

Jimmy Jackson, Mars Carroll, and the Spook in the Pantry

Terence Walz

James Jackson, known as Jimmy, was a light-skinned Black man who worked for Mrs. Sally Carroll from his teenage years until she died in 1895 – a service lasting thirty or thirty-five years. He was first noted in the Carroll household in 1870 when he is listed as a “servant” aged fifteen. Born in Maryland ca. 1855, he may well have had a connection with Prince George’s County, where Sally had her roots, although Jackson is not among the names of the people we know to have lived on her parents’ farm.¹ He served her in a variety of capacities, as a waiter and probably as general factotum, and Mrs. Carroll placed great trust in him. In her will, she left him \$300 and requested that he be paid “as soon as possible.” He was also gifted some of her “common china.”

Little is known about the background of formerly enslaved workers in the Carroll household except what is provided in relevant emancipation documents, and often even less about the hired servants who worked for Mrs. Carroll in later years. Jimmy is an exception.

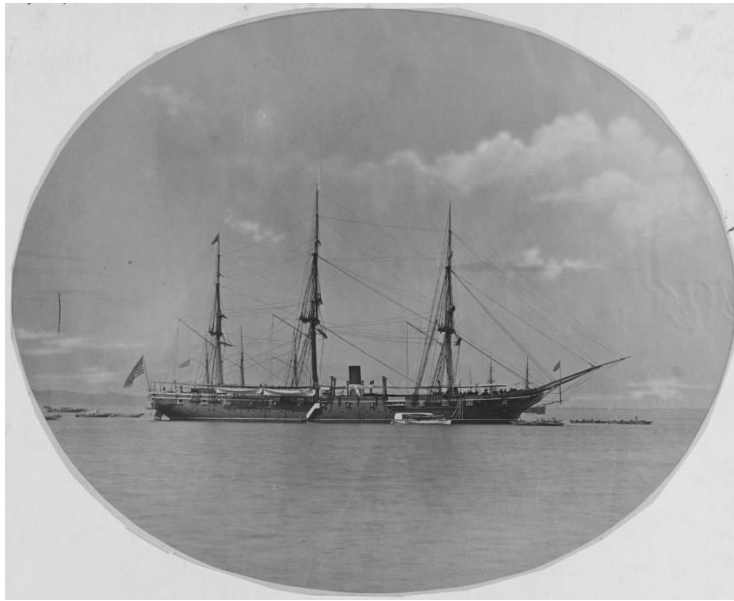
An early notice of him is found in the local newspaper, the *Evening Star*, when it was reported in September 1870 that when Jimmy fell ill, his father, William Jackson, came to visit him. In the middle of the night, William went out to the courtyard to get a drink of water from the well, and had a heart attack while at the pump. His dead body was found in the morning. The *Star* suggested that he suffered from “fits” and had one while trying to pump water from the well.² The coroner decided that an inquest was not needed, and the body of Jimmy’s father was released to his family.³ His burial and burial site are unknown.

Jimmy served the family primarily as a “waiter” or “butler” and as such is often identified in yearly Washington Directories at the address of the Carroll home on F Street. As Mrs. Carroll and her personal maid Delia Noonan aged, he may also have done much of the family shopping and have kept the stoves and fireplaces stocked with coal and wood. He may also have helped in the kitchen with the hired cook – he was apparently familiar with the Carroll’s pantry on the ground floor of their house, and he would have noticed when the grandsons of Mrs. Carroll were poking around there late at night for something to eat.

Mrs. Carroll’s grandsons were Carroll (b. 1857) and Jack Mercer (b. 1861), sons of her eldest daughter, Violetta, who lived in the house from 1862 onward. The boys’ father, Thomas S. Mercer, although trained as a doctor, was employed in later life in the Patent’s Office in Washington. The boys grew up in the Carroll home, until they were sent away to school in the 1870s. After their education was completed, they returned to live in their grandmother’s house until the early 1880s, when Carroll enlisted in the Marines and Jack went West to seek his fortune. Jimmy would have known them well, and they, vice versa.

Which leads to the second story about Jimmy and the Carroll family. This was related in a social column in the journal of the U.S. armed forces known as *The United States Army and*

Navy Journal and Gazette of the Regular and Volunteer Forces, and as relayed in that journal, the story includes language expressed in the jargon that Black people stereotypically spoke in the nineteenth century. It dates from 1882.⁴ By that time, Carroll Mercer, now 25 years old and a strapping and handsome young man who, after joining the Marines, was posted to various foreign lands. In 1882 he had been assigned to join the marine contingent sent with the U. S. Richmond to Yokohama, Japan, which had been recently opened to U.S. trade.



U. S.S. Richmond, ca. 1878 on which Carroll Mercer served as a marine on a mission to Yokohama.

Image: <https://www.history.navy.mil/>

A report circulated in the papers back home that sensationally claimed that the U.S.S. Richmond, the flagship of the new Asia Fleet, had gone missing during its long Pacific crossing. This was quickly denied by the Navy Department. However, at a late supper gathering in the Carroll home, the story goes, the topic of Carroll Mercer's whereabouts came up. Gen. S. Sprigg Carroll, a Civil War figure much admired, was at the table, as was his sister Carrie Carroll Kinney and their redoubtable mother, Mrs. Carroll. The general and his sister expressed fears that Carroll Mercer might have gone down with the ship, if the reports were true. At this point, Jimmy Jackson, though not named, spoke up.

"Deed, Mars Sprigg (Gen. C.), Mars Carroll ain't drowned, he's all right, sure." Being asked why he felt so confident he said, "Deed I knows he ain't dead. Ef dat boy was gone drowned his spook would have been prowling around the pantry late of nights arter cold grub. He *ain't* dead, kase I isn't seed his spook in the pantry."

Carroll Mercer did survive, and he continued his career with the Marines until 1890 when he resigned and, with his newly married wife, Minnie Tunis Mercer, returned to take his place in

Washington's gilded age society. In 1899, he enlisted with the Rough Riders and participated in the conquest of Cuba and later in the occupation of the Philippines.

Jimmy's life after the death of old Mrs. Carroll in 1895 is untraceable. There are several "James Jacksons" in Washington street directories in the last five years of the nineteenth century, but none can be identified with certainty as the "Jimmy" that Mrs. Carroll loved and left money for or was accustomed to finding Carroll Mercer in the pantry looking for food on a late night.

¹ Known as Northampton. A census of the families on the farm was taken in 1864; Jackson is not among them. Prince George's County, Commissioner of Slave Statistics, (Slave Statistics, Original) 1867-1869, CE404

<https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/coagsere/ce400/ce404/000000/000001/pdf/ce404-1.pdf>.

² Evening Star, September 3, 1870, p. 4; also *Daily Critic*, September 5, 1870, p. 2.

³ Evening Star, September 3, 1870, p. 4.

⁴ *United States Army and Navy Journal and Gazette of the Regular and Volunteer Forces*, April 8, 1882, p. 3.