School Ties And Social Networks

The Rise Of 'The New Negro' In The Age of Jim Crow

This is the fourth in a series examining the social and political conditions that evolved from Virginia's foundational election of 1867. Those local legacies are tracked through the lives of those first-time Black voters and their children.

At the close of February's Black History Month, a final coda will witness the evolution of Lexington's two Black cemeteries. All are co-written by Rockbridge Historical Society Executive Director Eric Wilson, and RHS Secretary Larry Spurgeon. See RockbridgeHistory.org for extended versions of the first three articles.

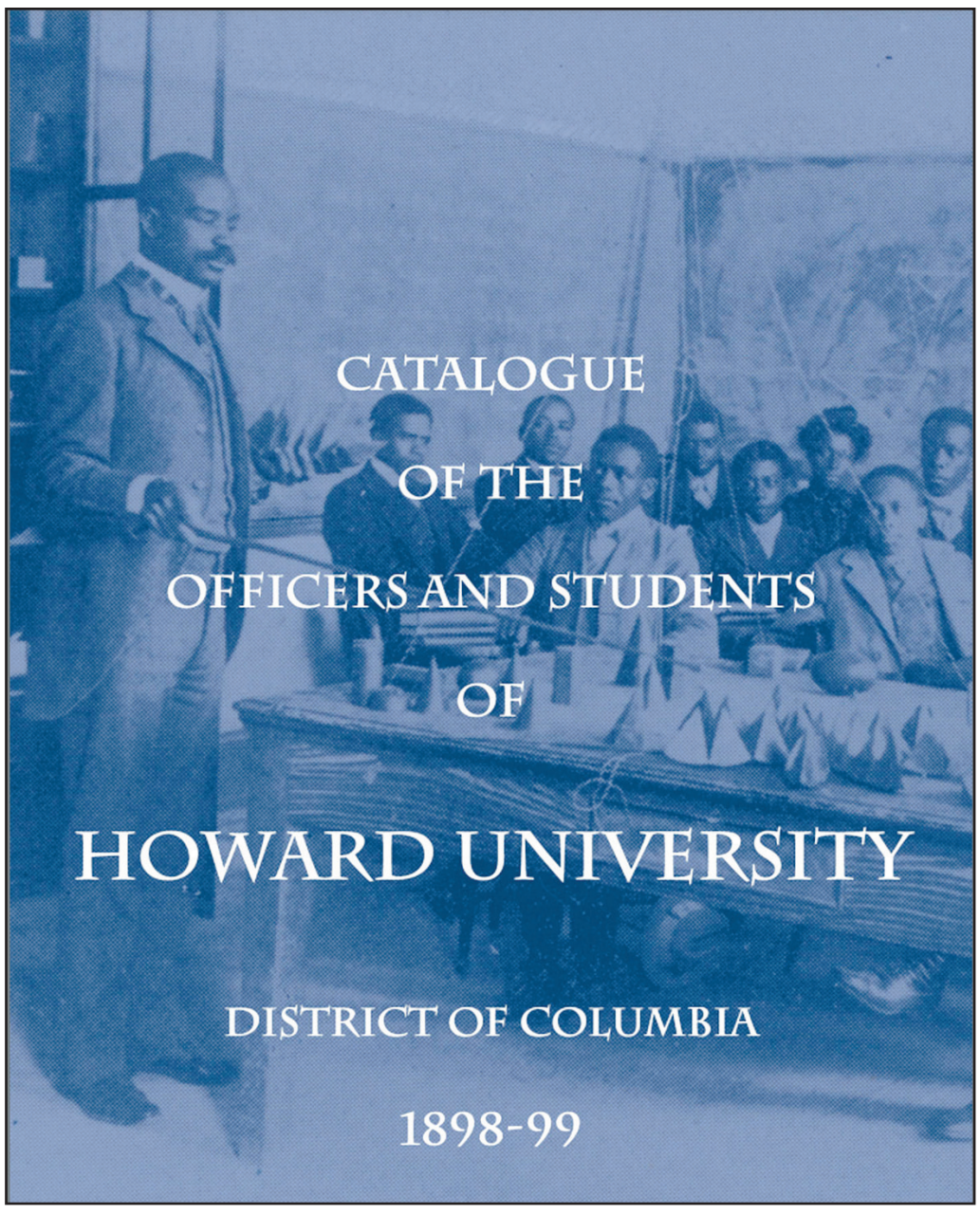
'The New Negro'

To many ears today, the phrase jars a bit: "The New Negro." A little too singular, or antique.

