

## First Gift Recorded

On August 29, 1831, parish records note the first gift made to Christ Church. The donation was “part of a service of communion plate” from Mrs. Rebecca Symmes (or Sims). The gift included the first silver chalices used in communion services at Christ Church. This seems to have been the first time that the secretary of the Vestry recorded the name of a woman parishioner. Given the time and place, the story of these chalices and their donor inevitably intersects with the history of slavery in Middle Tennessee.

Rebecca was born in Pennsylvania in 1772. Her father was the well-known ship captain John Green, who piloted the first American merchant vessel to reach China in 1784. As a young woman, Rebecca married Walter Sims, an English-born merchant and ship captain who had crewed with her father. As Rebecca bore and raised five children, Walter developed into a wealthy Philadelphia merchant. He invested his profits in large tracts of land in several southern states, as well as mills and distilleries.

Rebecca and Walter first established ties with Nashville in 1809, when two young men from that city, both medical students at the University of Pennsylvania, married young women in the Sims’ extended family and took them back to Tennessee. Dr. Boyd McNairy married Anna Maria Hodgkinson, a cousin of Rebecca, while Dr. John Shelby married Anna Maria Minnick, a niece of Capt. Sims. Both young men and their wives would go on to play leading roles in the early years of Christ Church.

Rebecca and Walter moved to Nashville with their children in 1818. Walter must have seen extraordinary promise in Nashville, then emerging as a bustling river port on the western frontier. Like many wealthy transplants from northern states to the South in the antebellum period, the Sims family quickly acclimatized themselves to the lifestyle of elite Southern planters. For their home they acquired a farm in Davidson County that they called Woodland, as well as slaves to provide agricultural labor and household services.

Capt. Sims had little time to settle into this new life, for he died in 1820. His extensive land holdings in the Tennessee counties of Davidson, Bedford, Giles, and Hawkins, as well as property in the Philadelphia area, were either sold or divided among his wife and children. Walter bequeathed to his wife Rebecca “all my slaves to serve her during her natural life.” According to census records, in 1820, shortly after Walter’s death, she lived in the Nashville area with three family members and thirteen enslaved persons. Walter’s estate inventory, recorded at the Davidson county courthouse in 1822, lists twelve unnamed slaves who had been transferred to his wife Rebecca: three adult males, three adult females, and six children. Rebecca continued to manage the plantation over the years. In 1830, Rebecca Sims lived on the Woodland farm with one adult son, his wife, and one of their children. This small white family was supported by no fewer than seventeen enslaved persons. Judging by the gender and age ranges provided in the 1830 census data, the African American slaves likely comprised four or five families.

The widow Rebecca Sims was probably among the small community of Episcopal worshipers in Nashville in the 1820s, but parish records do not mention her until the 1830s. Well supported by landed property and slave labor, Mrs. Sims was in a position to contribute financially to the success of the infant congregation. When church pews were offered for auction in July 1831, she was one of only two women, both widows, who purchased pew space to ensure privileged seating at Christ Church. And, as we have seen, in August 1831 she also made the gift of silver communion chalices. She remained an active communicant at Christ Church for more than twenty years, passing away in Shelbyville in 1849.

The lives and even the names of most of the Sims' slaves are largely unknown to us, though we have a few clues. We know that one of them was a woman whose husband George belonged to a man named Michael Campbell. In September 1819, George ran away. Campbell placed an advertisement in Nashville newspapers offering a reward for George's capture. As with many runaway slave ads, Campbell provided a physical description of George, noting his unusual height and facial scarring. Campbell specifically noted that George "has a wife at Capt. Sims', about five miles from Nashville. He is expected to be in the neighborhood." It is unknown whether George was ultimately recaptured, though he must have remained at large for at least a few months, as the newspaper notice kept appearing until early 1820. Perhaps George reunited with his wife and managed to escape to the north.

In Walter Sims's will of 1819, he mentions "my Slave boy Jefferson which is now the property of my son William." Given that William was only seven years old at the time, it may be that Jefferson was as much a playmate as a servant, though it is difficult to infer much about the nature of their relationship. When Rebecca Sims died thirty years later, she bequeathed to this same William "my slave by the name of big George." Whether Big George was the same as the George who fled from Michael Campbell in 1819, we may never know.

### **Sources and further reading:**

Sims, Jim. "Capt. Walter Sims, the Immigrant." Ancestry.com, posted 31 December 2011.

Will of Rebecca Sims, written June 15, 1848, probated December 4, 1849. Tennessee, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1779-2008. Wilson County: Wills and Inventories, 1848-1863, pp. 153-154 (image 83 on microfilm).

