

Spottswood Styles: Rockbridge Poet in Residence



ROCKBRIDGE has its own unofficial poet laureate: Spottswood Alexander Styles, born January 24, 1869, at Lucy Selina, on the border of Rockbridge and Alleghany Counties. His father had been enslaved. Typically for a child in his circumstance, he received only an elementary-school education. But somewhere along the way he picked up a lyrical sense of style, a sense of literary humor, and an almost musical ear for rhythm.

He became a poet.

In one sense, Styles led a life that was conventional for a Black man of his day. In 1890 he and Bertha Hawkins of Welsh's Bottom were married. The union lasted until his death 56 years later and produced 10 children. He led a Sunrise Prayer Meeting at First Baptist Church for 53 years. By day, Styles worked as a mechanic for Harper & Agnor and its predecessors for 40 years.

But whenever he could, he wrote poetry. His daughter Lucy (one of eight, and two sons) remembered sitting with him on the front porch Sunday afternoons while he wrote verse. Sometimes she would be asked to read his poems at the Methodist or Baptist church. (The family attended both).

Spottswood died in Lexington on April 21, 1946, at the age of 77.



SUALLY HE WROTE in conversational English, but sometimes he composed in a perhaps exaggerated Black voice. There seems to be some consensus that his best poem was one he called "Dat Ground-Hog Day,"

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Above: Spottswood Styles
in an undated Michael Miley photo

reproduced nearby. In it, he had fun with words that were both ridiculous and perfectly sensible in context: "Some say I'm Juverstetious," "Well, yes, I'm superspecious." He rhymed "door" and "low," as a speaker of Black dialect might.

The establishment applauded. At Washington and Lee for a speaking engagement in 1941, Robert Frost ("two roads diverged, and I took the one less traveled by") scanned Styles's poetry and remarked that his work "shows a very poetic mind." His poems were published occasionally in both local weekly newspapers, the *Rockbridge County News* and the *Lexington Gazette*, which seem to have developed a properly soft spot in their journalistic hearts for him. The Rockbridge Historical Society, in 1966, devoted its spring meeting to Styles and his poetry.

DAT GROUND-HOG DAY

*Some say I'm Juverstetious,
I don't care what dey say,
Kase I'se been Teached from Childhood
To watch dat Ground-Hog Day.*

*Well, yes, I'm superspecious,
And got dat curous way
Ob watching Ebry Little Sign,
Especially Ground-Hog Day.*

*Yes, some folks say I'm Foolish,
In de sylum I should stay,
But dat don't change my Notion
'Bout dis hear Ground-Hog Day.*

*It's February de second
which am dat Vent full Day,
If he don't see his shadow
He Just comes out and stay.*

*Den look for pleasant weather,
Jes Fling wide open de Door,
Don't worry bout de wood Pile
Or de coal bin running Low.*

*Don't shed your under garments
Like lots of People do,
Kase de Ground Hog makes no Promise
Dat you won't Ketch de Flue.*

*Law, if de sun am shining
When he pokes out his head
Jes order up more wood and coal,
Put more Kivers on de Bed.*

*You can mark it on de stove Pipe,
Dar's gwinder be sleet and snow,
Dar ain't no doubt about it,
'Case de Ground-Hog done say so.*

Lesley Wheeler, holder of an endowed chair in English at Washington and Lee University and the poetry editor of *Shenandoah* (and a fan of Spottswood Styles), compared his ease of movement between vernacular and standard English to that of Paul Dunbar, an eminent Black poet and early contemporary of Styles.

According to a 1941 profile in the *Rockbridge County News*, his poetry had “a deep religious tone.” For our money, though, you’d be hard-pressed to beat “The Cost of Living and Dying” (reproduced in full nearby), which smacks of Langston Hughes channeled by Ralph Kramden:

*“We advise every woman, boy, girl and man
In all good religion: Live long as you can.
So often the friends and relations are crying,
Not for the dead, but the high cost of dying.”*

SOURCES

“Pain, pleasure, and Spottswood Styles,” online essay at LesleyWheeler.org, January 28, 2015.

Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings, Vol. 7: “Spottswood Styles, 1869–1946,” by Ann Brandon Heiner; “Spottswood Styles,” by Houston Barclay, pp. 36–38; selected Styles poems, pp. 38–45.

“Spottswood Styles” (obituary), *Rockbridge County News*, April 25, 1946, p. 1.

THE COST OF LIVING AND DYING

*The cost of our living is entirely too high,
And it seems to increase as you lie down to die.*

*It’s seventy-five dollars for powders and pills,
The doctor wants his if he cures or he kills.
The good undertaker is there, it’s his biz,
And of course, therefore, he is looking for his.*

*The graveyard sexton before the body is cold
Will charge two prices for digging the hole.
The nice jitneyman will furnish his car,
And charge just so much for just so far.*

*You don’t have to look for the tombstone man,
He’s right on the job, He’s always on hand.
He always displays a feeling of sadness,
When we know in his heart there is nothing but gladness.
He will show you designs of monuments tall,
It’s something that’s worthy, the price is so small.
He will tell the bereaved “ ’Tis best not to weep,
I’ll carve on this tomb ‘Not dead, but asleep.’ ”
Then he gets busy with chisel and hammer
At the same time he whistles the Star Spangled Banner.*

*Now everything is moving quietly and still
Until you receive that stone-cutter’s bill.
One hundred and fifty for the stone, as you know,
And for setting it up, just twenty-five more.*

*We advise every woman, boy, girl and man
In all good religion, live long as you can.
So often the friends and relations are crying,
Not for the dead, but the high cost of dying.*



Bertha Styles, shown in the same undated photo as her husband (previous page)