was having other difficulties and addictions. He says, “It seemed for a time that all the good that had been accomplished through my many friends, and self denial and perseverance, were all overshadowed with darkness, in immorality and sin.”²² Among other things, William had been dealing with a gambling problem. It was in this setting that on January 1, 1877 he turned his life around and his conversion took place.

He says:

But thank God, on New Year’s night, 1877, while standing at the gambling table, I heard my mother’s voice, as I thought, as audibly as I ever heard it in my life. She said, “my son,” in that tender, motherly way in which none save a mother can speak, “is this what you promised me when you were wearing the shackles of bondage?” ... I resolved on that night that I would not stop until I was converted. All the entreaties and prayers of my mother came rushing upon my mind, and I decided at once that they should not be in vain. My mind fully made up, I left the gambling den that night, never to enter it again.²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²² *Ibid.*, 137.

²³ *Ibid.*

This conversion experience was one of the most important experiences of William's life. After that day, he found a preacher and finalized his conversion and became a Methodist minister.

William's personal life turned around after his conversion experience too. He was married to a woman named Alice in 1877 and they had three children together – Dora, Marguerite and William. Unfortunately, his fortune did not last long and his son William died in infancy. Then, in 1892 Alice passed away and in 1897 his oldest daughter Dora died. Throughout this time William prayed to keep his sanity and he continued to do missionary work and hold revival meetings hoping to help convert others. It was also during this time that William Cowens changed his name to William Robinson. As previously mentioned, Cowens was the name of his original and final master. After he became a free man and met with his many relatives, they realized they all had different surnames. They decided to choose the last name "Robinson" because of a story they heard regarding William's father being a prince of a tribe in Madagascar before arriving in America on a slave ship. He says, "[The tribe] heard the fictitious story of Robinson Cruso. In the African dialect the definition was 'Rob-o-bus-sho,' meaning Robinson Cruso... After carefully talking it over, a unanimous vote was taken to discard all other names and hereafter answer to our father's name, which meant Robinson."²⁴ While this story might seem unlikely, specifically that William's father would have been a prince, it is most likely an oral tradition that William and his siblings heard and believed. Ultimately, though, this is how William Cowens became Reverend Robinson, "the great colored evangelist."

²⁴ Ibid., 158.

His narrative, then, was written sometime after 1897. "Every line is dictated by the author, WH Robinson, and written by his secretary, Miss Florence Mitchell."²⁵ He originally published *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery* in 1903 stating that:

My book reveals in every chapter either the pathetic moans of slaves in almost utter despair, yet panting, groaning, bitterly wailing and still hoping for freedom, or of slaves with their hearts, lifted to God, praying for deliverance from the cruel bonds, the auction block, and years of unrequited grinding toil for those had no right to their labor... I wanted to be assured of the fact that I could give the world at least some thoughts that would not only be a remembrance, but would prove beneficial to all in whose hands this book may chance to fall.²⁶

After the 1903 edition was published in Indiana, it was re-edited and a second edition was published in 1907 in Iowa. It is believed that between 1903 and 1907, and also between 1907 and 1910, when Robinson moved to Eau Claire, he continued on his missionary work and gave lectures about his life as a slave. This is implied in the way the *Eau Claire Leader* described Robinson and his lecture, calling him "the noted negro evangelist" in 1911, prior to his reputation being solidified in Eau Claire.²⁷ In another article, it says "WH Robinson will give his popular lecture 'From Log Cabin to the Pulpit.' The lecture has been given in many states and it is still worthy of a full house."²⁸ So it seems from the time he published his memoir the first time, until he moved to Wisconsin, Robinson continued travelling throughout the country spreading his word and God's.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ *Eau Claire Leader*, 4 October 1911, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 March 1917, 10.

