



# The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia

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## The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black **Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia**

#### The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum **Philadelphia**

Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia, first published in 1841, was written by Joseph Willson, a southern black man who had moved to Philadelphia. He wrote this book to convince whites that the African-American community in his adopted city did indeed have a class structure, and he offers advice to his black readers about how they should use their privileged status. The significance of Willson's account lies in its sophisticated analysis of the issues of class and race in Philadelphia. It is all the more important in that it predates W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* by more than half a century.

Julie Winch has written a substantial introduction and prepared extensive annotation. She identifies the people Willson wrote about and gives readers a sense of Philadelphia's multifaceted and richly textured African American community. The Elite of Our People will interest urban, antebellum, and African-American historians, as well as individuals with a general interest in African-American history.

This volume has withstood the test of time. It remains readable. Joseph Willson was well read, articulate, and had a keen eye for detail. His message is as timely today as it was in 1841. The people he wrote about were remarkable individuals whose lives were as complex as his own.



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