First coined in 1894 by white Oberlin graduate abolitionist the Rev. W.E.C. Wright, then quickly amplified in 1895 by John Mitchell (editor of Richmond's most prominent Black newspaper), "The New Negro" would be canonized as archetype and title of philosopher and art critic Alain Locke's anthology.

Commonly associated with an emergent Black middle class of writers, artists, intellectuals and urban professionals, its dynamic rise is often associated with the Harlem Renaissance. It's been recently, concisely characterized by Henry Louis Gates Jr. – in his 2017 PBS series, "Reconstruction" – as "Black America's first superhero."

In the shadow of "The Great Migration," a 20th century diaspora of southern Blacks to northern cities, the dynamics and relevance of "The New Negro" also drew many rural Black Virginians. A notable number were nurtured in Lexington, then left their small southern town to advance through a range of regional colleges and universities, often drawn to known educational and professional circuits in Washington, D.C. Their new, accomplished biographies enrich not just our appreciation of lesser known Black lives in Rockbridge, but of the community networks evolving for everyone here, through two generations after the Civil War.



AT LEAST SEVEN students from Lexington attended Howard University between 1894 and 1908, including Charles Harper.

School Ties

In the 1880s, the feasibility and rewards of a Virginia public school system were hotly debated, as new political parties jockeyed for constitutional power, centrally contesting the handling of state debts. Gradually, new social priorities and economic recovery (still beset by the national financial Panics of 1873 and 1893) shaped an array of one-room country schools dotting outlying communities around Rockbridge, serving a wider range of white children who couldn't afford the academies in town, or elsewhere.

Schools for the county's Black children were fewer and poorer. But during the uneven arrival of Emancipation, a Freedmen's School was established on Randolph Street, next to the town's Black Methodist Church. It was largely staffed at first by white teachers and missionaries from the North; some persisted and some left after periodic local attacks by students and citizens.

By the later 19th century, it was increasingly crowded, in need of repair, yet it established new foundations of literacy and ambition. Students were mentored by a core of native faculty, many of whom were themselves graduates of what would be called, on early 20th century diplomas, the "Lexington Colored Graded School."

Native to Lexington, then returning to teach, were William Lee Washington Jr. and Charles Sumner Harper. Born in 1872 and 1880, William and Charles signaled an emergent local pattern: students whose early success in this growing school, with family or congregational support, then allowed them to progress to preparatory academies (advanced high schools), liberal arts colleges, and teacher and professional training schools at Oberlin College in Ohio, Storer College in West Virginia, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Among them, are more locally well known figures such as the Rev. Lylburn Downing (born enslaved in Lexington in 1862, earning theological degrees at Lincoln); and Eliza Bannister Walker (born in Natural Bridge in 1874, trained as a nurse at Howard's Freedmen's Hospital). William Washington Jr. first set out for Harpers Ferry to attend Storer College. After his preparatory studies there, William then earned his B.A. at Oberlin College, age 28, decorated with multiple prizes for oratory, and followed by older brother Francis.

In the 1902 Lexington Gazette, Washington and Harper were heralded as faculty at the Lexington Colored School, William as principal; they would have attended only a few years earlier. They joined two other teachers noted as longtime veterans: Henrietta C. Evans and Nannie Clay. Soon, William left for new teaching appointments and a Divinity Degree at (now) Virginia Union University. We will find him again, in Washington, D.C.

