Continuum: The Journal of African Diaspora Drama, Theatre and Performance
Volume 2 Number 1 - **MEMORY AND SPIRIT** - Aug. 2015 - ISSN 2471-2507

.The Florence Mills Association vs. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson: The Contentious Battle over Flo Mills's Monument

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Abstract

Florence Mills, the internationally known and beloved Harlem Renaissance singer, fell ill and died abruptly on November 1, 1927, shortly after returning to New York from a wildly successful tour of London. Her husband Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson attributed her death to exhaustion, saying she had continued to perform two shows a day even though she was visibly sick and exhausted. She was only thirty-two years old. According to the *New York Times,* at least 5,000 mourners packed the church during her burial ceremony while more than 150,000 lined the streets of Harlem in the pouring rain to pay their respects. Shortly after her funeral, several Harlem luminaries including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Charles Gilpin called for the creation of a monument in her honor. Richly citing the "race" papers of the era, such as *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier,* as well as mainstream publications, the article chronicles the heated controversy and eventual unraveling of the efforts to memorialize Florence Mills, against the backdrop of the waning Harlem Renaissance and the chasmal Great Depression.

Florence Mills, the internationally known singer, had just returned to New York after a wildly successful tour of London. In late October of 1927, when her ship, the Île De France, docked at Pier 51 in Manhattan, she was greeted by an adoring crowd that "whooped for joy" as she moved toward the caravan of cars waiting to escort her to Harlem and on to her home at 220 W. 133rd Street (Chicago Defender 1927a).

Florence Mills, 1923
From the Collection of Bill Egan

Several days later Flo Mills fell ill and while recovering in the hospital following two surgeries and a blood transfusion, she suddenly passed away on November 1. According to her husband, Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson, even on her deathbed she sang to visitors to cheer them up. Her fans were eager to know the details of her death. Though the official cause of death was appendicitis, rumors of foul play circulated. Thompson put an end to them explaining to newspaper reporters that "Flo had only worked herself to death, insisting on playing two shows daily in London even when she was visibly sick and exhausted" (Maeder

2005). It was typical for the diminutive young star to perform three hundred shows without a break. She was only thirty-two years old when "exhaustion" claimed her life.[1]

In many ways the brief life and career of Florence Mills epitomizes the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, which is a complex historical event. This essay approaches the Renaissance and the evolution of the "New Negro" historically, primarily through the "race newspapers" [2] of the day, including the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), the *Indianapolis Freeman*, and the *Chicago Defender* all of which championed the birth of the "New Negro" and encouraged its many implications and meanings (though they did not all use the term). The *Chicago Defender* (still circulating) is a particular example of the journalism that heralded the incredible enthusiasm and outpouring of artistic endeavors during the Harlem Renaissance. Although, like other race newspapers, The *Defender* clearly, even militantly, championed equal rights and the fair treatments of Blacks, its editorial agenda was not limited to front-page headlines. To further engage readers, the paper used cartoons, editorials, advertisements and even the social and sports pages as opportunities for indictment and sensationalism. Critic Salem Tutt Whitney's syndicated column, "Timely Topics," that appeared in the *Defender* and other race papers, included scandalous anecdotes of the suicides, nervous breakdowns, fist fights, and murders in the world of Black vaudeville and the lives of its practitioners. Whitney and the *Defender's* circulations were intended for a narrowly targeted readership and solicited contributions from a very specific segment of the general population, "The New Negro."

Florence Mills, one of the first Black international stars served as a kind of ambassador to Britain and Europe, spreading the word of the new Harlem. In "Florence Mills Tells Londoners About 'The Soul of the Negro,'" a *Pittsburgh Courier* recap of an article that Mills wrote for London's *Sun Chronicle,* Mills captures the determination of the performers of the Harlem Renaissance. She wrote:

> When I was born I was just a poor pickaninny, with no prospects but a whole legacy of sorrow. My parents were far too poor to afford me good educations, and it was obvious that I would have to fend for myself. One day when I was playing in the street, with a number of other children, a white comedian who was appearing close to my home saw me and took a fancy to my face. From him I learned my first song: "Don't Cry, My Little Pickaninny." That was the beginning….From the age of eight, when I appeared in a production called "Sons of Ham" it has just been one long fight for success. Always there was the bogy of my color barring the way. That I was able to win through it all was due to sheer determination to rise superior to prejudice." (*Pittsburgh Courier* 1927a)

Less than a year after this published interview, Florence Mills would be dead.