Robinson's Move to Eau Claire (1910)

Robinson moved to Eau Claire in 1910. According to a letter he wrote to its residents, as published in his slave narrative, it was because he had an invitation to preach at a local church. He says:

In 1910 we became residents of Eau Claire, I want to say that I have traveled quite extensively, at home, and abroad, but I have never met such a body of warm hearted ministers as in Eau Claire; men who at once became interested in my daughter and self, and seemed to have no thought of the "black rubbing off." They belong to the class of men who look beyond the color of the skin or the texture of the hair, and they immediately entered a brotherly hand.²⁹

It seems even Robinson was surprised that his move to Eau Claire was smooth and seemingly untroubled. It is not surprising that Robinson, a black man, would have found safety and a home in a small Wisconsin town. Zachary Cooper, a respected black historian, notes that African Americans have played a role in Wisconsin history since the 1700s. He explains that, "in the last century many of the [blacks] lived in rural areas, pursuing the same goals, facing the same hardships, enjoying the same rewards and simple pleasures as their white neighbors."³⁰ He goes on to explain that there was an acceptance in the interaction of the white and non-white citizens of the state in the specific areas he looked at.³¹ This might explain more about the reasons Robinson settled in Eau Claire in the early 1900s.

When Robinson moved to Eau Claire he entered a town that was undergoing many changes. Going into the early 1900s, Eau Claire was moving from a lumbering town, whose industry was

²⁹ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 194.

³⁰ Zachary Cooper, *Black Settlers in Rural Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

rapidly going down, into a manufacturing area.³² Eau Claire was hoping to do this so that it could become a large economic city like others in Wisconsin. In 1910, the year Robinson moved, the city was going through a tremendous expansion. The most significant of these changes was its diversified economy, low unemployment level, and the value of the city was 10 million dollars.³³ It is clear that when Robinson moved to Eau Claire he entered a city that was thriving. During his tenure in the city, that fact did not change. It seems that Eau Claire was doing very well in the early twentieth century, the time in which Robinson was in the city.³⁴

The population history of Eau Claire during this time is also important to understand in order to fully appreciate Robinson's life in the city. The chart below indicates the total population of the city of Eau Claire followed by the number of white and black citizens in the 1910, 1920 and 1930 Census.

Table 1: Census Figures for the City of Eau Claire, 1910-1930

	1910 Census	1920 Census	1930 Census
City of Eau Claire Population	18,310	20,917	26,287
White Citizen Population	18,274	20,855	26,223
Black Citizen Population	32	21	11

Source: US Census Bureau, Thirteenth – Fifteenth Population Censuses, City of Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

³² Jane Hieb, *Eau Claire: Heartland of the Chippewa Valley* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1988), 65.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴ Lois Barland, *The River Flows On: A Record of Eau Claire, Wisconsin from 1910-1960* (Stevens Point: Worzalla Publishing Company, 1965), 200.

These census figures show that the city of Eau Claire was majority white, with very few non-white citizens making up its population. It is now clear to see the city and community that Robinson moved into when he settled in Eau Claire in 1910.

Robinson's Life in Eau Claire (1910-1923)

When William Robinson moved to Eau Claire in 1910, at age sixty-two, he stayed at 513 ½ Lake Street in an upstairs apartment. This is verified by the Wright's Directory of Eau Claire for 1914 which contains a general directory of citizens and is the only directory published for Eau Claire after Robinson moved; Robinson's name is under the heading "Ministers."³⁵ He lived there until his death with his daughter Marguerite, or Margaret as she is sometimes called.³⁶ William and Margaret remained very close throughout their time in Eau Claire. She consistently sang and performed with the reverend when he was holding meetings or speeches because, "her vocal work has gained her some favorable press comment."³⁷ Another *Eau Claire Leader* article said of her, "the singing by Miss Robinson, the evangelist's daughter, is proving a big help in all the services."³⁸ It is clear that Margaret's role in Reverend Robinson's life in Eau Claire proved beneficial to both of them. This relationship continued until Robinson's death because even in his obituary, the newspaper refers to Margaret as "his daughter and inseparable companion."³⁹ Robinson's life in Eau Claire was marked by a strong connection with his daughter.

³⁵ *Wright's Directory of Eau Claire for 1914* (Milwaukee, WI: Wright Directory Co, 1914), 394.

