



**Barry Lawrence Ruderman
Antique Maps Inc.**

7407 La Jolla Boulevard
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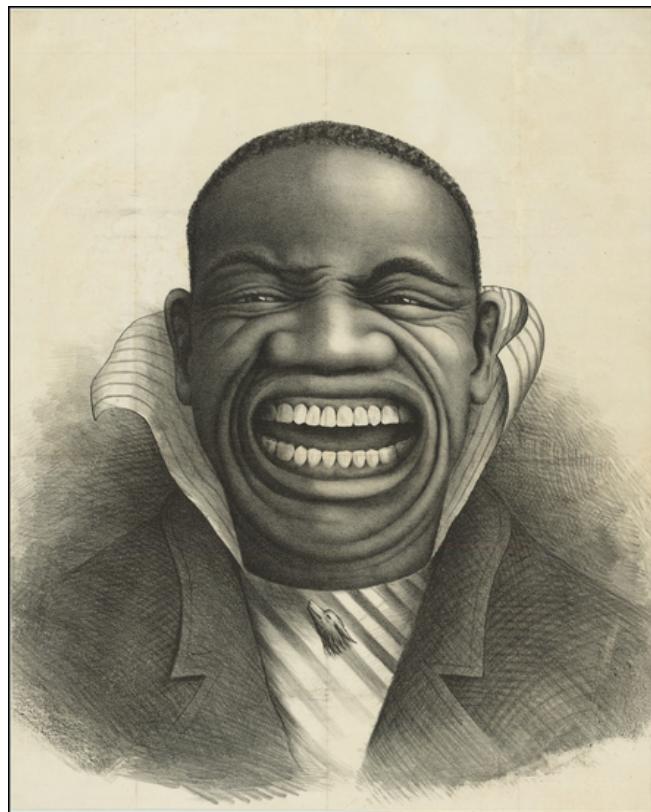
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(Billy Kersands)

Stock#: 55220
Map Maker: Anonymous

Date: 1875 circa
Place: n.p.
Color: Uncolored
Condition: VG
Size: 16 x 20 inches

Price: SOLD



Description:

A Previously Unkown Image of One of America's Most Famous 19th Century Black Comedians

Rare lithographic portrait of the African-American comedian and dancer, Billy Kersands.

Comparing this image to other known images of Kersands, this appears to show him at a relatively young age. Kersands had become a marquis headliner by 1875.

Given the size of the image and the lack of text, we surmise that this image would likely have been produced for a traveling show and used locally to paste onto printed broadside advertising for local shows.

Billy Kersands (c. 1842-1915) was the most popular black comedian of his day, best known for his work in blackface minstrelsy. In addition to his skillful acrobatics, dancing, singing, and instrument playing, Kersands was renowned for his comic routines involving his large mouth, which he could contort comically or fill with objects such as billiard balls or saucers. His stage persona was that of the dim-witted black



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man of the type that had been popularized in white minstrel shows. Modern commentators cite him as one of the earliest black entertainers to have faced the dilemma of striking a balance between social satire and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes.

Kersands began performing with traveling minstrel troupes in the early 1860s. As black minstrelsy gained popularity, Kersands became its biggest star. In 1879, he earned about \$15 a week, but by 1882, he was reportedly earning \$80, only slightly less than a featured white minstrel. He was a hit with both white and black audiences, particularly in the South. Tom Fletcher wrote that "In the South, a minstrel show without Billy Kersands is like a circus without elephants."

Over his career, Kersands played with many of the major black minstrel troupes. He was a member of Sam Hague's Georgia Minstrels, along with Charles Hicks and Bob Height. When the company returned from an English tour in 1872, Charles Callender purchased the troupe and renamed it Callender's Georgia Minstrels. When Kersands and other popular troupe members demanded higher pay and more favorable treatment, Callender dismissed them. They quit to form their own ensemble, a move Callender characterized as theft. The company did poorly, and Kersands and most of the others returned to Callender. During his years with Callender's Georgia Minstrels, Kersands regularly featured in the military burlesques that regularly ended the first act beginning in 1875 or 1876. These sketches earned him renown for his acrobatic feats of drumming.

In 1885, Kersands began his own minstrel troupe, named Kersands' Minstrels. Charles Hicks was the manager, but he left to form his own group after little more than a year. Kersands' Minstrels was well known for its marching band, and the group led a Mardi Gras parade in 1886. Kersands offered \$1000 to any rival who could outmarch them. He also continued to play engagements with other companies, including Richard and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels in 1890 as one of "The Vestibule Car Porters and Drum Majors".

In 1904, Kersands performed in an urban, black-produced show in the East. He only stayed for a short time, instead preferring the blackface minstrelsy he knew best. He formed another troupe and took up touring primarily in the South. Kersands answered the inevitable question of why he had not made the move to vaudeville thus: "All of my money came from the people of the South, the white and the colored, while playing down there. Whether they meant it or not, the way I was treated by them, and still am, I feel at home. I also make a good living with no worries."

Despite Kersands's reinforcement of negative black stereotypes, very few African Americans disdained his act. Part of his appeal for them lay in his mixing of elements of African American folklore into his show in a way that would appeal to his black audience but be ignored or derided by whites. "Old Aunt Jemima", one of his signature songs, serves as a good example. The song exists in three texts, two published 1875 and



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one in 1880, suggesting that Kersands made up verses as he sang. All three versions begin in a church, a locale that white minstrels tended to avoid. The 1875 texts describe charismatic black worship practices, but the 1880 edition begins with a black character fleeing a white church because they "prayed so long".[Verses from the song soon entered the African American tradition and appeared in later collections of folklore. Other songs Kersands performed featured African American elements like talking animals and weak-versus-strong match-ups. His popularity led many theatre owners to relax rules limiting black patrons to specific sections of the playhouse.

Despite weighing over 200 pounds, Kersands was also a talented dancer and acrobat. His trademark dance was Essence of Old Virginia or Virginia Essence, which he may have introduced. The dance later developed into the soft shoe. He was also known for the Buck and Wing. His dance routines helped cement such dance acts as fixtures in later vaudeville and Hollywood routines.

Detailed Condition:

Several tears repaired on the verso. Evidence of old folds.