

1 SANDY
SAW FOR STORY

Sandy & Lillah Cornish, by Lewis G. Schmidt
1464 N. 39th St., Allentown, PA 18104-2126; 610 395 1661

FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM AND SUCCESS

Sandy Cornish and Lillah Cornish
(circa 1793-1869) - (circa 1813-1870's)

Trapped in the institution of slavery in the first half of the 19th Century, Sandy and Lillah Cornish migrated from the area of Cambridge, Maryland to Florida, through their labor freeing themselves from the bonds of slavery, and eventually locating in Key West where they achieved success and respect and lived out the remainder of their lives.



UNCLE SANDIE
"W.G. Jackman, Engraved expressly for this work"
After The War, Whitelaw Reid; Moore, Wilsbach & Baldwin, 1866

The Cornish name¹ is well known to Black history and relatively common in the area of eastern Maryland and Delaware. A Samuel Cornish, who was born free in Delaware in 1795, "was the first black man to undergo the normal exacting training and testing procedures required of Presbyterian ordination...After being licensed to preach, Cornish spent six months as a missionary to slaves on the eastern shore of Maryland". He later founded the first Black Presbyterian Church in New York City, and was the first African-American journalist.¹

Joshua Cornish, born about 1790, immigrated to Liberia with his family in June 1835, and won awards for best farming. In 1842 he returned and recruited other members of his race for an immigration to Liberia.²

Other than general areas of birth, ethnic origin, and the fact that in time they were contemporaries, there is no known connection between Samuel, Joshua and Sandy Cornish. All were born in the last decade of the 18th Century and each appears to have had a positive experience in their background that seemed to impell them to achievements above the norm, and in that respect there may also be some connection.

Claiming Maryland as his place of birth, Sandy Cornish related that "My ole massa was William Eccleston of Cambridge, Maryland. I waited on him. I never worked in de field, not I, till I was thirty year old. Wen he die, my young massa gave me my time for \$83 a yeah. Dat was about \$40 more dan common people paid."³

Sandy's master William Eccleston appears in the Dorchester County census records of 1790, and again in 1810, 1820 and 1830. In William's household in 1790 were three slaves, and also listed in the same census were the free blacks Sam and Anny Cornish. Sandy was born about three years later. William's name does not appear in the census records of 1840, and other sources report his death in March of 1838.

In May of 1839, a "Sandie...faithful Negro Interpreter" appeared in negotiations with the Seminole Indians at Key Biscayne in Florida's northern keys.⁴