Will of Walter Sims, written 20 February 1819, codicil 19 March 1819. Tennessee, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1779-2008. Davidson County: Wills, Vol. 7, 1816-1821, pp. 381-388 (images 220-224 on microfilm).

1820 U.S. Federal Census, record for Rebeccah Sims, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

1830 U.S. Federal Census, record for Rebecca Sims, Davidson County, Tennessee

## *Fifty Dollars Reward.*

**R**ANAWAY from the subscriber on the 6th of September, a negro man named **GEORGE**, about 26 or 27 years of age, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, well made and very active, and brags much of his running; he has a large burn on his face, I think the left side, it was burnt with gunpowder some years ago, and disfigured his face very much, but he has had the lumps cut off and it don't appear so bad, but very plain to be seen. He has a wife at Capt. Sims', about five miles from Nashville. He is expected to be in the neighborhood. The above reward will be given if taken out of the state and confined in any jail, so that I get him again, and ten dollars if taken in the state.

**MICHAEL CAMPBELL.**

September 18—th.

This advertisement ran in Nashville papers periodically from October 1819 to March 1820, seeking the return of the slave named George.

Source: Nashville Whig, Wednesday, Oct. 6, 1819, p. 4

Now, M. Lucia that my father, Samuel Johnson left to the highest that bidder our  
my debts and means and how my just and honest debt cost of same.  
Now M<sup>r</sup>. Lucia that what is left of my hope all of my little is equally divided between  
my wife and child and that my father, Samuel Johnson, above named, meaning  
and disinherited for them in that way and manner that he may thank for the letter.  
In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal, this 10<sup>th</sup> day, 1898,  
Wm. B. Saunders W. Johnson Deaf

Forick Ries

The last will and testament of William H. Moore, deceased, is exhibited in  
this Court and fully proved by the oaths of Thomas H. Cole, J. Peck, Wm.  
Hershey, &c., subscribed to the same, and also ordered by the Court to be recorded as such.  
Recorded Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> 1849. J. H. H. Clerk of Nelson County Court.

I will that all my just debts & funeral expenses be fully paid & satisfied by my executor herein after named.

Item, I also give to my son William P. Hens my silver coffee pot, tea pot  
Sugar dish, and large and one small silver plated eaters, two plated bottle stands  
two cake baskets, and all my silver spoons.

with the interest that may accrue thereon together with all my household & Kitchen  
furniture, Glass & China of every description and Carriage.

Item, the 6<sup>th</sup> I give up to my grand-daughter Elizabeth & My all the money that is charged to her on my books at my death. I also give to my grand-

Item 8th I also give and bequeath to my grand daughter Rebecca Watson  
\$1000.00 Three hundred and twenty seven dollars and 50/100 which

her father is to pay her out my death - Money I paid for him to  
Benson Herint & Co.

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I appoint my son Nathaniel P Sims executor to this my last will & testament  
June 15th 1848 Rebecca Sims (Wife)

J. N. Ashworth Jr

The last Will and Testament of Rebecca Hens deceased was exhibited in open Court & fully proved by the oaths of W<sup>th</sup> Edsworth Sen. & W<sup>th</sup> Edsworth Jr. Substantive Allegheny to the same and it was ordered by the Court that it be accepted as the last Will of said deceased.

16 Aug 1854 154 409 J Mc Manby 12 Kinner Hester 2.50

John Gordon & Stone Creek 45 E 1/2 R. north Full set Runway, 4 holes 16 60-

40 16 J. H. Hager 2 Glasp. jans 1165

2.5 barling 2 water bricks, the egg. 25 John Kelly the farmer duster 75

A Carlisle 3 Buckets 55 " " 8 Glas tumblers 55

Jack Brater 1 Bread tray 40 6 Squarn Sugar bowl & cream pot 60

John Peterson Half bushel 65 No. 1 Yams Sugar bowl 65

Ich Pflanzte Orange, ja 4 Jungbäume, 20 Nottbäume 1 Beal, hatte Heffern mit 55

Jos <sup>s</sup> M. Elkhartone	"	"	"	60	Mrs Gordon & Massachussetts Spectator	1-60
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Yaskey Mosley 1 large tea bowl 90 Jim A. Dawson 1 table 5.10

John Kelly	1 pr statue dishes	1.70	Sea Hancock 1 Burnam	7.00
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1 Mc Edgar	1 doz Soup plates	1.55	R Hancock 1 Looking glass	25
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111 Ashworth 2 Pitching	'50	16 1/2 Carter 1 Cartwright (1855)	2.40
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Bird Brake 2 White dishes 1.35 York Brake Red Thastian 44.50

"	"	The Picklefishes	80	Ipswich, N. H.	2.10
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Notth. Jones 1 doz white water 1/10 Bx 12 P. Allam 1 doz 3/10