

Henry Sneed

“Uncle Skillet”

By Jerry Long
c.2025



Henderson: Guide to Audubon's Home Town In Henderson
Susan Starling Towles, Kentucky Writers' Project, WPA
(Northport, NY: Bacon, Percy & Daggett, 1941) pp.44-45 & 92:
and “Everyday People of Henderson Co.”
<https://jjaeverydaypeople.weebly.com/people.html>



Uncle Skillet

Among the Negroes of that day whose names are remembered for their loyalty and fine character is that of Henry Sneed, generally known as "Uncle Skillet." This nickname, given him by the young men whom he accompanied on hunting trips, was bestowed in honor of the excellent food he prepared for them. He was born in North Carolina at Montpelier, the estate of Dr. Richard Henderson Sneed. In 1849, when the family migrated to Kentucky, he drove the carriage through the mountains from North Carolina. After his wife, Martha, died he went to the home of S. K. Sneed, the son of his former master, who cared for him tenderly until his death. For years "Uncle

Skillet" was an auctioneer and was accustomed to go up and down the streets ringing a bell to call attention of the public to the auction. Usually his remarks were combined in rhymes of his own composition. The following are typical:

All you that's got money
Come up and buy,
And you that ain't got none,
Stand back and cry.

When I was young and in my prime.
I could get a wife mos' anytime;
But now I'm ole an' out in the cole;
I can't get a wife to save my soul.

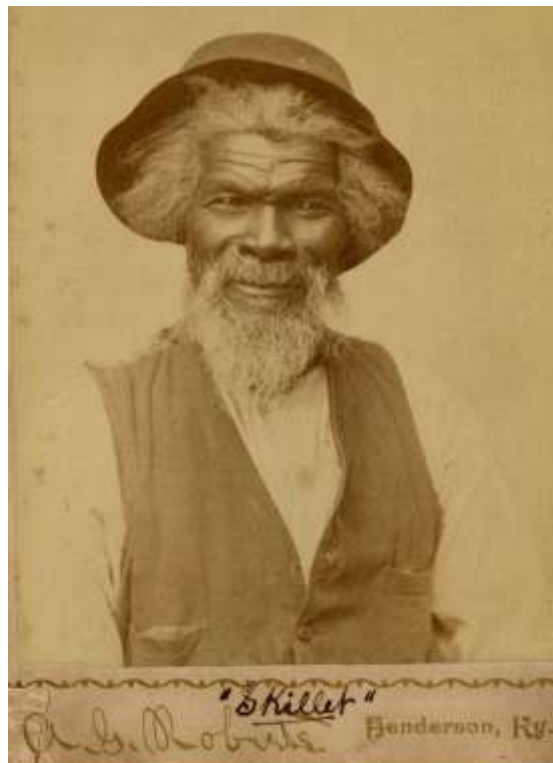
Once I made my livin' by the diggin' of a well,
Now I makes my livin' by the ringin' of a bell!

A full length portrait of Uncle Skillet, painted by Lida Williams, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



"Historic Henderson"

<https://historichenderson.com/henry-sneed-uncle-skillet/>



This rare cabinet card photograph depicts Henry Sneed, who was known by the residents of Henderson, Kentucky, as “Uncle Skillet” for his fish cooking prowess.

Henry Sneed was born into slavery at the Sneed Plantation in North Carolina around 1808. In 1852, Richard Sneed relocated to Henderson with his family, bringing Henry Sneed with him. After his emancipation, Sneed stayed in Henderson and grew to become a notable town figure, working as a day laborer, bank porter, janitor, and auctioneer.

According to local folklore, he would daily carry jugs of water on his head to the town courthouse, never spilling a drop, and on auction day he would parade up and down the streets of Henderson, ringing a bell and proclaiming the following rhyme, “All you that’s got money / Come up and buy / And you that ain’t got none / Stand back and cry!” For this reason, he is sometimes identified as Henderson’s town crier.



Sunday Gleaner and Journal, Henderson, KY, Sunday, 14 December 1924, p.1B:

**REMINICENT OF UNCLE SKILLET,
PICTURESQUE DARKY YEARS AGO**

Made Rhymes and Delighted
All of the Young-
sters

By Spalding Trafton

You folks who lived around this good old burg back in the seventies or thereabouts must or should remember that picturesque negro character known as "Uncle Skillet."

In those days Henderson had a population of about four thousand, more or less, and we still hung on to some of our village habits. There were town characters, both white and black, and "Uncle Skillet" was one of them. Everybody knew him, and he knew every body.