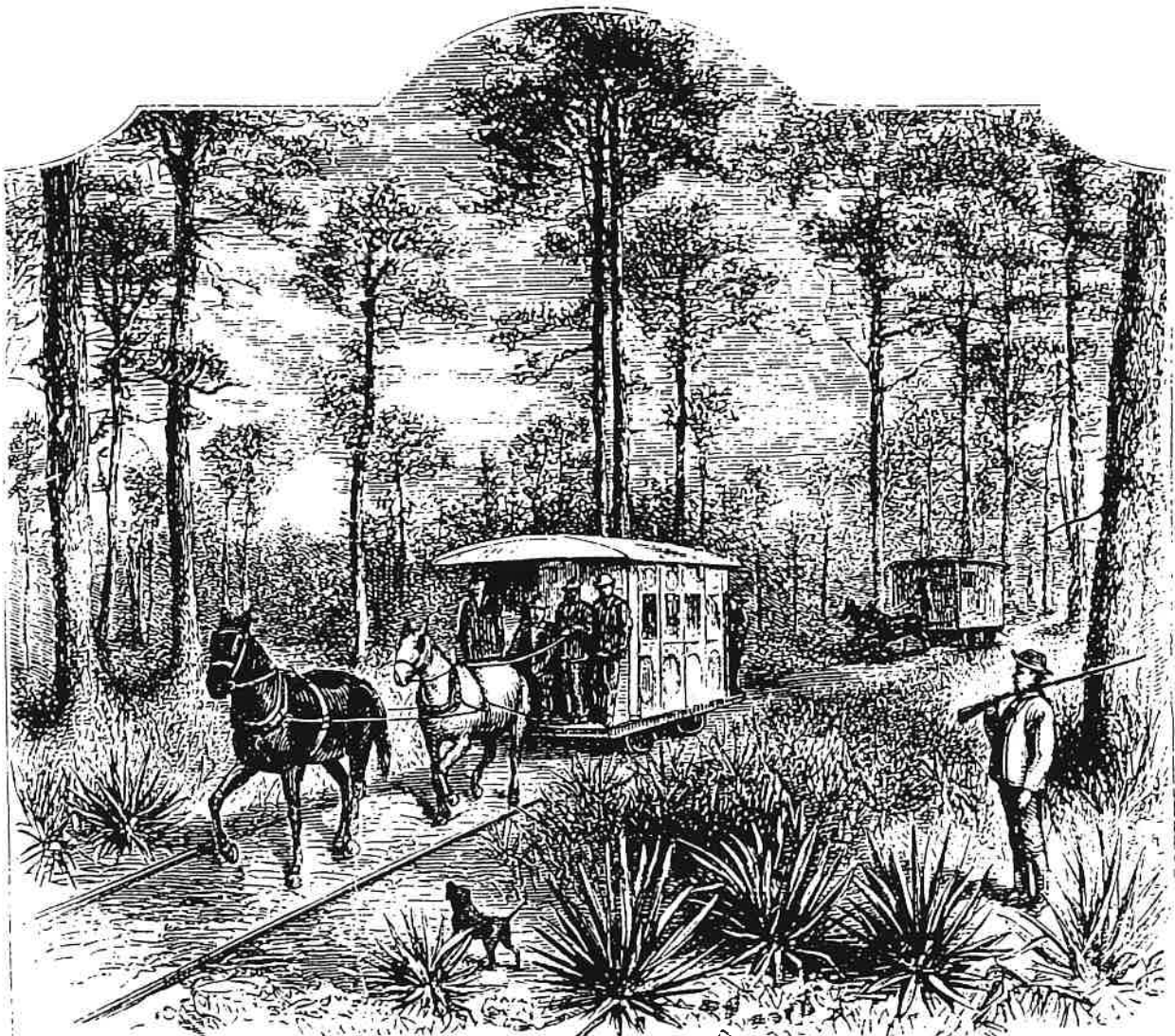
Although within the next ten years "Sandy" Cornish and his wife Lillah would settle in Key West in the southern keys, where they would spend the remainder of their lives, all other apparently reliable information would seem to preclude the possibility that "Sandie" and "Sandy" are the same person. An investigation of other sources fails to place Sandy in Florida in time to become sufficiently proficient in the Seminole language and act as an interpreter. In addition, any involvement in May of 1839 would have had to have been prior to his work on the railroad in the Panhandle of northern Florida. Water was almost certainly their route to employment on the railroad, and to reach the Panhandle from Maryland would require passage around the southern keys, and is probably the time when they were first exposed to Key West, their future home.

It was probably sometime late in 1839 (Sandy claimed October 2, 1839 as the date) that Sandy and Lillah left Maryland and migrated to Florida where

1 The Cornish name was mentioned in Maryland records as early as 1652.

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Sandy was employed for nine years, at \$600 per year, in the construction of a railroad at "Port Leon". Lilly was a freewoman and received \$15 per month. Sandy was probably "hired out" by the son¹ of William Eccleston after the death of his father in 1838, and was employed at Port Leon in the Florida Panhandle on the railroad being constructed from Tallahassee to St. Marks. It was with the savings from these wages that they were later able to buy Sandy's freedom for \$3200², and Sandy stated that his wife Lilly "had to see paid" the sum which purchased his freedom. "She made herself a slave to go wid me".⁵



Scribner's Monthly, November 1874

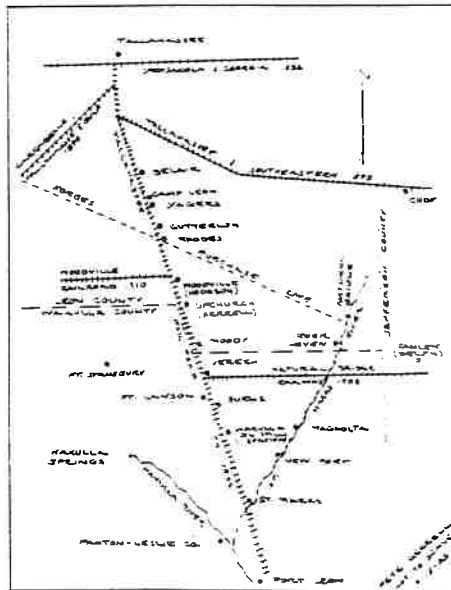
1 Possibly Joseph Richardson Eccleston, born January 12, 1811.

2 Variouslly reported as \$2300, \$3200 and \$3350 by primary sources.

In 1826, a wagon road had been surveyed from Tallahassee to St. Marks, and was used to ship cotton to the coast for transport by water to other markets.¹ In 1835, a seven hour stage coach connection was established between the two areas, at a cost of \$2.50 per passenger. With the development of steam powered railroads ten years before, it was not long before a need was recognized to establish a railroad to serve the area, and its construction was considered as early as 1831, and the Leon Rail Way Company was incorporated in 1832. A lack of funds resulted in the company's demise and a new attempt to effect the construction of the railroad was initiated in 1834, resulting in the establishment of the Tallahassee Rail Road Company.