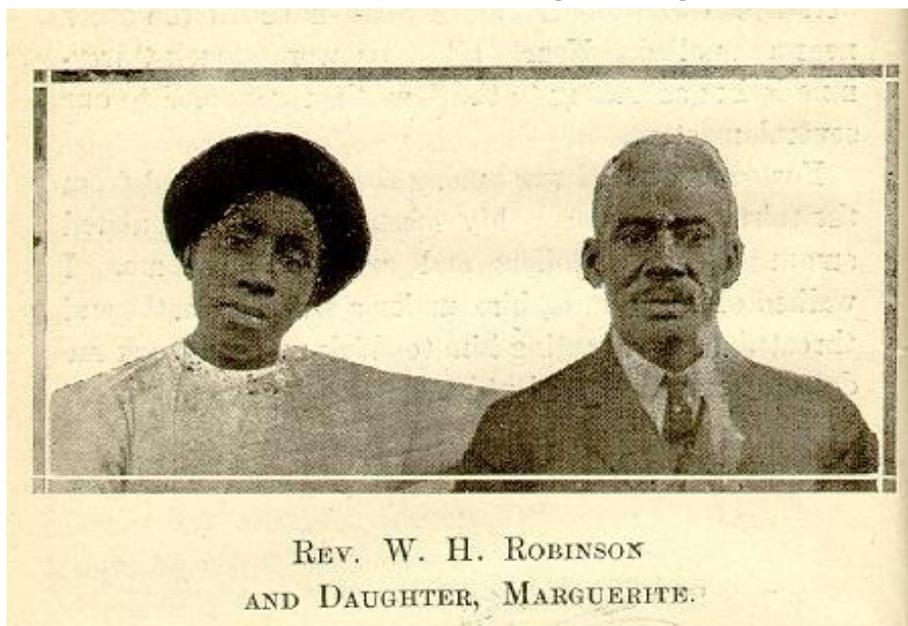
³⁶ US Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, City of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920. T625_1984, 6B.

³⁷ *Eau Claire Leader*, 21 March 1915, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24 January 1917, 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1923, 7.

Figure 2: Picture of William Robinson (left) with daughter Marguerite



Source: Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit*, Documenting the American South.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/ransom/ransom.html>.

As already mentioned, Reverend Robinson initially came to Eau Claire to preach at a local Methodist Church. He says in his narrative that in 1910, “My first service here was in the Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church, by invitation of Rev. Guy W Campbell and his good people.”⁴⁰ Also published in the book is a letter from Reverend Campbell speaking about Robinson to another preacher. He says, “I have recently had a negro and his daughter hold a few nights’ services in my church. He is an ex-slave and a very good speaker.”⁴¹ The rest of the letter goes on to suggest to the preacher of the other church to invite Reverend Robinson to come and speak to his congregation. It seems that the link between Robinson and the Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church was very strong in his early days in Eau Claire.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 194.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

His connection to the church on Lake Street continued over the next thirteen years. In looking through the *Eau Claire Leader*, four articles were found from the time Reverend Robinson lived in the area that explicitly expressed a connection between the man and the church.⁴² Though this does not seem like a lot, it is important to understand the happenings of the Lake Street Church during this time. The Church was undergoing serious renovations and changes that took a lot of time and money. For this reason, the Lake Street Methodist Church may not have been allowing many speakers and revival meetings to be held on their grounds. But also during this time frame, from 1912 to 1917 when Rev. Frank Lee Roberts was pastor, Church membership nearly doubled and the Church was one of the strongest Protestant churches in the city.⁴³ Margaret Gratz, the Lake Street Methodist Church historian, attributes some of the membership to Robinson when she says, "One of the early evangelists who helped conduct revival services in this area in 1910 and following years was a man by the name of William Robinson, an African American."⁴⁴ She believes that he played a role in the growth of the church. So while a number of events were occurring during the time Reverend Robinson worked with Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church, he and its community were still enjoying prosperity.

Besides his work at Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Reverend Robinson did evangelical work with other churches throughout the northern Wisconsin area. There is evidence from the *Eau Claire Leader* that he held revival sessions and spoke in Radisson (1911), Ingram and

⁴² *Eau Claire Leader*, 1910-1923.

