

Article

On Black Women, Memory, and History: Inserting Lillie Thomas Hines and Eddie Florence Gray into the Historical Narrative

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Abstract

This article introduces my mother and maternal grandmother into the American story. I bring together sources like the census and family bible, documented history, and my memory to demonstrate that genealogy and family history expand the archive on black women and the black family. I also reflect on the way history and memory are dichotomized and argue that autobiography/memoir holds a key to freeing black women's history from the violence of the archive.

Keywords: archive; autobiography/memoir; dissemblance; history vs. memory; subjectivity vs. objectivity; social history

1. Introduction

Slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere. They were in southern households and in Southern fields but the sources are silent about female status in the slave community and the bondwoman's self-perception. In fact, the material sheds little light upon the way sex and race shaped her self-concept. ... A consequence of the double jeopardy and powerlessness is the black woman's invisibility. Much of what is important to black Americans is not visible to whites, and much of what is important to women is not visible to men. Whites wrote most of antebellum America's records and African American males wrote just about all of the antebellum records left by blacks. To both groups the female slave's world was peripheral. (Deborah Gray [White 1985](#), *Ar'n't I A Woman*)

I have been preoccupied with the archive for some time. Two years after the publication of *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, the book from which my opening quote is taken, I wrote an article for the *Journal of American History* pointing out the source problem that confronted historians of African American women ([White 1985, 1987](#)). Black women were, I reported, the “missing character” in the emerging fields of African American and women's history, indeed in the history of the American nation. Part of the problem had to do with the archive. Those who recognized that the inclusion of black woman's history would enrich American history were hamstrung by an archive that invisibilized their subjects. Because it is dependent on sources written by people who thought black woman irrelevant, the very people who used violence and intimidation to keep black women from producing their own sources, the archive reproduces and reflects the way black women are devalued, indeed dismissed, in the contemporary world. In “Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History,” in the *Journal of American History*, I noted that the sources that did exist were submerged in the papers of white people and black men, or they were dismissed because historians devalued the African American oral tradition in favor of written records. I noted also that they were sparse



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because black women were justifiably fearful of handing over documents that could be, and often were, used to vilify them. Even though much has changed—in large part because of a change in historical methods (Hartman 2008; Fuentes 2016), the opening and mining of new traditional and non-traditional source material, and the rise of social history that centers the history of “ordinary” and subaltern people—when it comes to getting at the subjectivity of black women, it is still the case that, as historian Annette Gordon-Reed writes, “the archive can be maddening.” (Gordon-Reed 2020).

In the introduction to *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*, I once again took up the issue of the archive, this time in an examination of why most educated African American women steered clear of the field of professional history until after the mid-twentieth century freedom rights movements. Besides the fact that could-be black female historians were faced with the impossible task of proving what was *not* recorded in archival documents deemed legitimate by powerful white male historians—namely the sexual exploitation of black women by white men—there was, and is still, the problem that archival documents, written almost entirely by white men and women, reinforce the stereotypes of promiscuity, and indolent malevolent motherhood (Lerner 1973b). There was and still is the perennial problem of dissemblance, the perfected practice of hiding one’s real self behind a mask of respectability so as to make one’s subjectivity impenetrable (White 2008). Even if black women, or anyone else, wanted to write the black woman’s history—and by extension, the history of the black family—how could they get behind the masks?