The new company received its first grant of land in March of 1835 although construction of the line had already begun the previous January with 40 to 50 hired slaves. By November 8, 1837, the railroad was in operation from Tallahassee to St. Marks.

A need had been recognized in 1835 for the railroad to continue across the St. Marks River and the town of Port Leon was established, selling the first lots in April of 1838. With this connection, the railroad was 24 miles long. A visitor to the town in 1841 described it as a town of about twenty houses, and "The people. Oh my! The 'ruff scuff' of civilization and as to law...they don't know what it means." Drinking, swearing, smoking and billiards were the prevailing pastimes, although the town boasted a hotel, tavern and newspaper, but no jail and church. Port Leon and the three miles of railroad on the south side of the St. Marks River were destroyed in a hurricane on September 13, 1843 and were never rebuilt, and the line then terminated where it intersected the river.



Courtesy of Allen R. Gerrell, Sr.

¹ The following account of the railroad construction between Tallahassee and St. Marks, and Port Leon, has been edited from a paper at the Florida State Archives by Allen R. "Pete" Gerrell Sr. of Tallahassee, FL. See the bibliography for a list of Mr. Gerrell's sources.

Claiming he worked on the railroad for nine years, it may have been sometime during the mid to late 1840's that Sandy's "free papers" were lost. "The town cotch fire and burnt my papers, and pretty smart money. All de money was burnt, 'cept a little silver and gold."¹ With nothing to prove that he was a free Black, he was seized "one night after I'd been out fishin. I was settin' stripped off, washin' my feet", when some unprincipled opportunists with the intent of profiting from his sale in the New Orleans slave market approached him. He broke free from his "six"² captors, suffering head injuries in the process, and before he could be recaptured, inflicted severe personal injuries on himself to frustrate any attempt to resell him in the slave market.⁶

The next morning, a Thursday, "He deliberately proceeded to the public square, accompanied by his wife, cut the muscles of his ankle joint, plunged a knife into the hip joint on the other side, and then sinking down on a wheelbarrow, finished the work by chopping off with a hatchet the fingers of his left hand!"⁷

Another description of the event from the same source, in the words of Sandy, describes the scene as follows: "I axed for de stickin' plaster...Den I put de needles and de stickin' plaster into a box...We went togedder, and to de public squar, and I gave free yells, so dey cud be heard all ober town. Everybody gathered around de squar. We de people was all standin roun', but some distance off, I tole 'em I didn't want dis (putting his hand on his right leg), nor dis (left arm), nor dis (left leg), but did want dis (right arm)."⁸

"Meanwhile, an awe-struck crowd of white men gathered around, but made no attempt at interference. Finally, brandishing the bloody knife, Sandie shouted to the crowd that if they persisted in their effort to sell a free man into slavery after he had once, at an extortionate price, bought himself out of it, his right arm was yet strong, and he had one blow reserved, after which they were welcome to sell him for whatever he would bring."⁹

"Den I libitly run my knife froo de heelstrings and cut em out; Den I stoop down on de wheel barrow, wid my needles, and seew it up, and stuck de stickin' plaster on it. Den I tuck a knife and drove it into my right hip heah (showing over the hip joint a very ugly scar, nearly eight inches long), and dey sed I work de knife back and forward four times, but I don't know zactly how many times. But I cut hole ten inches long, and four inches deep, till my leg hung useless. My wife Lily she freaded de needles; and den held de lookin' glass, so I could see to make long stitches, and sew it up, and stick on de stickin' plaster."¹⁰

"Den I set it down, and chopped my hand as hard as I cud wid de hatchet, and cut one finger clean off (holding up the left hand, with the shockingly mutilated fingers). Dat little finger I tuck up and put in my mouf, and smoked it for a cigar, till de blood from it run down my lips. Dat I sewed too, and den tole 'em if that wouldn't do, I would cut open my belly, and put de entrals before 'em. But dat I wouldn't go to New Orleans for a slave agin, for I was free."¹¹

¹ Sandy also claimed to have "thirty-nine head Buckshire hogs" at this time.

² Also described as 15 men.