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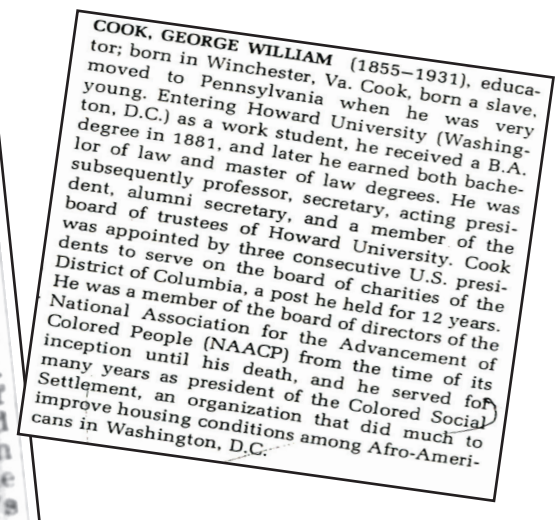
ABOVE, the "Lexington Colored Grade School" (as seen in this circa 1920 photo from RHS Collections) on Randolph Street next to the Randolph Street United Methodist Church started after the Civil War as a Freedmen's School and was managed in part by trustees and parents from the local Black community. The soon overcrowded school was finally replaced by the new, larger brick building on top of Diamond Street, now Lexington City Schools' central office. AT LEFT are Lexington native Coralie Franklin and husband George W. Cook (as seen in this photo from the National Baha'i Archives). A member of the Baha'i Faith Assembly in Washington, Coralie often wrote for its international monthly magazine, contributing articles advocating for the Faith's inclusive, revelatory religious vision, and its explicit rejections of racism and nationalism. BELOW are a notice of Coralie Cook's celebrated speech on Women's Rights, "Daughters of Men," in the Washington Times, April 20, 1904; and the 1931 obituary notice for George W. Cook.

MRS. COOK MAKES APPEAL FOR WOMAN'S RIGHTS

"The Daughters of Men" was the subject of the lecture of Coralie Franklin Cook last evening before the Bethel Literary and Historical Association at Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church, Eleventh and R Streets northwest. Mrs. Cook traced the gradual rise of mankind from the primitive state and showed what an important part woman had played in this development. She ended with a strong appeal for woman's rights. The Aeolian, Mandolin, Banjo and Guitar Club gave choice musical selections during the evening.



COOK, GEORGE WILLIAM (1855–1931), educator; born in Winchester, Va. Cook, born a slave, moved to Pennsylvania when he was very young. Entering Howard University (Washington, D.C.) as a work student, he received a B.A. degree in 1881, and later he earned both bachelor of law and master of law degrees. He was subsequently professor, secretary, acting president, alumni secretary, and a member of the board of trustees of Howard University. Cook was appointed by three consecutive U.S. presidents to serve on the board of charities of the District of Columbia, a post he held for 12 years. He was a member of the board of directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from the time of its inception until his death, and he served for many years as president of the Colored Social Settlement, an organization that did much to improve housing conditions among Afro-Americans in Washington, D.C.

Vote

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Born to 19-year-old single mother, Mary L. Harper, and only 22 himself, Charles had already graduated from Lincoln, teacher-certified by Morgan State. He'd leave Lexington a second time to earn two more advanced theology degrees, first at Howard (B.D., 1908, and awarded the Senior Pomeroy Prize) and again at Lincoln (M.A., 1914).

Although they didn't stay long in Lexington, their instructional influence – locally familiar models of "The New Negro" – can also be reckoned by the growth curve of their younger peers and students. In just one opportunity channel, at least seven students from Lexington appear in the student rolls of Howard University between 1894 and 1908. They enrolled in its preparatory academy and across a wide range of divisions: liberal arts, theology, law, dental and medical schools. In later decades, William would teach on its distinguished faculty himself.

