

Hope, a Photo Essay

By: Djeneba Aduayom

In the history of the United States, black Americans were the only group for whom it was ever illegal to learn to read or write. And so when emancipation finally came, schools and colleges were some of the first institutions that the freed people clamored to build. Black Americans believed that education meant liberation, and just eight months after the Civil War, the first historically black college opened in the South.

Howard University is among the most venerable of these institutions. Chartered in Washington in 1867, the school has educated some of the nation's most notable black Americans, including Toni Morrison, Andrew Young, Zora Neale Hurston and Paul Laurence Dunbar. But where Howard has had perhaps the most indelible impact on black lives — and on the country — has been its law school. Leading up to the civil rights movement, Howard was virtually the only law school in the South that served black students. It became an incubator for those who would use the law to challenge racial apartheid in the North and the South and help make the country more fair and democratic. Many of the architects of campaigns for black equality either taught at or graduated from Howard, including Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Thurgood Marshall.

The school continues that legacy today, producing more black lawyers than perhaps any other institution. In May, it graduated its 148th class, and the four newly minted lawyers featured here were among the graduates. All of them descended from people enslaved in this country. We asked Kenyatta D. Berry, a genealogist who specializes in tracing black Americans' roots back to slavery, to research their families and tell each of them, and us, something about one of those enslaved ancestors.

What Berry could and could not find reveals its own story about the occluded heritage of black Americans. Because enslaved people were treated as chattel, they are rarely found in government birth and death records but instead must be traced through the property ledgers of the people who owned them. Berry often has to work backward through documents, locating ancestors in the 1870 census, when they were counted as people for the first time, or through the records of the Freedmen's Bureau. Because 95 percent of enslaved people were illiterate at the end of the Civil War, the chances of finding old letters — or diaries or family trees stuffed in Bibles — are exceedingly low. And so for these graduates, like many black Americans, the holes in their family histories can outnumber the answers.

Still, more than any written record, today's nearly 44 million black Americans are themselves the testimony of the resiliency of those who were enslaved, of their determination to fight and survive so that future generations would have the opportunities that they never would. The story of black America is one of tragedy and triumph. These graduates represent nothing less than their ancestors' wildest dreams.

— *Nikole Hannah-Jones*

ALT Text: Elijah Port with his father



Elijah Porter, 26

(With his father, Elijah)

Hometown: Atlanta

Post-law-school plans: He has been hired as a corporate associate at a law firm in Mountain View, Calif., where he aims to become a partner in five years.

Elijah Porter's ancestor Moses Turner was born in April 1839 in Georgia. At the time of the 1870 census, he and his wife, Sarah, had five children between 6 months and 9 years. The family lived on 265 acres valued at \$750 (\$14,665 in today's dollars). Turner was an employer, and the farm produced cotton, sweet potatoes, molasses, butter and Indian corn.

By 1910 the Turners had no mortgage and were living with three daughters who worked as laborers on their farm. Turner died in 1917 and did not leave a will; his wife was the administrator of his estate.

"The way the story is always told is that we were slaves, we got free and now here we are and we didn't make any positive contributions to America," Porter said. "So when I am reading about Moses Turner, not only is he a landowner but he is contributing to the American economy, he knows agriculture, he is married and has children. I was really in shock because I always wanted to know my history." Porter also found some irony in the story of Turner's death. "The interesting thing was he died without a will," he said. "The story of me becoming an attorney was already written before I knew about it."

— *Wadzanai Mhute*

ALT Text: Septembra LeSane, her mother, and grandmother.



Septembra LeSane, 29

(With her grandmother Leola, left, and her mother, Debra, middle)

Hometown: Pompano Beach, Fla.

Post-law-school plans: To start a practice focusing on environmental civil rights and entertainment law.

Septembra LeSane's maternal great-great-grandmother Georgia Wilcox was born after the Civil War, in 1885, to Sandy Wilcox, who was born into slavery around 1854, in Wilcox County, Ga. (Sandy married Artimisha Roundtree in 1873, but Roundtree is not listed in any available documents as Georgia's mother.) Georgia's paternal grandfather, Silas Wilcox, was born enslaved in 1822 in Georgia. In 1867 Wilcox took an oath of allegiance to the United States in order to register to vote in Pulaski County, Ga. According to the 1880 Agricultural Census Schedule, Silas was a sharecropper.