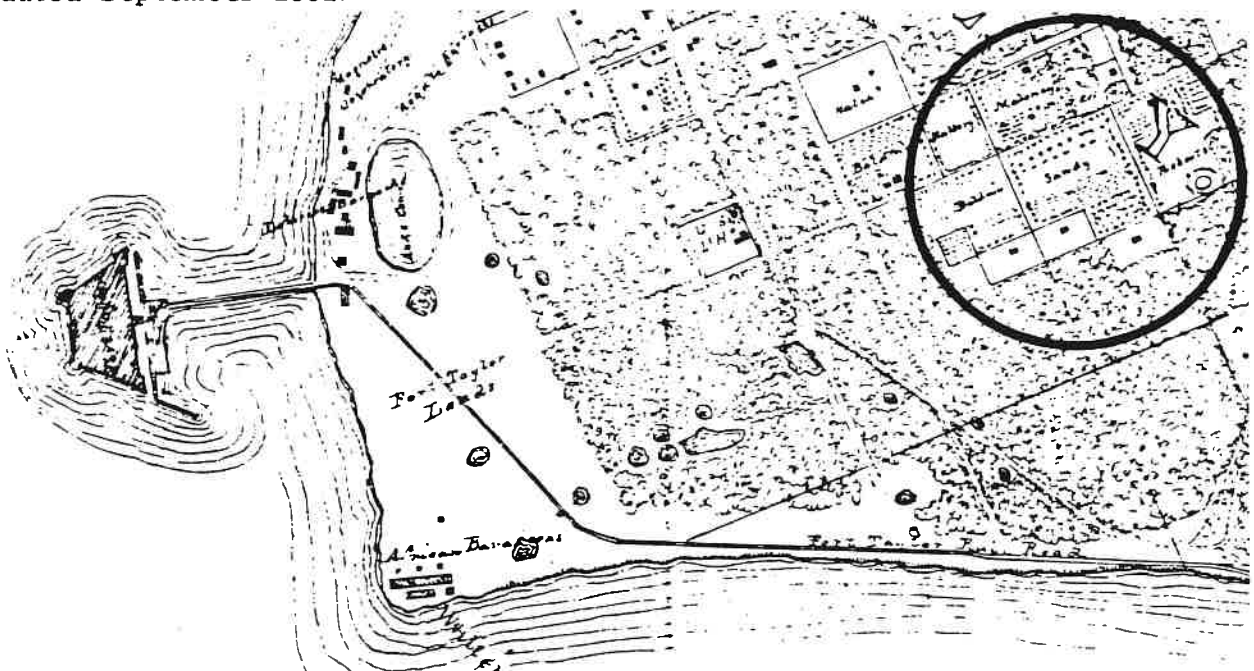
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"Den dey tuck me—not de whites, dey not come near me, afeared, but de brack people—and wheel me home on de wheel barrow, wid de utensils. I was down sick two months. After dat could go about on crutches."¹²

"That the essentials of this story are true, there is unquestionable evidence. The fingers on his left hand are mutilated, and the scars on the hip and ankle are fearfully distinct, while besides there are still white eye-witnesses to testify to the main facts. Sandie's powerful constitution brought him through; he was confined to bed for six months; then he began to hobble about a little, and at the end of the year was again able to support himself."¹³

Any children that Sandy and Lillah may have had prior to their arrival at Key West in the late 1840's were probably already of an age that enabled them to leave the household and establish themselves and their own families. None were included with Lillah in the Key West Monroe County census when she first appeared in the records in 1850, and when members of households were first included in the listings. The census records would have to be searched in Maryland or in other areas of Florida in an attempt to identify their migrations and family structure.

Sandy's wife Lillah, also called "Auntie" in one account from the period of 1865-66, had established herself in Key West by 1850 when she was included in the census of Monroe County as a 38 year old Black female. And on April 21, 1851, Lillah purchased from the Simonton Estate two lots on Division St., between Duval and Simonton Sts. The area of Sandy's orchard was identified slightly east of this location¹ on a map in the National Archives dated September 1861.



Key West Map, 1861; National Archives, RG77, 76-134-2

¹ This may have been an error by the mapmaker, or the tax records describing the transaction may have mislocated the property.