⁴³ Margaret Gratz, *Legacy of Love: 150 Years of Methodism in Eau Claire, Wisconsin* (Eau Claire: Lake Street United Methodist Church, 2007), 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

Trego (1912), Truax Prairie (1913), Albertsville (1914), and Knapp (1915), Wisconsin.⁴⁵ Additionally, Robinson speaks of visiting Holcombe (1910) in his narrative.⁴⁶ These revival meetings are held to evoke a visible and spiritual response from the audience in order to convert them to Christianity. “Revivalism disposed persons to think in terms of fundamental dichotomies – between the saved and the lost, the spiritual and worldly, absolute truth and error.”⁴⁷ During these events it is stated by Robinson and the *Leader* that 133 people were “converted” because of his preaching. While no printed sermon exists for these specific revivals, his eloquence and passion can be seen in the delivered sermons from his narrative. A sermon might sound like:

God will not hear the man who in his heart looks upon sin with any favor or allowance. God looks at sin with abhorrence. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity. We must have the same attitude toward sin that He has to be heard of Him. If we regard sin He will not regard us when we pray.... The truth is, the Lord helps those who help others.⁴⁸

Reverend Robinson spoke to people about their concerns and actions, hoping to use that to turn them towards faith. He also used his experiences as a slave to turn others towards God as he says:

I had worn the shackles of a literal bondage for fifteen years, but in due season God emancipated me from being the goods and chattels of other men, so I could think and act for myself as a man; but thank God, in 1877, he liberated my soul from a greater bondage, for human bondage enslaves only the body, while sin enslaves both soul and body.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Eau Claire Leader*, 1911-1915.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 196.

⁴⁷ George M. Marsden, “From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism: A Historical Analysis,” in *The Evangelicals: What they Believe, Who they Area, Where they are Changing*, eds. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (New York: Abingdon Press, 1975), 137.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 171.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

His emotional plea towards the audience could also have resulted in conversion experiences. Ultimately his enthusiasm for God converted many souls and helped him earn the name “the great colored evangelist.”

His evangelical work in and around Eau Claire not only allowed him to turn people to God, but also helped him gain recognition and fame in northern Wisconsin. The *Leader* articles imply that his revival meetings were always well attended and say things such as, “each evening Rev. Robinson preached to a good sized audience.”⁵⁰ Also, when the local preachers sent in letters to the *Eau Claire Leader* about Robinson’s work, they were pleased and appreciative towards him. An example is by Pastor Harry Hall, of Knapp, who said, “Rev Robinson has made many friends and will always receive a welcome among the people of all denominations in Knapp.”⁵¹ It seems that listeners of Robinson sensed his passion for the cause and felt close to him.

Another way Robinson was able to be active in Eau Claire was through his connection to the local YMCA. It is important to remember that in the early twentieth century the YMCA was closely allied with the Christian churches in its community.⁵² In fact, “virtually all American Y.M.C.A.’s were organized at meetings held in Churches. There were usually clergymen to advise, to solicit the young men of their congregations, to give annual lectures, lead prayer services, and speak at revivals.”⁵³ There were three instances of the reverend speaking at these Men’s Mass Meetings held on Sunday afternoons at the YMCA, all between 1913 and 1915. The first of these speeches occurred on Sunday, November 2, 1913, right after Robinson published his autobiography in Eau

⁵⁰ *Eau Claire Leader*, 3 March 1912, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1915, 3.

⁵² C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the Y.M.C.A. in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951), 362.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 370.

Claire. This was the subject of his lecture, as the *Leader* said days before the talk that it would include, “many instances of his early life as a slave to his experiences during the Civil War, as a slave to his master on the Confederate side and later a soldier on the side of the Union.”⁵⁴ This specific “Log Cabin to Pulpit” lecture seemed to be popular for Robinson because during his revival meetings he would also speak about these things. He would most likely talk about the most interesting stories found in his slave narrative to educate and entertain the audience. The idea of lecturing about his slave narrative was common because many ex-slaves who published their life story would use “rhetoric and oratory [skills] on the ... lecture circuit” directly related to their slave narratives.⁵⁵ It seems that Robinson fell in line with his peers in this sense. His other appearances at the Men’s Mass Meeting for the YMCA were about, “men and affairs as they were at the time of Lincoln, Grant, and Lee,”⁵⁶ and “about his early life.”⁵⁷ Reverend Robinson’s association with the YMCA was another way he participated in the Eau Claire community.