Picture in your mind's eye, if you, please, an ancient darkey about five feet, ten or eleven inches in height, and weighing about 175.pounds, maybe some less.

His hair was white and fuzzed-up like that in the pictures of Fred Douglas, and he wore fluffy beard that was equally as white and bushy. He wore patched pants – two patches in the seat and one| just about the left knee. None of these patches ever harmonized, but there was a striking contrast in the color scheme. Sometimes he wore a hat, and sometimes he didn't, and when he did it was a dilapidated affair.

"Uncle Skillet" was always in a good humor; his poverty never bothered him in the least.

By trade he was a janitor and an announcer of auctions.

He had a line of talk in his auction announcements that would make Old Mother Goose ashamed of herself.

He was a rhymester, crude, it is true, but he broadcasted vocally and effectively.

Was a Rhyme-Maker.

I have seen him with his auction bell, ringing it in accompaniment to his rhymes, which he was spouting to crowds of small boys and adults. They were all anxious to hear his "new stuff," and he always had it.

He would perambulate up and down the principal streets with his bell, calling attention all the while to the auction that was about to be pulled off. One of the rhymes that he almost invariably got off was this:

"All you whose got money, come up and buy,
Ar' you who ain't got none, stand back an' cry."

And his bell would ting-a-ling all the while. "Uncle Skillet" had trouble with his feet. He had a hard time carrying them around with him, for each foot was about a foot long and weighed considerable.

"Uncle Skillet" became matrimonially inclined, and after a severe and energetic courtship he and "Aunt" Martha Parsons, a likely middle-aged woman, became the target of Cupid's darts and were married. They lived in a cabin on the corner of Center and Elm, just about where the Reichert residence now stands.

It is said that the domestic sea| of these two was not altogether calm, and that family felicity was at times somewhat impaired, ruffled and fuzzed up. I do not recall that they got a legal separation, but alter so long a time each was gathered to that "bourne from which no traveler returns."

"Uncle Skillet" was somewhat of a juggler as well as a janitor. I have often seen him "toting" water at the court house. In those days there was no water works and no hydrants, and the water supply for the court house had to be drawn, from a chain pump.

Balancing Act.

"Uncle Skillet" would take three, 3-gallon buckets, pump them brimming full of water. He would set one on top of his head, take one in each hand and carry all three up the court house stairs into the court room and fill the cooler without spilling a drop.

A number of years ago Miss Lida Williams, with splendid artistic touch and talent, painted a picture of "Uncle Skillet" showing his patched trousers. It was true to life and was a speaking likeness of the old darkey. Everybody knew him as "Uncle Skillet," but his real name was Henry Sneed.

"Uncle Skillet" radiated sunshine and quaint darkey humor and made the world in his little corner just a little bit brighter.

[Note – The preceding article was written by Spalding Trafton, who was a Henderson, Kentucky journalist, historian, and postmaster known for writing local history columns for The Gleaner newspaper. A significant figure in the community, he died tragically in 1932 after being struck by an automobile while on his way to cover a story.]



The Gleaner, Henderson, KY, Wednesday, 10 September 2014, p.3A:

Tour to introduce visitors
To Fernwood 'residents'

By Donna B. Stinnett, The Gleaner

Local historian and tour guide Frank Nally will share some of the history of the city's oldest municipal cemetery during the fourth-annual Fernwood Cemetery tour on Saturday.

Nally will introduce visitors to former Henderson residents who now reside in Fernwood Cemetery during the tour hosted by The Depot Community Room.

Among the historical residents portrayed during the tour are the man responsible for the beginning of Douglass High School, a local artist with New York ties, a former circus performer and an early politician who stood up for women's rights.

Characters on the tour include: Lida Williams (portrayed by Christy Taylor): An artist and teacher. Painter of the Henry Sneed "Uncle Skillet" portrait that hangs in the Depot Community Room.....



The Gleaner, Henderson, KY, Tuesday, 16 September 2014, p.8A:



Painting a portrait of "Uncle Skillet," artist and teacher Lida Williams, portrayed by Christy Taylor, waits for visitors during Saturday's Fernwood Cemetery Tour. The Henry Sneed "Uncle Skillet" portrait hangs in the Depot Community Room.

[Note – The "Depot Community Room" in Henderson, KY is a venue located at 101 North Water Street and is associated with the Henderson County Tourist Commission. It is a space for local events and historical programming. In 2020 The Gleaner reported that the Henderson County Public Library has absorbed the collections and operations of the former Henderson County Historical and Genealogical Society, which were once housed in the Depot Community Room.]