Flo Mills began her career in vaudeville as a child, touring in the mega-hit *Sons of Ham* by superstars Bert Williams and George Walker. *Sons of Ham* was an all-Black ragtime entertainment/musical that featured songs such as "Miss Hannah from Savannah" and "My Little Zulu Babe" (Jas Obrecht Music Archive 2011). Mills's shows on Broadway, and in Harlem and

London made her an international star known for a voice that was "full of bubbling, bell like, bird tones.…[She sang] with such exquisite poignancy as always to raise a lump in your throat" (Dixon 2003). Mills was also known as an active philanthropist in the "race" vaudeville community and was particularly noted for her generosity to the homeless and down and out, be they White or Black.

Mills's body lay in state at the Mother of Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church at 137th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenue. The petite actress was laid in a copper coffin under glass. The *Pittsburgh Courier* described the display:

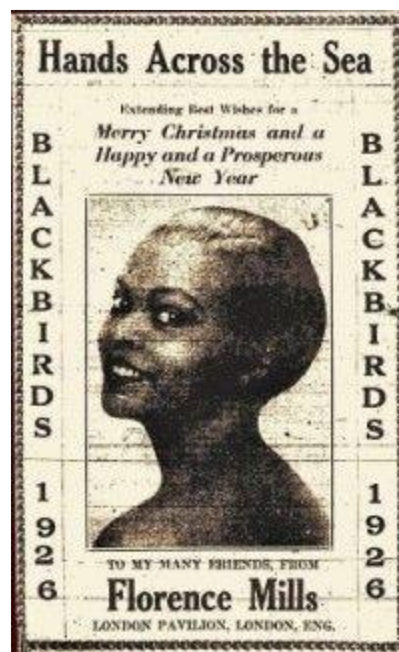
> In her nest of white satin she appeared small and strange. The thin legs, the twinkling feet in their silver slippers were still. She wore a formal white satin dress that ended abruptly above the knee. In her hand was a little nosegay of a bouquet. Her head, with the hair drawn sleekly back, looked unexpectedly tiny" (*Pittsburgh Courier* 1927b).

Florence Mills and Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson
From the Collection of Bill Egan

At least 5,000 mourners packed the church during her burial ceremony alone. More than 20,000 fans visited throughout the week during her wake and more than 150,000 lined the streets of Harlem in the pouring rain to pay their respects (*New York Times* 1927a).
The *Pittsburgh Courier* described the mourners as "laundress[es], porters, laborers, nurse maids, actors, business men, society women, school children, all of the varied mass that composes black Harlem" (1927b). Inside the church, the memorial was lavish and star-studded. Planned by Earl Dancer (husband of Ethel Waters), the event featured flower girls, an orchestra, soloists along with a chorus and eight female honorary pallbearers, including Ethel Waters. Emotions ran so high in the crowded church that a soloist fainted during one of the songs, and during the processional to the cemetery in pouring rain, a cornet player collapsed and died on Seventh Avenue. (*New York Times* 1927a).

The idea for the Florence Mills Theatrical Memorial was conceived shortly after her death. In fact, it was mentioned in her eulogy. The *New York Times* reported that the idea of a monument originated with Miss Mills herself and was actually first supported by Charles Gilpin, former star of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (Ibid.). An organization was formed early in December, just four weeks after Mills's death. Earl Dancer established a committee to found the "Florence Mills Memorial Club" to raise $20,000 to build a life-sized statue on her grave (Cannon 1927). An organization, the Florence Mills Theatrical Association, was incorporated and granted a charter by New York Secretary of State Robert Moses in December (*New York Times* 1927a). Incorporators included Jesse A. Shipp (director, performer, writer and lyricist, who played Archangel/Abraham in *The Green Pastures* by Marc Connelly), Ulysses S. Thompson (Mills's husband), and Irvine C. Miller (whose lavish variety shows featured beautiful

Black women in scanty Zeigfieldesque costumes)[3] and Earl Dancer (showman and husband of Ethel Waters), all of them New Yorkers and all well-known vaudevillians (Ibid.).