Recent attempts have taken the historical profession by storm. Family history, for example, has given professional historians a new appreciation for oral history and memory. By itself, family history enabled new ways of conceptualizing history and dealing with ordinary people, but DNA sequencing has enabled new connections to the past, and because it has brought both geneticists and laypeople into the fold, it has redefined the definition of a historian. Family history, say scholars Matthew Stallard and Jerome de Groot, increases our understanding of the individual’s relationship to the past. Once people contextualize the stories and discoveries made about their ancestors, they engage with the past differently. “Family history,” they write, “has a radical impact on the way in which historical individuals are perceived, and this personal engagement tends to engender a bottom-up, microlevel view of social history.” It makes people reflect on how the “lived experiences of past individuals were dictated and shaped by their circumstances and the social mores of the time.” Despite many of the problems associated with DNA sequencing, it too is especially helpful for researchers investigating women because it enables researchers to reclaim their female ancestors who “generally get kind of left out of it all,” because written records lose them when they “become somebody’s wife and somebody’s mother.” (Stallard and Groot 2020). As individuals discover new family members through genetic genealogy, and uncover family facts through traditional and non-traditional sources, their own personal history and stories make more sense; memories take on new meaning and, for better or worse, they connect themselves to new communities in ways that previously seemed unimaginable. Because family history and genetic genealogy connect people to the past in a way that make memories come alive, they challenge, indeed change, the idea of history as an objective endeavor undertaken by disinterested practitioners aiming to reconstruct a past devoid of emotion. I maintain that in putting “the self” back into history, memoir and autobiography hold incredible promise for getting at not just the history of African American women but at their subjectivity. It allows us to peek behind the veil of dissemblance and lower the masks of respectability.¹

This is what this article aims to do: add subjectivity to the faceless, emotionless data found in acceptable historical documents. Through autobiographical/memoir narration,

I will first introduce my mother and maternal grandmother into the American story. A good deal of the information comes through sources like the census and family bible, but other information comes from documented history, and my memory. My narration takes purposeful aim at these women's subjectivity, and, as such, attempts to make their lives more meaningful than numbers and facts on a page or government document. After the narration, I will reflect on why I think autobiography/memoir holds a key to unlocking black women's history, and where I think memory fits in the rethinking of how history is practiced.

2. Giving Life to the Archival Presence of Lillie Thomas Hines and Eddie Florence Gray

My mother was born on 7 January 1918, in McColl, South Carolina. This small, sleepy, one-traffic-light, rural southern town in the northeast corner of South Carolina made the news in 1993 when the father of basketball player Michael Jordan was found there, murdered in a swamp near interstate I-95. Miles and miles of tobacco, cotton, corn and soybean fields, dotted with dirt roads and former sharecropper cabins, belie the fact that the area was a hotbed of NAACP organizing in the 1930s and 1940s (Lau 2006).

Government records do not even begin to tell the story of my mother's life, though they helped me, the professional historian, make sense of it. Her mother, Lillie Thomas, (Figure 1) was born around 1899 and married her husband, my grandfather, Porter Hines, in 1913 when she was a teenager of 14. He was around 18, but by the time he registered for the World War I draft in June of 1917, Grandma Lillie had already had two children and my mother was on the way.



Figure 1. Inscribed by Mommy, this picture of Grandma Lillie was taken the year Mommy was born.

Professional medical care in the rural south was scarce to non-existent (Luke 2018; Beardsley 1987); so, it is not surprising that by the time Mommy was born, seven months later in 1918, these teenagers had lost their first born, a son named Douglas, and would lose their second child, a daughter named Allie Mae, before Mommy reached her second birthday. Their births were not recorded by the state at the time of their births but were

written down in the family bible, where much of the family memory was recorded. So were the births of Lillian and Evanora, two future daughters born to Grandma Lillie. As far as the state was concerned, they were non-existent. Both were stillborn with no official record of their births, no story of the grief Grandma Lillie endured upon birthing dead children into the world, and no story about how their births and deaths affected either parent.

Since enslavement, white people had been saying that black people, women in particular, did not have emotions like white folks, so they did not really *feel* anything when their children died or were sold away from them.² Proof that my grandparents cared deeply about the stillborn children that quickened in Grandma Lillie's womb is found in the names they recorded in their family bible. Lillian carried Grandma Lillie's name into the next world, while Evanora entered eternity with part of her father's mother's name, Agenora. While I am pretty sure that my grandparent's hearts broke when the midwife swaddled their tiny dead bodies before committing them to the ground, I am more than certain that the names my grandparents gave their daughters screamed that they cared.

Like herself, Mommy's mother was a sharecropper's daughter who worked long hours in the cotton fields of northeast, South Carolina. Both lives were shaped by the rhythm of cotton. Plowing, planting, picking, and chopping defined the seasons of their year. Though Grandpa Porter eventually left sharecropping, got a job as a cook on the railroad, and bought his own home and an extra plot of land, neither Grandpa Porter nor Grandma Lillie were able to read or write. Both were illiterate. The census records exposed this sad truth, but I did not believe it until I saw Grandpa Porter's World War I draft card and his will (Figure 2). My grandfather, a tall slender dark-skinned black man, who beat the odds and became a southern landowner, signed both documents, which were separated by 51 years, with an "X".