Robinson’s public role also found service at the Eau Claire Salvation Army, where Robinson was a frequent visitor. Five articles were found in the *Eau Claire Leader* mentioning Reverend Robinson’s presence at the Salvation Army, ranging in dates from 1913 to 1920. The goal of the Salvation Army, specifically during this time period, was to “bring salvation to those outside the Church” and to carry out the word and works of God.⁵⁸ His work with the organization varied from

⁵⁴ *Leader*, 31 October 1913, 6.

⁵⁵ Gates, *Classic Slave Narrative*, ix.

⁵⁶ *Leader*, 21 March 1915, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 December 1915, 5.

⁵⁸ Harry Edward Neal, *The Hallelujah Army* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company Press, 1961), 3-13.

conducting meetings, to holding services, to speaking and singing.⁵⁹ Like other events Robinson hosted, it seems his talks at the Salvation Army were always successful. On one specific occasion the *Leader* says of his series of speeches, “[they] are progressing nicely. Sunday, although a stormy day, the hall was comfortably filled and at night two young people came out to claim Christ as their savior.”⁶⁰ In addition to being an active spokesman for the Salvation Army, Reverend Robinson seemed to have been an honorary face of the organization. This is suggested by two specific articles about the Salvation Army that asserts his presence at events was especially important. When another evangelist hosted an event at the Salvation Army, the *Leader* noted that Robinson was in attendance and that, “appreciated by all also was the singing by Rev Robinson and daughter.” More significantly, at the farewell meeting of Adjutant Askin, an influential position in the Salvation Army, the newspaper noted that, “Rev WH Robinson was present and took part.”⁶¹ This might have been included because he was such a prominent member of the organization or because his name was recognizable to the readers of the newspaper. It seems that William Robinson, among other positions, was an important contributor to the Salvation Army.

Robinson also reprinted and republished his slave narrative *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery* in Eau Claire in 1913. He published it himself, with the help of printer James H. Tifft. Robinson says at the end of this edition that:

I wish also to thank the publisher and his helpers for the interest taken in me, and for the good work they have done in getting out a more presentable book than the former ones

⁵⁹ *Eau Claire Leader*, 1913-1920.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 January 1917, 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16 August 1914, 8.

were. Their suggestions and help in various ways have enabled me to re-edit my book, and to bring this edition up to a higher standard.⁶²

Besides the copyediting that seems to have occurred in this last edition of *Log Cabin to the Pulpit*, other differences between this edition and earlier ones are the inclusion of a letter to the people of Eau Claire by the author, and testimonials by Eau Claire residents of Robinson's character and work. This edition of his narrative was his third and would be his last one. It also seems to be the one that is most accessible, as the books and websites that cite Robinson's work usually use the citation information from the 1913 edition. The publishing of his memoirs "attracted a great deal of attention in the [Eau Claire] area at that time."⁶³ It also seemed to have boosted his speaking career around the area because the majority of the articles found about Robinson occurred after 1913.

While the bulk of Reverend Robinson's speeches in Eau Claire were given specifically for Christian or evangelical associations in the area, he also functioned as a link to the Civil War and the past. As an older citizen of the area, and one of only a handful of African Americans, this role seems suitable. On two separate occasions in 1918, when Robinson was seventy years old, he was called upon to speak of his memories of and experiences with Abraham Lincoln. The first talk was with the Eau Claire chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union on the anniversary of Lincoln's birthday. The *Eau Claire Leader* mentioned that, "a special feature of the meeting was a talk by Rev. Robinson touching upon his personal experiences with Abraham Lincoln."⁶⁴ More impressive was his deliverance of memories during a "Patriotic Program" for parents and children of Eau Claire.

⁶² Robinson, *Log Cabin*, 197.

⁶³ Gratz, *Legacy of Love*, 26.

⁶⁴ *Leader*, 12 February 1918, 5.

