

## A Story of a 200-Year-Old Violin Handcrafted by a Slave

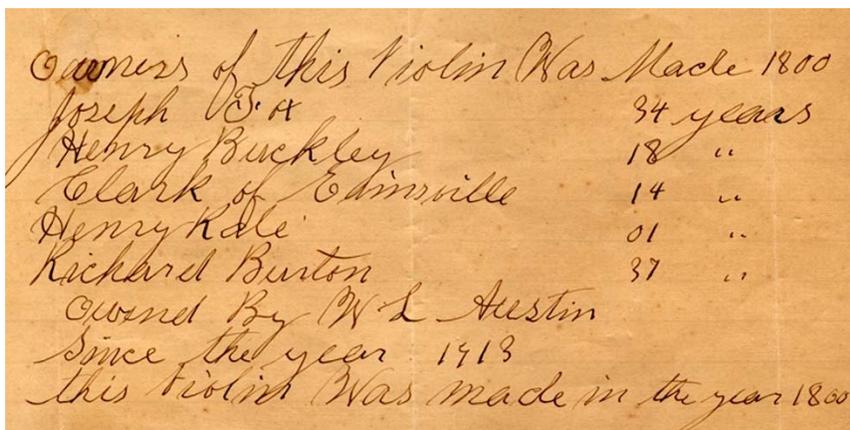
From an email from Clarence P. Cameron, 28 September 2016:

I am a pretty persistent detective and I was so happy, today, when I simply put "W. L. Austin, Beloit, WI" in Google and your Austin Families Association of America's web site was the first thing to come up. This led me to the record for [William Leuron Austin](#), who I learn from your site was born 2 October 1839 in New York and died 8 August 1923 in Beloit, Wisconsin. He married Phoebe Jane Burdick on 27 February 1864, and had seven children. She was born 11 July 1848 and died 27 April 1934. William was a carriage-maker by trade serving as foreman at Munger's Carriage Works. He was a Civil War veteran, mustering into the 4<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Artillery in Sep 1861, mustering out in July 1865. His address in 1923, the time of his death, was 356 Vernon, Beloit, Wisconsin.



I grew up in Beloit. When I entered the fifth grade, the school system offered all students music lessons wind or string. I believe we had to have our own instruments. One day, my mother and I visited an acquaintance who, I recall, belonged to the Cosmopolitan Club in Beloit, along with my family. Although my memory of her is vague, I recalled that this woman lived on Vernon Street and her name was Grace Allen. Somehow, the subject of music came up and she asked me, a 10 or 11 year-old, what instrument I wanted to play. I told her, "The violin." She said, "Wait, just one minute." She left the room and went to the back of the house.

She brought back a black, wooden case, handed it to me, and said, "Open it up." To my surprise, it was a violin. I was thrilled, as was my mother, and I couldn't thank her enough. She told us that it was made by a slave for his master in 1800. Inside the case was an old envelope with the attached "provenance." My brother's private music



Owners of this Violin Was Made 1800  
Joseph B. A. 34 years  
Henry Buckley 18 "  
Clark of Edinville 14 "  
Henry Hale 01 "  
Richard Burton 37 "  
Owned By W. L. Austin  
Since the year 1913  
this Violin Was made in the year 1800

instructor checked the violin over and many years later, we learned that he switched bows and gave me a cheap, beginner's bow. (Of course, watching Antiques Roadshow, the bow, itself, could have been worth a fortune!)

I did take lessons for a while, but the instructor frightened most of us children. Mr. Polis was very tall and lanky, and the best description is of Ichabod Crane in the cartoon/film of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. He was mean! I soon lost all interest and switched to the cornet, which both my father and older brother had

played. The junior high band director, Richard Bjorklund, was a wonderful teacher and person. I continued on that instrument up to my senior year in high school.

Many years later, the band director, told me, as an adult, that Mr. Polis should never have been teaching children. So, for many years, the violin gathered dust. At one point, I was going to donate it to the Wisconsin Youth Symphony, but when I heard their staff discussing it and suggesting it be given to an inner-city child, I backed away. (I could picture the child having this old violin smashed over his or her head at a bus stop!) A neighbor boy played it a couple of times, and that was it, up to a few years ago.

When I learned that the Smithsonian was building an African-American museum in Washington, I thought, perhaps, that might be a good home for it, so I donated it to the museum. They had professionals come to retrieve it, and they took every precaution to make certain it would make the trip undamaged. I did receive a thank-you (and a donor invitation to the opening) and, about six months ago, a researcher wrote me to see if I had any more history than the attached provenance. I told her that I didn't but would keep trying. I did track down W. L. Austin's records and family plots in Oakwood Cemetery, a very nice place to be.

So, I know the violin was in his possession, and that he wrote the provenance in 1913, but I have had no luck in finding any of the previous owners or the woman, after him, who gave it to me. Nor did the researcher at the Smithsonian find any more information. In addition to the provenance, I am attaching a photo of the violin. I would be more than happy to learn anything additional. I am sorry I'm a bit wordy, but the later the hour becomes, the wordier I become. Thank you.

#### Editor's Note:

*William Leuron Austin is a descendant of Richard Austin of Massachusetts, AFAOA Genealogist Liz Austin Carlin's personal Austin line. In doing her research on this line, she had previously visited William's Oakwood Cemetery gravesite, retaining copies of the cemetery lot card. There are 10 graves in the lot, 8 of which were filled with William and Phoebe and members of William's family. Buried in grave 4 is an Alice (Austin) Allen, William's daughter, born about 1877. From the obituary for William, we learn that Alice married a Fred Allen. Fred Allen is not buried in the lot, so it is possible that there was a divorce or a separation. There are also no Allen children buried in the lot. Checking the 1930 Census for Beloit, Wisconsin, only Alice and her mother are listed at 510 Vernon Street in Beloit (apparently, they moved prior to William's death in 1934), confirming that Fred Allen is no longer with the family, and that Fred and Alice had no children.*

*A likely scenario would have the violin coming into the possession of William in 1913 and remaining with the family until Alice Allen (age 74) gave it to Clarence in the 1951-52 time frame. This information was reported to Clarence who replied,*

I am willing to say that it must have been Alice Allen who gave me the violin. It certainly makes sense with the timing and the last name, at least. Grace Allen has been stuck in my mind all these years only because my family knew her from the Cosmopolitan Club.