Florence Mills' Christmas Card from London, 1926
From the Collection of Bill Egan

Many newspapers assisted the promotion of the organization, including the *New York Times*, *New York Morning World*, and race papers such as the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Indianapolis Freeman*, and the *Chicago Defender*. Initially, from the variety of the newspaper coverage, the exact purpose of the Association was difficult to discern. This lack of clarity led to many opportunities for misunderstanding which would fuel the controversy to come. Some papers reported the aim of the fund was to erect "a permanent monument to the beloved star" (*New York Morning World,* 1927). Others claimed the Association's efforts would "promote the welfare of the Negro performers in particular and the theatrical profession in general…assist its members…encourage more harmonious business and social relations among Negro theatrical performers…[and] operate without pecuniary gain to its members" (*New York Times* 1927b). The *New York Morning World* described the project's aim was "to raise funds for the erection of a permanent monument," "to build a home for Negro actors and members of the profession," and "to erect a clubhouse for Negro actors." The estimated cost would be approximately $50,000 to be raised in three to four months, primarily from "the proceeds of midnight performances to be given in Negro theatres" (*New York Morning World* 1927). These particular "midnight frolics" were late night, semi-private variety shows voluntarily performed after a regular day's program of up to four shows. They were a great success, drawing the best race and White performers and musicians. These performers eagerly supported the project with their time and energy.

Two characters emerged early on as the most active and vocal supporters of the project, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Salem Tutt Whitney. However, their commitment and dedication to the idea of a memorial for Florence Mills unfortunately led to more controversy than collaboration. The lack of organization or a clear statement of goals led to a perfect storm of misunderstanding between these two strong-willed individuals.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson is best remembered by most for the tap dance duets he performed with Shirley Temple in films such as *The Little Colonel*, *The Littlest Rebel*, and the 1943 stage musical *Stormy Weather*, which was loosely based on Bojangles' own life. Flo and Bojangles had a special relationship; he served as a mentor early in her career. "Mills gave credit for her accomplishments to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson…whom she said taught her the art on the road" (*Chicago Defender* 1927b).

Bojangles was not a particularly eloquent man. He was generally known to be unsophisticated and prone to fits of temper. Still, he did release to the press an expression of his grief:

> The death of Miss Mills will be keenly felt for she was without doubt the greatest star we had. She did more kind and generous acts during her lifetime than any star with whom I have ever come into contact. In the death of Miss Mills the theatrical world has lost one of its greatest stars. (Ibid.)

In the years that followed, Robinson was praised for the endless Association benefits he organized, promoted, and performed in. The *Chicago Defender* acknowledged "he [had] done more than words can express of appreciation toward the support and founding of the building fund for a Colored performers' home" (*Chicago Defender* 1928c).

Opposite Robinson was Salem Tutt Whitney, the syndicated columnist and critic for the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and other race newspapers. Whitney also worked on the vaudeville stage with his younger brother J. Homer Tutt. Billed as the "Tutt Brothers," Salem and Homer successfully wrote, produced and performed race vaudeville shows and revues. They formed the popular Smart Set Company, which played the circuit for over twenty-five years, all the while encouraging race performers, managers and theatre owners to resist Jim Crow practices by creating and taking control of their own race shows, race theatres, and touring circuits. Whitney had been a preacher turned poet/performer/producer, who never stopped advocating for the acknowledgement and recognition of race performers. He did not hesitate to use Mills's death as an opportunity for indictment of White theatre owners and to express his opinions on racism and discrimination. Of Mills's death he wrote:

> Once in a decade, such great souls as Aida Overton Walker, Bert Williams and Florence Mills, by reason of their superior courage, tenacity, talents and accomplishment, outrun prejudice, almost but not quite…When will white America cast off the shackles of its enslaving color prejudices and see that it may be losing to posterity some of the sweetest flowers and rarest gems of genius that God's storehouse may bear" (Calvin 1927).