During the Civil War, many of the Union soldiers stationed at Key West visited and described "Old Sandy's" fruit orchard¹. They considered him to be one of the richest men in Key West and a leader of the Black community. He cultivated about 20 acres, raising² 4,000 pounds of grapes and other fruits, and charged those who visited his establishment 50 cents for a plate of fruit.¹⁴

A post Civil War visitor to "Old Sandie's farm" described it as follows: "A rude fence separated this from the surrounding waste land, but the soil was equally stony, and apparently sterile."¹⁵ One patron recorded the experience as he wrote: "We were ushered into the house, and took seats around a square table in the parlor, and then gave our order for some fruit which he brought to us on individual plates. There were delicious grapes, guavas, oranges, etc., and after we had eaten what fruit we wanted, we each paid him fifty cents, his price per plate of fruit, and then we took a look about the garden and retired."¹⁶ He also provided the soldiers with entertainment at his orchard in the form of fortune tellers.¹⁷ Another visitor described the house as "a little hut with two rooms" and nearby a "lean to" or "piazza".¹⁸

"Ripe sasadillos hung from the trees; and a particularly large 'sour-sop' was pointed out as especially intended for our dinner. He had a little patch of tobacco; green cocoanuts [sic] rested at the tops of the palm-like stems, and tamarinds were abundant; the African cayenne pepper berry was hanging on little bushes."¹⁹

The Federal soldiers spoke well of Sandy and seemed to like and respect him, describing him as "the aristocratic farmer of the race" who led parades, occasionally made speeches at local festivities³, and delivered the sermons at some of the burials.²⁰ On New Years Eve, December 31, 1862, a group of soldiers from the 47th Pennsylvania Regiment "went out towards the beach and visited Old Sandy, a great Union Nigger, and roused him up, and gave him a salute".²¹

Sandy was described by contemporaries "as an institution. He is a genuine darky, large headed, large souled, big of stature, full of vigor and brawn, and the most perfect gentleman in Key West. He was formerly a slave—paid \$2300 for his own freedom with the help of his wife who sold herself into slavery for his sake—has some thousands of dollars in bank" in February of 1864.²²

Another description recorded him as "a stalwart negro, with the physique of a prize fighter; body round as a barrel, arms knotted with muscles that might have belonged to a race-horse's leg, chest broad and deep, with room inside for the play of an ox's lungs...The head was large, but the

1 See "The Civil War History of the 47th Regiment of Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers", and "Volume III, Florida's Keys and Fevers" of the series "The Civil War in Florida", all by Lewis G. Schmidt.

2 Henry Hornbeck of the 47th Pennsylvania Regiment mentioned buying sweet potatoes and melons from an "old gentleman", possibly Sandy who he frequently visited.

3 On new years day 1864, Sandy spoke on "the speedy down fall of Charleston", and acting as "chief marshal" led the parade (from Volume III of the Civil War in Florida, by Lewis G. Schmidt).

broad forehead was very low. Above it rose the crisp, grizzled wool, almost perpendicularly, for a height quite as great as that of the exposed part of the forehead; and the bumps above the ears and at the back of the head were of a corresponding magnitude. The face was unmistakably African, glossy black, with widely-distended nostrils, thick lips and a liquid but gleaming eye...an old man—'now in my sebenty-tree yeah'¹—yet the strongest man on the island, the richest of the negroes, the best farmer here."²³

"Since the war, his remarkable history has attracted many visitors...and brought him many attentions that might readily have turned the head of a less judicious person...[He] appeared in the village in a faultless suit of broadcloth, with a well-brushed silk hat...and standing, hat in hand, under the cocoas" he told the story of his life.²⁴

For some unknown reason, Sandy himself has never been identified in the Monroe County census records², although his 38 year old wife Lillah (also Lilla or Lily) has been identified in 1850; and again in 1860 as a 45 year old washerwoman; and finally, in 1870, the 66 year old Lilly was keeping house.

In 1864, Sandy was involved in the establishment of the Cornish Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, now located at 702 Whitehead St. in Key West. Sandy had "contributed largely to the erection of a handsome church for the negro congregation, of which he is the leading spirit"²⁵, and frequently conducted services for the congregation.

Sandy's 1866-67 Monroe County tax records listed his assets as follows: 19 acres of land, \$240; one horse, \$100; one carriage, \$50; and 50 sheep, \$260.

No further record pertaining to Sandy has been discovered, and it was probably about 1869 that he died and was more than likely buried in the City Cemetery in Key West, in a grave that over the years has lost its identification. An inventory of his estate was recorded on January 7, 1870, and a value of \$138.75 was placed on the estate, which included: crockery ware, pots and stoves, tables, bedding, iron, tumblers, tables, sofa, smoothing irons, crow bars, brass boiler, tin ware, tubs, knives and forks, castor and fruit dish bench, rocking chair, pitcher, press, trunk, bake oven, and pick axe.

Lillah survived her husband, living until sometime in the 1870's, having appeared in the 1870 but not the 1880 census. She is also probably buried in what is now an unmarked grave in the City Cemetery at Key West.

¹ In 1865-1866.

² Having lost his papers proving his status as freeman, he may have been attempting to conceal his whereabouts from Federal authorities in the pre Civil War era census of 1850 and 1860. He was deceased by the time of the 1870 census.