"It gave me chills," LeSane said. "Chills to know that slavery was not that long ago, to feel the connection. My grandmother knew her grandmother, and her grandmother was the daughter of slaves."

LeSane is one of seven children. She said her family used to return to Georgia for vacations when she was younger and they walked through cotton fields. She remembers the vastness of the land and thinking of her ancestors working in the hot sun on the same land. Learning more about Georgia Wilcox and her other ancestors, she said, "brought those images back to me. It showed me what they endured; they never wavered, they endured, so we wouldn't experience any of that. As a sixth-generation descendant of slavery, I am essentially a part of the first generation of descendants to carry the torch that was lit by my ancestors into true freedom."

— *Wadzanai Mhute*

ALT Text: Ky'Eisha Penn with her mother



Ky'Eisha Penn, 28

(With her mother, Teresa, right)

Hometown: Miami and Augusta, Ga.

Post-law-school plans: To be a civil rights lawyer; she begins a fellowship at the A.C.L.U. in New Jersey in September.

Ky'Eisha Penn's ancestors on her mother's side include Phillip Officer, who was born into slavery on Oct. 18, 1837, in Tennessee. His unusual surname apparently connects him to a nearby landowner: The 1850 U.S. Census Agricultural Schedule indicates that James C. Officer had 19 slaves, one of them a boy whose age matched Phillip's.

By the time of the 1870 census, Phillip Officer was working as a farm laborer, probably a sharecropper, which would explain why census records indicate he was living in the household of a woman named Sarah Turney. Within a decade, Officer was married to a woman named Emeline (her maiden name and origins are unknown) with two sons and had become a landowner himself. According to the 1880 Agricultural Schedule, he owned 66 acres, and his farm was worth \$400 (\$10,045 in today's dollars); his livestock and machinery were valued at \$200 (\$5,022). By 1900, Officer owned his farm outright.

"My mom and I were dissecting this history, and we were wowed by it," Penn said. "He was a slave, but when he died he owned land." Her ancestor's story resonated with her, she said, as a person who was

raised by a single mother with limited resources and who has just graduated with a dual degree in law from Howard and a master's in African-American history from Florida A.& M. "I wanted to be challenged by the history, molded by the history and then become a part of it," she said. "I wanted so much more for my life and for my children in the future, to work hard and set a legacy. My ancestors were doing that, they were not born in the right circumstances but made something by the time they died."

— *Wadzanai Mhute*

Alt Text: Yasiman Montgomery and her parents



Yasiman Montgomery, 24

(Between her father, Alfred, and her mother, Cecily)

Hometown: Washington, D.C.

Post-law-school plans: She will work as a litigator in New York, after which she intends to return to Washington to work in the federal government.

Charles McDuffie Wilder, Yasiman Montgomery's ancestor on her father's side, was born around 1835 in Sumter, S.C., and is absent from public records for the first several decades of his life.

By 1866, Wilder was a member of the South Carolina General Assembly, where he represented Richland County throughout Reconstruction. He was also appointed a deputy marshal — the U.S. marshal for

South Carolina, J.P.M. Epping, said he “could not find a white man who could take the oath who had honesty and capacity enough for the position.”

In 1869, Wilder was named postmaster for Columbia, S.C., a presidential appointment that required confirmation by the State Senate, becoming the first known freedman to receive such an appointment. Coverage in *The Columbia Daily Phoenix* included this paragraph: “Charles M. Wilder, the newly appointed postmaster at Columbia, is an intelligent colored man, fully competent to discharge the duties of the office to which he has been appointed, and is highly esteemed, as a colored man, by the whole community. The only objection made against him by opponents of the present Federal and State Governments is, that he is a negro.” He held the job for 16 years, under four presidents. During this span Wilder was also a member of the Columbia City Council and attended the National Republican Conventions as a delegate.

Montgomery grew up in Washington and knew of Wilder, who, she said, a lot of people in the area trace their history back to. “Reading about it makes me feel more purposeful,” she said, “because I am attached to that legacy.” She credits her parents, Alfred and Cecily, for instilling in her an appreciation for her heritage. “They were older and grew up in segregation,” she said. “They took me to look at archives together; they wanted me to learn my history. I have a lot of pride in being black and that’s because I know my heritage. It’s important to start the conversation before slavery. We didn’t just pop up in America, we were part of a culture.”

— *Wadzanai Mhute*