Form 1 1489 REGISTRATION CARD No. 33

1 Name (last, first, middle) Porter Harris Age 51 years

2 Home address Rt. 1 Box 1 SE

3 Date of birth Feb 3 1893

4 Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien? (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)? Natural born

5 Where were you born? Marion Co SC (State) USA (Nation)

6 If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject?

7 What is your present trade, occupation, or office? Sharecropper

8 By whom employed? McLean SE

9 Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 18, or a sister or brother under 18, wholly dependent on you for support (specify which)? Wife & 1 child

10 Married or single (which)? Married Race (specify which)? African

11 What military service have you had? Rank None Branch None

12 Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)? Not a citizen of the United States

I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.

783 Porter Harris (Signature or mark)

I HEREBY WITNESSE, CONSTITUTE AND APPOINT, my beloved daughter, Lillian Florence Gray, as sole executrix of this my last will and testament, and she is authorized to serve in this capacity without bond.

WITNESSE AT HAND AND SEAL, this 2nd day of October, A. D., 1944, at Clarendon, South Carolina.

Porter Harris Testator

SUBSCRIBING WITNESSES:

Signed, Sealed, Published and Declared by the Testator to be his last will and Testament, in the presence of us, who at his request and in his presence and in the presence of each other have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses.

1st Lillian Harris

1st Evanora Harris

1st Porter Harris

WITNESSE AT HAND AND SEAL, this 2nd day of October, A. D., 1944, at Clarendon, South Carolina.

Porter Harris Testator

Figure 2. Grandpa Porter's draft registration is signed with an "X." To protect the land and house that he had purchased, he had his lawyer draft a will that he also signed with his mark, an "X".

Both my grandmother and mother signed a second mortgage in 1973 (Figure 3). I can only wonder how my high-school-graduated mother felt when beneath her beautifully inscribed signature, her mother put an "X" on the line that enabled them to make repairs on the Clio home where they would both reside once my mother migrated back to South Carolina.

AND IT IS AGREED by and between the parties that in the case of foreclosure of this mortgage, by suit or otherwise, the mortgagee shall recover of the mortgagor a reasonable sum as attorney's fee, which shall be secured by this mortgage, and shall be included in judgment of foreclosure.

WITNESS our Hands and Seals this 9th day of November in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and Seventy-Three and in the one hundred and 198th year of the Sovereignty and Independence of the United States of America.

SIGNED, SEALED AND DELIVERED
IN THE PRESENCE OF
Arshea B. Gillespie
Frank E. Cain, Jr.

Eddie Florence Gray (L. S.)
Lillie F. Hines (L. S.)
mark (L. S.)
(L. S.)

State of South Carolina, }
MARLBORO COUNTY. }

PERSONALLY appeared before me Arshea B. Gillespie and made oath that she saw the within-named Lillie F. Hines and Eddie Florence Gray sign, seal, and, as their act and deed, deliver the within-written Mortgage; and that she with Frank E. Cain, Jr., witnessed the execution thereof.

Sworn to before me this 9th day of November A.D. 1973.

Frank E. Cain, Jr. (L. S.)
Notary Public for South Carolina
My Commission Expires: 11/17/79

Arshea B. Gillespie
Arshea B. Gillespie

Figure 3. Beneath Mommy's signature, Lillie Hines makes her mark, an "X," on a 1973 mortgage note.

Maybe she thought of how far she had come and how much Grandma Lillie had lost. She lost Allie Mae a year after Mommy was born. "Bun up," was the way my mother described her tragic death. "She was burned up in the fire." Mommy narrated the story of the fire as if she witnessed it, but she was just shy of two years old when her three-year-old sister was, as described on her death certificate, "accidentally burned to death," in a "pen fire" (Figure 4). One can only imagine how that fiery scene burnt a forever hole in grandma Lillie's mind and heart, (and even perhaps in the mind's eye of her two-year-old sister); how the horror of seeing her helpless toddler burning in a hungry all-consuming fire, or finding her burnt to a crisp forever haunted her and her surviving child, my mother.