The article states, “The address of the evening was given by Rev. Robinson, colored, on ‘Abraham Lincoln.’ Mr. Robinson gave his personal recollections of his acquaintance with the martyred president.”⁶⁵ This specific event seems to have been a significant affair in the city and the article suggests Reverend Robinson’s talk was especially enjoyed. While Robinson’s slave narrative tells of no direct experiences with President Lincoln, he may have talked about his level of respect for Lincoln that is prominent in his memoirs or discussed the time period of the Civil War as an African American man. These types of responsibilities were probably well liked by Robinson because he was able to go back to his roots and speak to a wider audience.

Another way Reverend Robinson was able to remember his past was through keeping a connection with the black community that existed in Eau Claire. It is important to remember that when Robinson lived in Eau Claire, there were at most thirty-two other African Americans in the city.⁶⁶ The size of the small community most likely made it possible for Reverend Robinson to stay connected to each of these people. The evidence for this notion is in the fact that Robinson officiated over the funeral for two black citizens, Mary Christian and Henry Hudson.⁶⁷ No other obituaries were found in the obituary index for the African American residents of Eau Claire during the time period Reverend Robinson was working, so it could be assumed that the Christian and Hudson funerals were the only black deaths during this time period and that Robinson presided over both of them. This information shows that Robinson played a role in the small black community of Eau Claire.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2 March 1918, 2.

⁶⁶ US Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, 1913, Vol. 3: Population by State, City of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1058.

⁶⁷ *Eau Claire Leader*, 29 August 1919, 4. And Ibid., 11 April 1920, 8.

Robinson's link to the black community brings up another question about his life in Eau Claire. Did he face discrimination in the northern Wisconsin city? Racism during this time period was a concern for many African Americans across the United States, both in the North and in the South. Robinson himself had not been free from racist attitudes in the past. The Wilmington Race Riots in 1898 occurred in his hometown, and other incidents like this occurred across the nation, possibly in cities Robinson travelled to during his evangelical work. Twenty-six articles were found in the *Eau Claire Leader* describing such riots across the country between 1910 and 1923, the years Robinson lived in Eau Claire, though none described a specific incident in Wisconsin.⁶⁸ So it seems that while African Americans faced discrimination and racism elsewhere, there is no primary evidence that suggests this occurred in Eau Claire. In the twenty-seven newspaper clippings found in the *Eau Claire Leader* that mentions Robinson in any way, there is no significant proof that suggests race was a defining characteristic of him. The following table shows the breakdown of the way Robinson was described in each of the articles.

Table 2: Descriptions of Robinson in *Eau Claire Leader* Articles, 1911-1923

Term used to describe Robinson	Number of Incidences	Percentage
"Negro"	3	11%
"Colored"	5	19%
"Former slave" language used	4	15%
"Reverend" or "Evangelical" only	15	55%

Source: *Eau Claire Leader*, 1911-1923.

This table ultimately suggests that while race was used as a descriptor for Reverend Robinson in some articles, overall he was only described as an individual preacher. In less than half of the total articles was race or racial language used to distinguish Robinson. So, while race relations were

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1910-1923.

questionable across the country during Robinson's lifetime, he seemed to have found a safe home in Eau Claire.

Robinson's Death and Legacy (1923-)

As Robinson aged, his public life diminished more and more. No articles were found in the *Eau Claire Leader* about Reverend Robinson after 1920. This would suggest that he kept to himself in his old age and stayed out of the spotlight, as he was already seventy-two years old. His obituary ultimately comments on this aspect of his life by saying, "he has not been as active [in evangelical work] of late years on account of feebleness due to old age."⁶⁹ It seems that the end of Robinson's life was marked by more solitude than his earlier years in Eau Claire.

Robinson's obituary states that, "he was taken ill" sometime in the summer of 1923.⁷⁰ He was treated at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eau Claire and a blood transfusion was done two days before his death in hopes of helping him.⁷¹ Although Robinson was seventy-five when he died, his death record calls his condition of death related to, "hemophilia secondary to herniectomy" and an "organic heart lesion." Robinson died at 7:10PM on July 21, 1923 at Sacred Heart Hospital.⁷² His obituary in the newspaper the following day commented on Robinson's remarkable life, both before moving to Eau Claire and while in the city. It seems that even in the days following his death, "the great colored evangelist" was still remembered for all the good work he had done. The obituary also cited a funeral service at Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church in two days. This

⁶⁹ *Eau Claire Leader*, 22 July 1923, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² "Death Certificate: William H Robinson" (Eau Claire, WI: Eau Claire County Courthouse, Register of Deeds, 1923, photocopied).

means that Reverend Robinson had a Christian funeral service, presumably followed by a burial. He was buried at Forest Hill Cemetery, also in Eau Claire. His daughter, Margaret, paid ten dollars for his burial lot.⁷³ This is, one would think, when Robinson's story ends, but it is not.