From Slave, to Storer, to Suffragist

Another local avatar of educational advancement was Coralie Franklin Cook, born enslaved in Lexington during the first year of the Civil War, to Albert and Mary Edmondson Franklin. A 1902 article about Coralie in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle intoned that her parents had been "owned by Southern aristocratic families of a high type, and had been in close daily relations with them."

Coralie's mother Mary and her seven siblings, along with their mother Malinda Colbert Edmondson, were owned by the family of Lexington's James McDowell, governor of Virginia, 1843-1846. Malinda's father, Brown Colbert, had been sold by Thomas Jefferson to Lexington entrepreneur John Jordan; Brown's own mother, Betty Brown, was a half-sister to Sally Hemings.

Albert was listed among the near 1,000 local Black men who cast their first votes in the Virginia election of 1867. By 1869, the Franklins decided to move to Winchester, then soon to Harpers Ferry where Coralie and her older sister Mary could be educated. When Albert died there in 1878, according to that same 1902 article, he held "the respect of the entire community." Alongside his wife, he's buried just a few blocks from the site of John Brown's raid.

Coralie lived through many of America's greatest transitions: from Emancipation and the end of the Civil War; through industrialization and the Great Depression; seeing the costs of two global World Wars and the segregated sacrifices of Black troops at home and abroad. Although her marks on the national stage have often been chronicled, her earliest years here have been effectively unrecognized.

In 1880, Coralie graduated from Storer College, the first known Hemings descendant to earn a college degree. Opened as a teacher-training college in 1865, Storer soon hired Coralie as its first female faculty member of color. She taught English and elocution there until 1893, before moving to Washington, D.C., to head its "Home for Colored Orphans and Aged Women."

In time, Coralie was appointed to the faculty at Howard University, where she would chair the Department of Oratory. In 1899, she married George W. Cook, valedictorian at Howard in 1881. He earned three more degrees there, variously serving as a Howard professor, dean, university trustee and acting president for 58 of the venerable institution's first 66 years.

A longer article about Coralie is being written for RHS' Local Black Histories page, drawing from materials included about her in Monticello's "Getting Word: African-American Oral History Project," a still-growing archive foundationally shaped by Lexington resident and research partner Lucia "Cinder" Stanton.

Coralie Franklin Cook would become close colleagues and collaborator with Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, author of "The Souls of Black Folk," and one of the most prominent American intellectuals and activists of the 20th century. In 1915, she was a featured panelist in a star-studded NAACP symposium, "Votes for Women," its lengthy remarks published in DuBois' magazine, The Crisis. In 1932, DuBois wrote to her at Howard, asking her help in implementing a "racial attitudes" curriculum, given her leadership on the D.C. School Board.