1. PLACE OF DEATH
County of Marlboro
Township of Marlboro
City of Marlboro

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
Bureau of Vital Statistics
State Board of Health
Registration District No. 3305

File No.—For State Registrar Only—
18582

2. FULL NAME Arshea May Hines
Residence In City Yrs. Mos. Days

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS
3. SEX Female
4. COLOR OR RACE Negro
5. RACE, MARITAL, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED
6. DATE OF BIRTH Jan 4 1916
7. AGE 3 yrs. 9 mos. 10 days
8. OCCUPATION
9. BIRTHPLACE Marlboro Co. SC
10. NAME OF FATHER Carter Hines
11. BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER Marlboro Co. SC
12. MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER Lillie Thomas
13. BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER Marlboro Co. SC

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
14. DATE OF DEATH Oct 14 1919
15. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from Oct 13 to Oct 14 1919, and that death occurred, on the date stated above, of 12:00 P.M. The CAUSE OF DEATH was as follows:
Accidentally Burned to Death in Pen Fire
16. Where was disease contracted? If not at place of death?
17. Was there an autopsy?
18. What test conducted?
19. State the Disease Causing Death, or, in deaths from Violent Causes state (a) Means of Injury and (2) whether Accidental, Suicidal or Homicidal.
20. UNDERTAKER
21. DATE OF BURIAL

LOCAL REGISTRAR: J. C. Pate
DATE OF DEATH: Oct 14 1919

Figure 4. This death certificate of my mother's older sister tells a tragic story that gets lost in the archive.

Grandma Lillie went on to have seven more children, but she never got over the loss of her first daughter. At least that is what Mommy thought, and the way the fire is remembered in family lore. To hear Mommy tell it, the fire that took Allie sucked every bit of joy from Grandma Lillie's spirit. She never recovered from the catastrophe, which meant that no one else in Grandma's circle could either.

"Muh" is mean, Mommy told me when I was a child. "She's mean and always has been," Mommy said repeatedly. She called her "Muh," unaffectionately, and for the longest time, I did not realize that Muh and Grandma Lillie were the same person. I could not disagree with her because I thought she was mean too. She was never kind to me and never provided the refuge I know so many other grandmothers did. Unlike Grandpa Porter, whom I adored, she never took me on walks or played checkers, joked or even talked to me. I remember her stalking around with her stockings rolled down close to her ankles next to the top of what I will always consider old lady shoes. She barked orders: "Go get dem eggs from dem chickens." "Here, shuck these peas." "Here, stem these beans." She once told me to catch a chicken so she could cook it for dinner. I could not catch it to save my life. Before I knew it, Grandma Lillie swooped down on it, grabbed it by the neck which she twisted effortlessly, killing it before she took a lighted piece of paper to singe the feathers off so she could chop and cook it. (Although I loved fried chicken, I could barely look at, much less eat it, when it was served up that night for dinner.) Because her lips were always poked out, she always looked mean. The look had as much to do with the snuff she had tucked between her bottom lip and her teeth, as with her sour disposition. The fact that she was always spitting a brown liquid from her mouth with laser-like aim did not endear me to her. In fact, it added to my sense of her as a witch. Wherever she went, she carried her spit can, and God help you if you knocked it over.

I did not realize it then but the historian in me now knows that Grandma Lillie was true to the austere tradition of rural black mothers whose lives were synonymous with hard labor and loss. Even if they had wanted to, they really did not have time to play with their children or share intimate moments with them. Their primary responsibility, especially in the rural south, where debt peonage and white supremacy was the rule, was to work and to train their children to work and behave properly around adults and white people (Clark-Lewis 1994; Jones 1985). No doubt, Mommy imbibed this spirit of motherhood.