In 2002, seventy-nine years after the last mention of Reverend William Robinson's name in the local Eau Claire newspaper, Jerry Polling published an article in the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram* about Robinson's story – being born into slavery, fighting in the Civil War, and moving to Eau Claire. The article went on to say that his grave had no headstone verifying where he lay since 1923 at Forest Hill Cemetery. This unmarked grave could have occurred for a number of reasons, as Polling states, "if he couldn't afford one, didn't want one, or had one that disappeared over time. Or was he prevented from having one because of his color?"⁷⁴ In the months following this article, citizens of Eau Claire began writing into the newspaper asking how they could help Robinson receive a grave marker that he rightly deserves. Something had to be done to mark Robinson's final resting place.

After reading the newspaper story, the local Veteran's Affairs Office of Eau Claire submitted a packet to the US Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington in hopes of receiving a government grave marker since Robinson served in the Civil War. Unfortunately, there was no solid evidence of Robinson's service except for the memories in his narrative because his name was not found in the records from the National Archives as an enlisted man. "The problem with verifying Robinson's service is twofold. First because he entered the war as a slave, it's likely he never was mustered in. Thus, a paper trail of his service may not exist. Second, Robinson wrote [in his narrative] that he didn't take the name Robinson until after the war, when he discovered his real

⁷³ "Burial Lot Deed: William H Robinson" (Eau Claire, WI: Forest Hill Cemetery, 1923, photocopied).

⁷⁴ Jerry Polling, "Stone Cold," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 10 March 2002, B1.

name” because he was still going by the name “William Cowens.”⁷⁵ While no solid evidence of his service was found in Washington either, the government used Robinson’s book as evidence enough and sent a white marble Civil War stone bearing Robinson’s name to the Eau Claire Veterans’ Affairs Office. Finally, William Robinson would be marked forever for the work he did on the battle field, and in the Eau Claire community.

Figure 3: Picture of Gravestone of William Robinson



Source: Abbie Withbroe, *Gravestone of William Robinson*, photograph, 2008.

Conclusion

On May 27, 2004, William Robinson was given a memorial service deserving of a Civil War soldier, eighty-one years after his death. The service was attended by about sixty people and

⁷⁵ Jerry Polling, “Written in Stone,” *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 2 May 2004, B1.

received press attention.⁷⁶ It was one of the only times Reverend Robinson's life was remembered by the people of Eau Claire, Wisconsin since he walked the streets of the city. This paper has attempted to address the oversight and look at the life of Robinson beyond just his slave narrative, but into his contributions in Eau Claire. Robinson's life was more than just a slave and Civil War veteran, the reasons the newspaper article suggested his life was important in 2002, but it has also been shown that Reverend Robinson played a role in his community of Lake Street Methodist Episcopal Church, the evangelical associations in northern Wisconsin, the local YMCA and Salvation Army, as well as the small black community that existed in the city. It has also been seen that while racial discrimination occurred across the country during this time, Robinson was able to play a significant position in Eau Claire without fear.

More work could be done on the race relations that existed in Eau Claire during the time frame William Robinson was a citizen of the city. That type of work could shine light on the personal life of William Robinson instead of the public role looked at in this paper. This work would also show what type of a social community existed in Eau Claire in the early part of the twentieth century and therefore contribute more to the history of the city. Until then, it is important to consider Reverend Robinson for who he was, an active black man in a majority white community who participated in the happenings of the city through his experience as a minister and former slave.

⁷⁶ Andrew Dowd, "Final Respects: Civil War soldier gets market after ears of grave anonymity," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, 28 May 2004, B1.

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