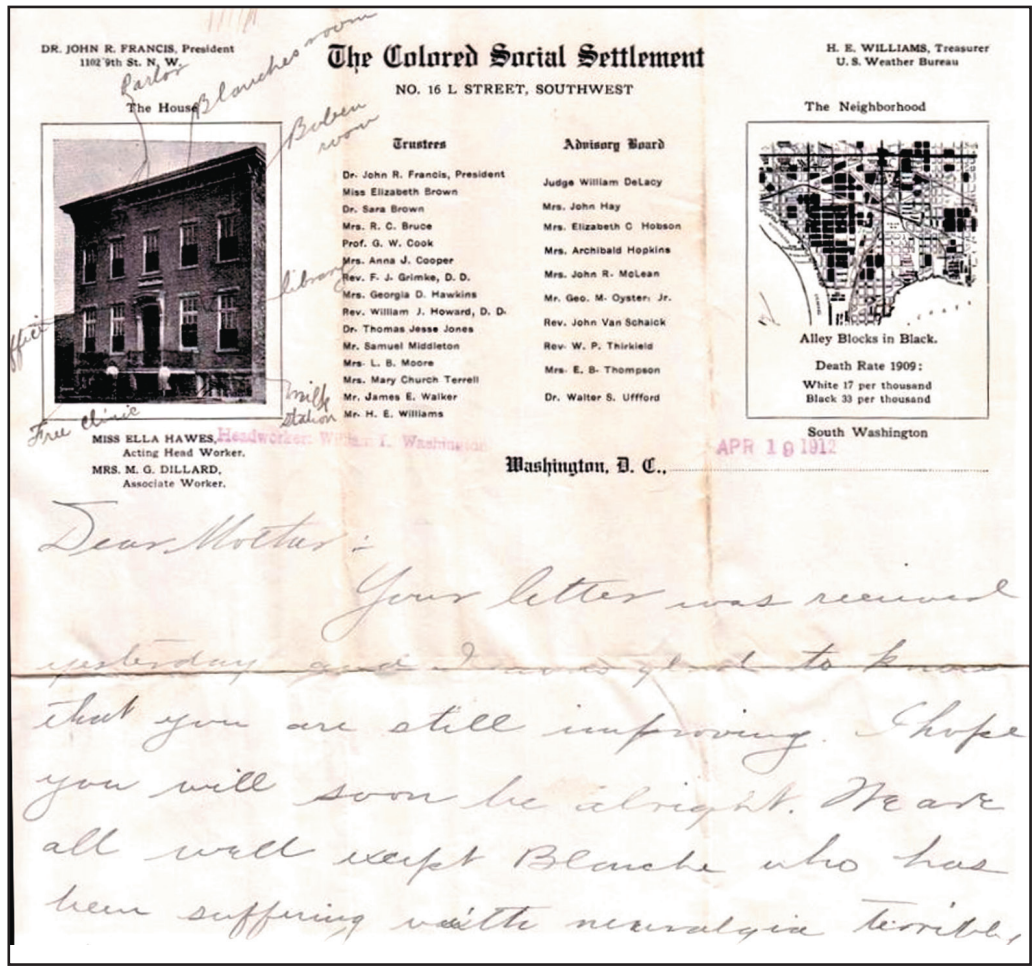
Most widely recognized as suffragist, Cook's political vision – and her career-long commitments to advancing the performing arts – can be seen in a speech delivered still 15 years ahead of the 19th amendment. Titled "Daughters of Men," her 1904 address to the Bethel Literary and Historical Association "traced the gradual rise of mankind from the primitive state and showed what an important role women played in this development. She ended with a strong appeal for woman's rights."

Coralie was a close friend of Susan B. Anthony and, ever the orator, gave a memorable speech at Anthony's 80th birthday celebration in 1900. Two years later, Anthony returned the tribute by hosting a "brilliant reception" for Coralie. But in later years, Cook became disenchanted with the Women's Suffrage Association, because it had turned its back on women of color.

She was a charter member of the National Association of Colored Women (formed 10 years before the NAACP) that campaigned for improved education and child welfare and against Jim Crow laws and lynching. Using her arresting public speaking skills, she'd learned how to network and partner with others in common cause, to resist long-standing cultural injustice.

Among Coralie's notable allies were two other suffragists and educators: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell (both Oberlin alumnae, further stitching school ties with William and others in D.C.). Along with fabled Presbyterian preacher Rev. F.J. Grimke (like DuBois, a co-founder of the NAACP), they appear as board members on the 1912 masthead of Washington's recently established Colored Social Settlement, a social services agency for both children and adults, similar to the YMCA/YWCA. Coralie's husband George, also noted on the Settlement Board in 1912, would serve as its president for many years, and as a national board member of the NAACP from 1914 until his death in 1931.

Together, this team would hire William Washington Jr. to run a social services agency – established in 1902 and similar to the YMCA/YWCA – that provided nutritional, educational, training support, and also advocated for public housing reform. All together, their collective and often collaborative efforts as dynamic American leaders supported each other through the constraints of Jim Crow, propelling themselves and thousands of others to new educational, economic, professional and political opportunities.



DR. JOHN R. FRANCIS, President
1102 9th St. N. W.