The Gleaner, Henderson, KY, Sunday, 21 March 2021, p.8A;

75 YEARS AGO

An estimated 3,000 people overflowed the gymnasium at Barret Manual Training High School to participate in the community's first Town Hall meeting in 132 years, according to The Gleaner of March 27, 1946....

.... Several historic artifacts were used for the program. Before the meeting town criers went through the community ringing a brass bell that had originally been used in the 1880s and 1890s by a town crier the community called "Uncle Skillet."...



The Gleaner, Henderson, KY, Sunday, 9 June 2024, p.6A:

75 YEARS AGO

Lida Williams, painter and retired teacher, died after a lengthy illness, according to The Gleaner of June 11, 1949.

"Miss Williams would never disclose her age, but no one in the city could remember a time when there hadn't been a 'Miss Lida,'" the story said. The Kentucky Death Index says she was 90 when she died.

She was the art teacher at Barret Manual Training High School when it first opened in 1910.

The story said she had been retired for about 12 years but before that her teaching career lasted about five decades.

Some of her more renowned students included Gerhard Bosch, who painted the view of Henderson's farmers market in the late 1930s, Warner Williams, who sculpted the bust of Richard Henderson that stands in the courthouse, and John O. Hambleton, a costume designer and color consultant on Broadway and in Hollywood.

Her most famous painting was of Henry "Uncle Skillet" Sneed, which at one time was displayed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.



Notes on Henry Sneed

Henry Sneed was born during 1814-1819. In the Henderson County, KY marriage records it is recorded that Henry Sneed married Martha McGillera on 16 December 1874. The record reported that he was 55, born NC, occupation was city auctioneer; his second marriage; Martha was 45 and it was her second marriage.

The household of Henry Sneed was enumerated as follows in the 1880 census of the city of Henderson, Henderson County, KY (p.416, enumerated on 4 June 1880):

Sneed, Henry	mulatto – 65 – bank porter – married – born & parents North Carolina
“ Martha	mulatto – 52 – hair dresser – wife – born KY – parents born VA
“ Babe	mulatto – 8 – granddaughter – born KY – father born NC mother born KY

Henry Sneed had been a slave of Richard Sneed, who was born 1 October 1790 in Granville County, NC. Richard was a physician and served in the North Carolina House of Commons for three years, 1819-1821. Richard was the son of Stephen Sneed (1756-1821) and Mary Williams (761-1826) of Granville County, North Carolina. Richard married Lucy Farrar Henderson 22 December 1814 in Granville County, NC.

Dr. Richard Sneed brought his family to Kentucky in 1851, where they made their home in Henderson, Henderson County, KY. Richard died 28 June 1861 in Henderson County, KY. Lucy Sneed was born 31 January 1798 in Granville County, NC and died 29 October 1868 in Henderson County, KY. Richard & Lucy were buried in the Fernwood Cemetery in the city of Henderson, KY.

Dr. Richard Sneed is listed in the 1820, 1830, 1840 and 1850 censuses of Granville County, NC. He was a slave owner. The 1820 census lists him as owning 16 slaves and the 1830 census shows that he owned 32 slaves. The 1850 census slave schedule of Granville County, NC reports that Richard Sneed owned 25 slaves, one of whom is possibly Henry Sneed:

Slave Information	
Age Gender Race	
75 Female Black	6 Female Black
47 Male Black	6 Female Mulatto
44 Male Black	6 Male Mulatto
40 Female Mulatto	6 Male Black
40 Female Black	4 Female Mulatto
30 Female Mulatto	4 Female Black
27 Female Mulatto	4 Male Mulatto
25 Female Mulatto	4 Male Mulatto
25 Female Black	2 Female Mulatto
10 Male Mulatto	2 Female Mulatto
8 Male Mulatto	2 Male Mulatto
8 Male Black	1 Male Mulatto
	1 Male Black

Richard Sneed is listed in the 1860 census of Henderson, Henderson County, KY. The 1860 census slave schedule of Henderson County, KY lists that Richard Sneed owned the following fourteen slaves, viz:

Age Gender Race	
58 Male Black	17 Male Mulatto
55 Female Mulatto	15 Male Mulatto
50 Male Black	13 Female Mulatto
45 Female Black	13 Female Mulatto
35 Female Black	10 Male Mulatto
30 Female Mulatto	7 Male Mulatto
18 Male Mulatto	4 Female Mulatto