My worst memory of Grandma Lillie was when she forced me to eat a food called puddin', a southern sausage mixture that to me tasted like burnt liver mush. She threatened to whip me if I did not eat it and made me sit at the table until I finished. I ate it, but it turned my stomach and made me so sick that I could barely move. When I threw up, she swore I did it on purpose, and stood over me with a switch as I cleaned up every inch of vomit. What did not come out of my mouth came out the other end, and since, even as a young kid, my New York City (I grew up in New York City but visited my grandparents in South Carolina every summer) sensibilities were hostile to both the slop jar and the outhouse, I was in a pickle. Grandpa eventually installed indoor plumbing in the Clio house, but not before this incident. Although I was sure snakes were waiting to slither up my leg, I still chose several trips to the outhouse, in the dark. I just could not squat over the porcelain bucket, especially since, with grandma around, I could not afford to miss. I had never felt comfortable around Grandma Lillie, and after the puddin' episode, I kept as much distance between the two of us as I could. Like my brother, I hated going south in the summers without Mommy, who, whether she knew it or not, acted as a kind of buffer. Though Mommy could wield a belt as good as grandma could a switch, somehow Mommy never whipped us down south.

This is probably because it would have reminded her of her own childhood and her connection to Muh. I do not doubt that although Mommy took care of Grandma Lillie

through her elderly years, and cared for her until her death in 1978, love was lost between the two of them. Unlike Grandpa Porter, whom she adoringly called “Deddy,” Mommy never had a kind word to say about Muh. I did not realize the depth of their alienation until I was weeding and clearing the overgrown Hines family burial plot in Fair Plains A. M. E. Zion cemetery in McColl, something I did every summer during the early 2000s. Every member of the Hines family has a headstone, including my grandfather and his siblings, and my mother’s brothers. My father’s headstone was provided by the Navy, and Mommy put one on my brother’s grave after he passed in 1993. Only the grave of Lillie Hines is without a headstone, marked only by a foot marker put there by the Morris Funeral Home. The deep meaning of this came into focus when I reflected on the very first item in my mother’s will—her *requirement* that I put a “suitable marker” on *her* grave, which I did in 2003 after she passed. As I looked at the numerous headstones in Fair Plains cemetery, I could not help but realize that it was not by accident that Grandma Lillie’s did not have one; that although Mommy had plenty of time to put one on her mother’s grave before she passed, she deliberately did not mark it. It is not hard to imagine that Grandma Lillie’s death did not squelch Mommy’s alienation.

By the time Mommy was born, my grandparents had apparently decided that no longer would their living children die without some official record of their births, for Mommy, their third child, was not only the first to be recorded in the census but she was also the first to have a birth certificate (Figure 5). Unfortunately, however, whoever recorded Mommy’s birth (it is signed by the midwife who was in attendance, but the handwriting appears to be the same as that of the official who filed it) recorded Mommy’s name as “Nora” instead of “Eddie Florence.” Nora was the name of Mommy’s paternal grandmother.

Form No. 1
CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH
 STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
 Bureau of Vital Statistics
 State Board of Health

File No.—For State Registrar Only
 1705

(1) PLACE OF BIRTH
 County of Marion
 Township of North Bluff
 Inc. Town of _____
 City of _____

(2) Full Name of Child Nora Hines

DATE OF BIRTH Jan 9 1918 TIME 4:41 SEX F COLOR Black AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY 24

FATHER
 (a) FULL NAME Porter Hines
 (b) PRESENT RESIDENCE McClellan SC
 (c) COLOR Black AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY 24
 (d) SIGNATURE Porter Hines

MOTHER
 (a) FULL NAME Lillie Thomas
 (b) PRESENT RESIDENCE McClellan SC
 (c) COLOR Black AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY 24
 (d) SIGNATURE Lillie Thomas

(3) I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was alive at the date above stated.
 (4) (Signature) M. C. Hines
 (5) State whether Physician by Medicine Midwife or by Surgery Midwife

(6) I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was alive at the date above stated.
 (7) (Signature) J. H. Hines
 (8) State whether Physician by Medicine Midwife or by Surgery Midwife

(9) I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was alive at the date above stated.
 (10) (Signature) J. H. Hines
 (11) State whether Physician by Medicine Midwife or by Surgery Midwife

Figure 5. Mommy’s birth certificate had the wrong name attached to it.

