

About “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”

“Swing Low Sweet Chariot” was sung in the 1850s by Wallace and Minerva Willis at Spencer Academy, a school for Choctaw boys. The Willises were of African descent, and they were enslaved by a Choctaw Indian named Britt Willis. This song tells about how enslaved persons wanted to be free. Since it was dangerous to sing openly of freedom, they disguised the real meaning: the chariot symbolizes the Underground Railroad, the angels are conductors on the Underground Railroad, and so on.

After the Civil War, someone brought the song to Fisk University, a historically Black college in Nashville, Tennessee. “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” then became a signature song of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In the 1870s, the Jubilee Singers became an international musical sensation, and were the first African American musical ensemble to perform abroad.

We sing “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” the way the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang it in the 1870s, since that is closest to the way Wallace and Minerva Willis sang it. The song begins with only the high voices, who sing, “Swing low sweet chariot.” Then everyone joins together to sing, “Coming for to carry me home.” This “call-and-response” singing continues for the whole song, and is one of the most powerful effects of the song.

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