BURLEIGH IN SARATOGA: WORK, WORSHIP and SONG

“...a warm spot in my heart for Saratoga Springs and for its people. I’ll never forget the start I received there. It gave me encouragement to strive higher.”

–Harry T. Burleigh, The Saratogian, 1964

Harry T. Burleigh may or may not have been discovered by the classical music world in Saratoga Springs. However, during the summers of 1892 and 1894 he was in the Spa City. The published record confirms the young singer’s dedication to work, worship and song which were a hallmark of his later life and career in New York City.

1892

THE LORE
Burleigh was “discovered” in Saratoga Springs with the help of summer residents in 1880.

“...a 'notable guest' affiliated with the National Conservatory of Music in NY, where another of his friends became Anton Dvorak, American composer.”

- The Saratogian, April 24, 1964

Bethesda Episcopal Church was founded in 1830. Saratoga Springs’ first Episcopal church, which seated 600, moved to Washington Street near Broadway, in 1847. Although a 1894 Saratogian article claims Burleigh sang in this church choir in 1880, no documentary evidence yet found confirms the story.

1894

A RETURN ENGAGEMENT
By 1894, the New York Herald confirms Burleigh’s growing stature. An article on “Saratoga’s Big Season” (August 19) includes Burleigh as a ‘notable guest’ affiliated with the National Conservatory of Music who will sing at a “musical at the North Broadway cottage of Mrs. John. W. Ehninger of New York.” A week later (August 26), the paper reported how the home’s “spacious parlors were filled with a fashionable and appreciable audience.” Fellow African-American singers also performed in town, including the soprano Sissieretta Jones.

FELLOW PERFORMERS
In Saratoga Springs, Burleigh encountered New York socialites, clergy and fellow workers. The town also hosted many African American performers, including successful opera and troubadour singer Sissieretta Jones, known popularly as “Black Patti.”

Sissieretta Jones Born Matilda Sissieretta Joyner (1869-1933) studied voice at the New England Conservatory. Known as “Black Patti” after an Italian fellow-soprano, she gave concerts in Saratoga Springs that attracted thousands, possibly including Burleigh, in August 1892 and 1894. The Daily Saratogian described one: “A great crush of people... began pouring into the park an hour before... the concert. Both entrances were used and the rush did not cease for an hour and one half. Every chair, bench or seat of any kind... was taken and still six percent of the people stood during the entire program... [The pavilion... was surrounded on all sides by the crowd of between five and six thousand people who were attracted by the phenomenal singer they were anxious to hear.

THE HISTORICAL RECORD
Area newspapers, including The Saratogian and Albany Evening Journal, do not reveal a direct connection between Burleigh and Mrs. MacDowell. Nor do the Bethesda Episcopal Church archives. It seems unlikely that Burleigh first came to the area in 1880, at 14 (as the 1964 article said). Newspapers seem to first have noted Burleigh in 1892. An article on the Grand Union Hotel staff member described his singing in a service at a Y.M.C.A. affiliated with the Presbyterian church.

“...the new rooms of the Young Men’s Christian Association were occupied yesterday for the first time for a Sunday service. The Rev. Dr. F. A. (Nettie) of Chicago presided, and the Rev. Dr. Merrick Johnson of Chicago delivered an address. Harry Burleigh, colored, of Erie, Pa, assistant head waiter at the Grand Union, sang “I’m the Child of a King.” Selection from “Prettily Played: Shakespeare Produced on the Grand Union Lawn,” - August 15, 1892, Evening Journal. Fulton County Postcards Website Y.M.C.A. In 1892, Burleigh performed at a Sunday service at the YMCA in Saratoga Springs, inaugurating its new rooms at 18-20 Phiia Street for worship. This is a description of the Y.M.C.A.’s mission and activities from Kirwin’s Saratoga Springs Directory.