Five months following Mills's death, around April 1928, the Association had a clearer vision of its goals as stated in the *Chicago Defender*:

> To perpetuate the memory of the late Florence Mills by erecting a memorial home for Race performers; to stimulate improvement in the character of entertainment provided for the public and to provide some material aid for invalid performers. (1928b)

There were still conflicts of purpose and criticism among the race vaudeville community who questioned the Association's ability to organize benefit performances and administrate the subsequent funds raised. Despite these setbacks, 1928 was a good year for the Association. While they did not meet their financial goal, the money steadily trickled in, thanks in no small part to Robinson's efforts. His philanthropic reputation and popularity were such that any charity bearing his endorsement was sure to attract performers and donors if for no other reason

than to share billing with the great Bojangles. Midnight frolics were offered in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Washington. Whitney wrote, "We deem it in order to mention especially the generous unfailing efforts of Bill (Bojangles) Robinson. His personal management has done more than words can express of appreciation toward the support and founding of the building fund for a Colored performers' home" (*Chicago Defender* 1928c).

Florence Mills Funeral, November, 1927
From the Collection of Bill Egan

On the other hand, Whitney complained about frictions between officers and trustees. Also, a general loss of interest by members was demonstrated by the sparse attendance at Association meetings. It soon became all too clear that trouble was at hand when the *Afro-American* reported that at an executive meeting, Robinson "declared that much of the work [of the officers] should be done free" (1928). As a means of emphasizing his assertion he refused to turn over a check for $5,000 raised from benefits.[4] He promised to hold on to the funds until changes were made to his satisfaction. Robinson's concerns seem to have come out of nowhere and were not substantiated. Whitney made no mention of salaries or remuneration for officers in his editorials for the *Defender*, though he did admit that the secretary of the Association was given a stipend for time and materials. It may be that because of the affiliation of his name with the Mills benefit shows that Bojangles felt an entitlement to oversee the use of the funds. Whatever instigated Robinson's attack on the Association is unclear; details are lacking and conclusions are left to speculation. Since most of the information comes from Whitney's own editorials, it should be kept in mind that his reporting of the events was surely influenced by his own opinions, agendas, and personal loyalties.

With the 1928 election of officers, Robinson was elected treasurer, Jesse Shipp remained as president and Whitney was vice-president. With this new leadership, Whitney reported that the Association "will purchase a $30,000 home immediately and fit it up for the accommodation and pleasure of the profession" (Whitney 1928a).

Again and again through the summer and fall, calls for the reinvigoration of interest and contributions from the members were posted. Whitney used a variety of tactics in an attempt to motivate race performers out of their complacency. At times his words were harsh. He wrote, "Remember friends or should I say foes, when the home is up that the slacker, the knocker, the fault finder will be the first to ask it favor"(*Chicago Defender* 1928a). At other times he was encouraging. He described "a beautiful home in the heart of Harlem. There will be rest, reading and recreation rooms…a café where the best meals will be served…rooms where the sick can be served and guests accommodated…[and] a combination dance room and theatre" (Whitney 1928b).

Only two months after the election of new officers, in September of 1928, Mrs. Irene Jordan, secretary of the Association, announced that the idea of building a home would be abandoned due to lack of memberships and donations. Instead, there would be a search for a

home to purchase and remodel for about $5,000. Toward that end a membership dues of $10 would be imposed (*Pittsburgh Courier* 1928).[5] Also, in order to increase its strength and efficacy, the Association sought to establish affiliations with Actor's Equity, the four A's (American Artist Actors' Association) and the American Federation of Labor (Ibid.).

In July of 1929, Whitney announced the next election of officers with a general disclosure to all members: "[T]here has been no misappropriation of funds…indifference and dissenting opinions have been the main reason of failure thus far" (Whitney 1929a). Whitney again asserted that "[e]very dollar that has been expended has been spent with the sanction of a two-third vote of the organization." He also asked officers to put aside their "prejudice and personal dislikes" (1929b). Just one week later the dispute intensified. A headline in the *Chicago Defender* declared "Bill Robinson and Flo Mills Assn. in fight. Bojangles won't give up $8,000 check" (*Chicago Defender* 1929a). Tensions continued to escalate. The race newspapers confirmed the election of officers and declared that Bojangles had been voted out of office along with Mills's husband U.S.Thompson. They were defeated by a healthy majority. Bojangles was also defeated in his run for president, having collected an embarrassing four votes. Robinson had the look of a sore loser. He publicly objected to the election of "showman and producer" Irvin C. Miller as president. Miller and his followers, Whitney and Shipp in particular, had preferred a Florence Mills Home rather than a statue all along. Not coincidentally, Miller owned the property earmarked to be purchased by the Association. Robinson grew even more committed to the erection of a memorial.

