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Silas Green from New Orleans came to town

In the 1940s, and perhaps even earlier, Alexandria was a regular stop on the circuit for the Silas Green from New Orleans show. “Silas Green from New Orleans” was originally a song written by Salem Tutt Whitney, as part of a performance by the Black Patti Troubadours, an African American musical and acrobatic act based in New York.

By 1912, the song and performance were owned by Professor Eph Williams, who transformed the song into a tent show that he toured around the American South, even though he was from Wisconsin. That tent show came to Alexandria on multiple occasions, notably at N. Lafayette Street between Oronoco and Wythe Streets. The interpretive sign by the James Bland Homes notes that the show occupied multiple empty lots in the development.

From his early attempts to start a circus business in Wisconsin until he died in 1921, Williams was the only black circus owner in the United States. He started as a horse trainer and magician, but Williams’ ambitions went beyond performing himself.

At a time when vaudeville frequently utilized white and black performers performing

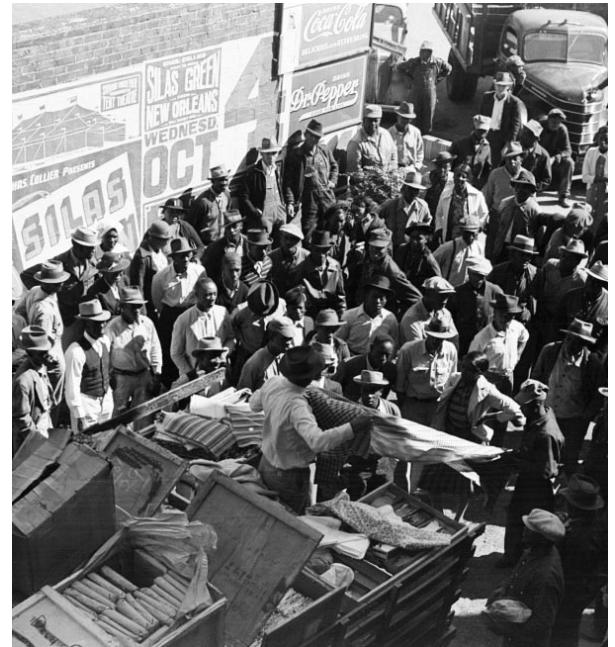
in blackface, Williams featured Bobby Cole, an African American performer known for acting in a clown’s white face. The show performed one-night stands, and it entertained audiences of all races.

After Williams died in 1921, half of the ownership in the show fell to Charles Collier, who was white. Collier later acquired full ownership of the show, which continued with the same format and audience into the 1950s.

When Collier died in 1942, his widow, Hortense Collier inherited half of the show. Hortense’s maiden name was Wong, as she was Chinese-American. At the time of Charles’ death, she had been with the show for 10 years, both as a dancer and as a manager.

The show usually traveled by rail to avoid Jim Crow laws. On one of those rail trips in 1924, lead performer Ford Wiggins shot and killed singer Henry “Slim” Gallman in a dispute over a card game. Wiggins was arrested and charged with murder in Lexington, Kentucky, but successfully argued that he acted in self-defense. Less than a year after the incident, Wiggins returned to the starring role of Silas Green. He died while performing for the company in 1944.

A 1940 Time Magazine ar-



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A streetscape of Bilzoni, Mississippi in 1939. Multiple signs are visible advertising Silas Green from New Orleans.

ticle featured Silas Green from New Orleans. The article explained:

“Part revue, part musicomedy, part minstrel show, it tells, season after season, of the adventures of two Negroes, short, coal-black Silas Green and tall, tannish Lilas Bean.”

For years the show never bothered to change its plot. In the 1930s, around the time the show began to stop regularly in Alexandria, the company fi-

nally updated the plot.

For more than 50 years, Silas Green from New Orleans, in some form, entertained audiences in the American South, both black and white. Some long-time residents of Alexandria still remember seeing this unique part of American entertainment history.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.