The Colored Social Settlement
NO. 16 L STREET, SOUTHWEST

H. E. WILLIAMS, Treasurer
U. S. Weather Bureau

The House

Trustees

Dr. John R. Francis, President
Miss Elizabeth Brown
Dr. Sara Brown
Mrs. R. C. Bruce
Prof. G. W. Cook
Mrs. Anna J. Cooper
Rev. F. J. Grimke, D. D.
Mrs. Georgia D. Hawkins
Rev. William J. Howard, D. D.
Dr. Thomas Jesse Jones
Mr. Samuel Middleton
Mrs. L. B. Moore
Mrs. Mary Church Terrell
Mr. James E. Walker
Mr. H. E. Williams

Advisory Board

Judge William DeLacy
Mrs. John Hay
Mrs. Elizabeth C Hobson
Mrs. Archibald Hopkins
Mrs. John R. McLean
Mr. Geo. M. Oyster, Jr.
Rev. John Van Schaick
Rev. W. P. Thirkield
Mrs. E. B. Thompson
Dr. Walter S. Uffford

The Neighborhood

Alley Blocks in Black.
Death Rate 1909:
White 17 per thousand
Black 33 per thousand
South Washington

MISS ELLA HAWES,
Acting Head Worker.
MRS. M. G. DILLARD,
Associate Worker.

Washington, D. C., APR 19 1912

Dear Mother:-

Your letter was received yesterday and I was glad to know that you are still improving. Hope you will soon be alright. We are all well except Blanche who has been suffering with neuralgia terrible,

THIS Washington. D.C., Colored Social Settlement board stationery includes a handwritten letter from its new head, William Washington, to his mother Cornelia, April 19, 1912. (This letter is described in detail in the final section of today's story.)

Looking Back To Lexington, And Ahead

To close, we have a more personal post-script from "Willie," mailed home to Lexington on April 19, 1912. Writing to mother Cornelia on the Settlement's stationery, William describes his new job; his wife Sadie's new workspace as assistant head; their daughters' new nursery and own latest good moves; the new motorcycle his board has invested to help him reach more neighborhoods in need. Lots, indeed, that's new.

But chiefly, the breezy four page letter turns thoughts back to Rockbridge. He assures his sick mother that the promised money "to pay on my note" will be sent in three weeks.

At greater length, 39-year-old William more assuredly stage-directs plans for a next wave of Washingtons to come settle in Washington. He's using his influence at the Settlement to recruit his 23-year-old sister to work there, too: "I hope to have Elizabeth with me as a teacher of Kindergarten and Cooking."

Puzzling out other moves in family planning, he proposes to "send Bob to school here instead of Hampton. Eliz. begs me not to send her there. But hasn't she done well?"

Looking out for Nelson, age 18, the youngest of 12 siblings, William maps out another plan, also routed through the Social Settlement and educational options: "I can get the janitor work for him for $12 per month and he will have plenty of chance to go to school or take a mechanical course."

The details reveal the needs and opportunities of a maturing family, William and his 11 siblings all born the generation after Emancipation. But the dynamics are broadly familiar as the patterns of cultural growth: the interplay of leaders and followers shaping not only families, but communities and countries.

William's words show the attentions of an established son, writing to an aging parent, and keenly looking out for siblings now ready to find their own footing in the world as young adults. Yet in important ways, they also echo and extend a classic American immigrant narrative, where some new arrivals variously work to bring others with them, while some look to return home, and some neither stay nor return, but keep moving to new places, positions.

William Washington, Jr. and Coralie Franklin Cook were both buried in the historic Lincoln Memorial Cemetery south of Washington, D.C., rather than their native Rockbridge.

But this series' final article will return to the story of Lexington's two Black cemeteries. Alongside the ancestors of many in our community today, some of William and Coralie's kin were buried there during their own lifetimes; others, unrecorded, in generations before. Some of those graves were marked, some moved, many now invisible. Whether carved in stone, printed in national newspapers, or inscribed in the ledger-books of Rockbridge's 1867 Electors: those names continue to reveal new and rich family histories, and to illuminate the complicated civic struggles to mark and manage our memorial landscapes.