In an attempt to make peace, Whitney made a plea for the members to set aside their personal opinions and give their full attention to "the unlimited possibilities for the protection, [its] benefit and advancement of our theatrical groups rather than self interests or personal aggrandizement" (Whitney 1929b). Whitney's plea fell on deaf ears. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Bojangles again accused officers of "filching funds" (1929). This occurred reportedly after the president, Irvin C. Miller, and Robinson had met at the Lafayette Theatre a few days earlier and only the "interference of friends averted a fistic clash"(*Chicago Defender* 1929a). When Bojangles and Miller took the dispute to the streets it was reported that Bojangles pulled a revolver and fired into the air as he threatened Miller's life. Despite Robinson's objections, negotiations for the purchase of a property at 115 W. 131st Street proceeded (*Chicago Defender* (1929b).

In August 1929, despite Whitney's attempt to placate both parties and restore peace and goodwill, the Association filed a suit against Robinson (*Chicago Defender* 1929d). Even so, Whitney reported that Bojangles seemingly had gotten over his temper tantrums and irritation. Robinson extended his hand in peace, which President Miller eagerly accepted. The truce did not last long. On a trip to Chicago, Bojangles gave a lecture/performance at the Regal Theatre. In it, Robinson accused the Association of embezzlement in front of an audience of 1,500. He named Miller, specifically, of mismanaging funds and inducing the Association's purchase of the home and property Miller owned. Robinson disapproved of the property, which had a bad reputation, and which had been frequently raided by the police (*Chicago Defender* 1929e). The Association responded that the property was the best available and most appropriate for the home and they were "not concerned about what transpired in the building before" (Whitney 1929c).

A few days later, Sylvester Russell, theatrical critic, editor, and all-around raconteur, who had also supported Miller's election to the office of the presidency, weighed in with his opinions about the dispute in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Russell explained that the catalyst for the feud was simply a misunderstanding of the Association's goals. Simply put, according to Russell, the source of the suit was that Bojangles wanted a memorial and Miller wanted the home. He wrote that Bojangles was "not educationally qualified" to hold office. He added insult to injury when he suggested that since Robinson was one of the creators of the fund, and had raised thousands of dollars, the Association might pay Bojangles one thousand dollars as compensation (Russell 1929). Robinson reacted to this insult with a burst of anger and understandably lost his temper (which it was said he often did). He declared he would have nothing more to do with the Association, made more threats, and still refused to turn over the check (*Chicago Defender* 1929c).

In his editorials, Whitney continually reiterated the objectives of the Association. He amended the goals and developments fairly frequently, perhaps to maintain interest in the matter and lend some dynamism to the project. Before the Association took possession of the property, officers made a plea to the membership to catch up on their dues. In an effort to encourage members, the dues were reduced from $10 to a fee of $1 (*Chicago Defender* 1929b).

Whitney stressed over and over, in refutation to Bojangles accusations, that all funds were being used honestly and appropriately. He asserted that officers and trustees were selflessly investing time, energy, and talent to the ongoing support of the Association and the home. In support of Whitney's claims and as proof of his commitment and generosity, Jesse S. Shipp, the first president of the group in 1926, donated a library "relating especially to the history of the Negro in his worthy achievements in the theatre...[It would] collect and preserve original documents, bills of the plays…photographs and curios connected with this history" (Whitney 1929d). Nevertheless, the feud continued between Bojangles and the Association, and in particular with the president, Irvin C. Miller. It was clear that Robinson strongly disliked the man.

In the following months, Whitney continued to plead, cajole, and even threaten race vaudeville performers to "organize" by joining the Association. He published progress reports, benefit invitations, announcements and reviews. He called for a peace treaty between the Association and Bojangles. He published small talk about the goings-on at the Mills home: who visited, who donated, and who held special occasions such as birthday parties and social tea parties. He emphasized the services the Association and home offered, especially to the unemployed and sick, and the provision of burial funds for members deceased in penury.

