

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"James Hope, Edwin Booth's Valet"

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by Jay A. Graybeal

For more than a quarter-century, James Hope operated a barbershop in the City Hotel on the corner of Court and E. Main streets in Westminster. Prior to opening his shop, he had once been the valet of the actor Edwin Booth (1833-1893), older brother of Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth. A lengthy article about Booth and Hope appeared in the March 15, 1890 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate.

James Hopes, the colored barber of Westminster, whose shop is in the City Hotel, some years ago was the body servant of Edwin Booth, the great actor. (When Hopes was his body servant he went by the name of Jim Brown, Brown being the name of his grandmother.) Booth was in Baltimore recently, and while there one evening entertained some callers with delightful anecdotes and reminiscences. Among the stories were two about Jim Brown (Hopes) and they were told in last Sunday's Baltimore News as follows: For years his faithful body servant was "Jim Brown, a coal-black negro, with a comical face and more comical ways. "Jim" was as exemplary and sedate a darkey as one could well wish, but had a most unfortunate knack of getting into trouble, on which occasions he would appeal most pitifully to "Mars Edwin" for aid. "Jim" was also the possessor of a fine tenor voice, which was at once his comfort and pride, and he would go to almost any extreme to give others the pleasure of hearing him. On one occasion, in Philadelphia, Mr. Booth left the theatre after a performance to walk to his hotel, followed, as he thought, by "Jim" Brown. But no "Jim" appeared at the hotel that night. The next morning some one sent word to Mr. Booth that his servant was in the police station, and unless his fine was paid the unfortunate darkey would be sent to Moyamensing, the city jail. Mr. Booth sent one of the attaches of the theatre to the negro's aid. That afternoon, as Mr. Booth was preparing to take his usual nap, the door was burst violently open and a black mass tumbled unceremoniously at his feet. It was the unfortunate "Jim," pale with fright and shivering with apprehension. "Oh Lordy, Mars Edwin, please forgiv me, I'll never do so agin, I won't," he pleaded. "Where have you been, you black rascal?" thundered his master. "Fo' God, Mars Edwin, I ain't been doin' nothin', cried "Jim." "I was a walking home behind you last night when I hearn singin'. It was a crowd sernadin' a house, and dey was singin' "Come Where My love Lies Dreamin'." It war powerful good singin, too, but dar wasn't no tenor. I slips up ter 'em and says, Gemmin', I kin sing tenor. Does you want a tenor singer? De leader he says, "yes, jine right in," and I did jine in. Jest in de finest part, Mars Edwin, a big perliceman grabbed me and he says, "I'll take yer whar yer love lies dreamin', and fo' do Lord, he run me in. Bless God, Mars Edwin, I'll never sing dat dar song agin." And he never did. Mr. Booth laughed heartily when telling this story. He also said that on one occasion "Jim" was driving him through Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, when he noticed that everybody he met seemed struck by something on the box. Passers-by would stop, look up at the driver and smile. Finally, Mr. Booth got out to investigate. On the box, as dignified and sedate as a Senator, sat the coal-black "Jim," arrayed in a gorgeous white vest. Across his breast he had pinned in the greatest profusion all manner of trinkets, medals and glittering stage paraphernalia, which he had picked up at the theatre until he resembled a miniature dime museum. To say that Mr. Booth was mad would be putting it mildly.

James Hope operated his barbershop until his sudden death on May 10, 1900. Next week's column will include his obituary and some details about his estate.

Photo Caption: The City Hotel at the corner of Court and E. Main Streets in Westminster, as it appeared from Court St., at the turn of the century when James Hope operated his barbershop in this building.

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One of the several doorways visible in this photograph led to his shop; the other doorways led to some attorney offices. The structure was last known as the Main Court Inn; it was demolished in 1940. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.