Whitney never waned in his call for support of the sick and the needy. He suffered attacks and barbs in the news from critics and performers and those in the Robinson camp. It is evident in his editorials that Whitney experienced moments of doubt and depression during the winter of 1930. In the midst of the country's Great Depression, his sadness and discouragement was not just about the Miller/Robinson conflict. Reflecting the difficulties of the economic downturn, Whitney seemed fatigued by his constant effort to get Black performers to organize, if not for their own security then for the sake of the profession and Black performers in the future.

During this time, Whitney and his brother and partner Homer Tutt also had their ups and downs professionally. In fact, Whitney took a hiatus from his own productions to join the company of *The Green Pastures,* to play the part of Noah. He complained that he and others in the cast were "so deep in debt that they will have to graze in *The Green Pastures* for more than a year before they can look at a week's pay and say…'Get in my pocket and stay there!'" Even so, the performers regularly took up collections for the Association on special performances and midnight frolics (Whitney 1930b).

In an editorial published in April, Whitney told his readers, "Another unpleasant thing for me to do is to solicit aid for the sick or funds to bury the dead." He gave the example of young Rastus Brown:

> The kid never had much of a chance. From 10 years of age till he died from consumption at the early age of 21 years, he had to shuffle for himself, with no one very much concerned about how he got along or what he did or did not do.

Poor Rastus was buried thanks to the good will of a generous and sympathetic donor. Whitney went on to scold actors for extravagant spending with no presence of forethought to think about their own welfare. At the very end of the essay Whitney made a call for membership in the Association. He wrote: "What one of you can't afford to give 12 ½ cents a week to maintain your self-respect, take care of your sick, aid your needy and to bury your dead?" (Ibid.).

Florence Mills' Funeral, November 2, 1927
From Bill Egan Collection

Meanwhile, Robinson continued to be very public about the fact that he still held the check for $4,600 from two benefits at the Regal Theatre back in 1928. He promised to continue to withhold the funds from the Association until the outcome of the lawsuit was settled (*Chicago Defender* 1930). In May, the *Afro-American* reported that the suit had been updated: the "amended complaint asks for an accounting and a restraining order to prevent Robinson from negotiating any of the money allegedly received" (*Afro*-American 1930). This move had little effect on the case since Bojangles had deposited the money in a bank until the dispute was resolved. The mudslinging became even more direct and personal. In June, Whitney laid down his own accusations, claiming that Robinson was jealous, selfish, and a seeker of "personal aggrandizement to sponsor the erection of a monument." Whitney claimed that Robinson was guilty of "malicious insinuations of theft and dishonesty "(Whitney 1930d). Even with this sensational publicity it was clear that interest and support in the Association and even Mills's memory were diminishing. Less than fifty people attended a memorial service commemorating Mills's death at her grave in Woodlawn Cemetery (Whitney 1930f).

Attendance at officers' and trustees' meetings continued to drastically decline, as well, despite the election of new officers and the promise that all financial activities were open for

public scrutiny (Whitney 1930e). In a move toward transparency, Whitney devoted an entire editorial to introduce the new officers, their backgrounds, and experience, but to no avail.

The year 1930 ended with hard times in Harlem. As the Depression advanced, theatres, dance halls, cabarets, clubs, and burlesques closed, leaving many race performers out of work and needy. As Whitney predicted, the services of the Florence Mills Association were needed more than ever. Benefit entertainments were held all over New York. The management of the Cotton Club gave free meals to hundreds each day. The Association prepared sleeping quarters for the needy and the manager of the Lafayette Theatre donated cots and blankets (Whitney 1930g). *The Green Pastures* was one of the few shows able to support the Association. The producers of the show donated $500 and cast members often played benefit performances after regular performances and hosted dances and variety shows at the Florence Mills Home (Whitney 1930c). Whitney opined: “Old man adversity is no respecter of persons, and hard times isn’t drawing any color line. The ‘ophay’ [White] actors are singing the ‘blues’ with as much emotion and sincerity as the ‘jig’ actor. The ‘board bill’ nemesis is dogging their footsteps with the nose sensitiveness of an ante-bellum bloodhound” (1930a).

Finally, in January of 1931, the suit was settled when Justice Edward Blennan dismissed the action in Robinson’s favor. Blennen ruled that there simply was no basis for the action since Bojangles raised the money himself and he understood it would be used for a monument and to prove his sincerity he deposited the money in a bank, leaving it to be used at a future time. “Robinson,” said Blennen, “you are an honorable man,” and with that ended the court case. Robinson kept the money.

Understandably, Whitney believed the court rendered its decision by “favor rather than merit.” He wrote; “The verdict has left us gasping for breath” (*Chicago Defender* 1931a). In a particularly vituperative editorial, he accused Bojangles’s attorney of telling fifteen deliberate lies in only the first five minutes.

A truce was forged but both parties continued to believe their cause was on the right. There were no apologies on either side. Robinson went back to work for RKO and the Palace Theatre in New York. The Association hosted a few more benefit shows, some including Bojangles, with receipts going to “stranded” and unemployed performers, who were many (Whitney 1931a). In June, unable to pay for maintenance and upkeep, the Association sold the home to a group of Masons for $14,750. It became known that the Association had not bought the house outright from Irvin Miller but rather had struck some sort of financial “deal” with Miller to use the property. *The Chicago Defender* revealed some unknown facts about the arrangement. “Irvin Miller, it is said, was the original owner of the property and when he was elected head of the organization….[he]resold the property and collected all monies coming into the treasurer as payment on the deal.” It was this arrangement, the *Defender* surmised, that caused the rift between Bojangles and Miller (1931b).

By July a disappointed and discouraged Salem Tutt Whitney finally had to admit, "the future of the organization was not very roseate." Criticized by the very people he had helped, Whitney became convinced that "no man who is actively engaged in theatrical work, no matter how conscientious or diligent he may be…try as he may to avoid it, he will come in competition with some, antagonize some, and create envy and jealousy of others." He ended the editorial with the warning that the only means of financial and ethical protection for race performers was through organization. He wrote, "The remedy is in our hands—organization. If we haven't sense enough to apply the remedy, then we deserve to suffer" (Whitney 1931b).

Florence Mills' Grave
From the Collection of Bill Egan

This would seem to be the end of the story but later, in 1933, just months before his death, Whitney was compelled to visit the topic one more time. In one of his last essays he attempted to clear the air once and for all. Regarding a $500 donation he received for the Association, he wrote, "I was variously accused of having bought a car and overcoat for myself and also a fur for a lady." He went on, "[E]very penny of the money was accounted for….Yet the officers and some members…were accused of stealing enough money from that $500 check to have bought and furnished the Flat Iron building" (Whitney 1933).

Whitney never gave up his dream to see a professional "colored" philanthropic performers organization. "It is still one of my dreams, a very vague dream at the present and I despair of its fulfillment during my lifetime"(Ibid.). Whitney's mournful prediction was realized when only three weeks after penning the editorial, he died of a "heart ailment" on February 12, 1934 at fifty-five years of age. To the end, he had never stopped reminding race performers that "we [are] to be a strong, self-functioning body of intelligent, progressive, self-reliant artists proud of and benefiting from the wealth and talent bestowed upon us" (Whitney 1933).

The Great Depression raged on, the Harlem Renaissance waned, and World War II was waiting in the wings. It is unclear if or when the Association formally disbanded. Whatever monies remained in its accounts were dispersed among benevolent associations. Robinson continued his philanthropy with other projects.

Sadly, no monument or statue in Florence Mills's honor was ever built. There is only an apartment building named the Florence Mills Apartments in Harlem, and of course, her grave at Woodlawn Cemetery. Beyond a doubt, it is ironic that one of the greatest performers in American theatrical history is nearly forgotten today by all save historians of theatre and music. It is even more ironic that the two men most dedicated and able to confirm her place in history were not able to collaborate to create the monument she most certainly deserves.

Notes

1 For an excellent biography, see Bill Egan, *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004.)

2 In this essay, I use the word "race" as it was used in the early 20th century by many African Americans when referring to African American performers and productions.

3 Miller was a successful producer of race vaudeville shows beginning in the 1910s and wrote, produced, and performed in many shows, the most well known of which was *The Brownskin Models*—Miller's race answer to the Ziegfeld Follies.

4 The exact amount for the check varies from around $4,600 to $8,000 throughout the dispute. My research shows that it was probably $4,646.23.

5 Prior to this time, a contribution of any size entitled the donator to full membership.

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