It was an egregious mistake, but it does not defy unpacking. It could be that at some point my grandparents thought to name Mommy after Grandpa Porter’s mother but then changed their minds or perhaps they did indeed name her Nora and then changed their minds. Or it could be that the recorder was careless and wrote the grandmother’s name without much thought. It is not a stretch of the imagination to think that the white recorder—and the recorder would have been white since no black person would have had such a job in 1918—was careless about recording a black baby’s name. In any case, it took twenty-five years and seven months before the mistake was corrected (Figure 6).

AFFIDAVIT OF CORRECTION TO BIRTH RECORD
SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

Enter Correct Information Consenting Person Whose Birth Record is Being Amended	REGISTRANT'S FULL NAME AT BIRTH EDDIE FLORENCE HINES				STATE FILE OR BIRTH NUMBER #139-18-0-1705	
	Month Jan.	Day 7	Year 1918	City or Town MARLBORO	County S.C.	State S.C.
ITEMS TO BE AMENDED OR CORRECTED	BIRTH DATE Jan. 7, 1918		BIRTH PLACE MARLBORO		BIRTH CERTIFICATE SHOWS SHOULD BE	
	ITEM OMITTED OR IN ERROR		BIRTH CERTIFICATE SHOWS		SHOULD BE	
	NAME		NORA		EDDIE FLORENCE HINES	
AFFIDAVIT	I HEREBY DECLARE UPON OATH THAT THE ABOVE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE AND CORRECT. SIGNATURE OF PARENT (OR OTHER)				RELATIONSHIP	
NOTARY (AFFIX SEAL)	SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO BEFORE ME ON			SIGNATURE OF NOTARY		NOTARY COMMISSION EXPIRES
DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE						
ABSTRACT of Supporting Evidence (for health dept. use)	NAME AND KIND OF DOCUMENT (INCLUDING BY WHOM ISSUED AND DATE OF ISSUE)					DATE ORIGINAL DOCUMENT WAS MADE
	1 Personal aff. by Lillie Hines					8-7-43
	2					
	3					
DHEC No. 473 Rev. 11/72	INFORMATION CONCERNING REGISTRANT AS STATED IN DOCUMENT OF CORRESPONDING NUMBER ABOVE					
	1 EDDIE FLORENCE HINES					
	2					
	3					
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION						
I certify that I have examined the documents referred to above, that they show no changes or erasures, and appear to be authentic.			ASSISTANT STATE REGISTRAR Doris M. Byers		EVIDENCE REVIEWED BY Jo Ann S. Lanier	
					DATE FILED 8-7-43	

Figure 6. Originally recorded as Nora, Mommy's name was corrected in 1943.

Not until 1943 did Grandma Lillie file an affidavit stating that Mommy's name was actually Eddie Florence. Since the change was made a month before Daddy filled out forms designating his wife as his beneficiary when he enlisted in the Navy in 1943 during World War II, it is more than likely that the document change was necessitated by Daddy's soldier status.

I do not know what Mommy felt about the name Nora but she hated the name Eddie. She might have been named after a family relative, as most of her siblings were. In fact, her younger brother's middle name was Edward and his first son was also named Edward, suggesting that a maternal uncle might have carried that name.³ Mommy thought that her middle name came from the small city of Florence, South Carolina, a city relatively close to McColl. Regardless, Mommy did not like that she was named after a boy, so she went mostly by Florence, at least up North. People down south and from the south called her Ed'flance, a name she really despised. It took a while before I learned that Ed'flance was "southern" for Eddie Florence. My mother told me this when she explained why I did not have a middle name like my brother (who carried the exact same name as my father, only with a Jr. added), and why she chose the three-syllable biblical spelling of Deb-o-rah and insisted that everyone pronounce the "o." She said she did not want people using their lazy-tongued southern drawl to spoil my name. For me, there would be no Ann (Deb'ran), or Sue (Debrasue) or Jean (Debrajean) to corrupt the northerness of the Old Testament pronunciation. "You were born up here," said my southern migrant mother, "You don't need a middle name." Because I had no middle name, I was able to use my maiden name Gray as my middle name after I married.

Indeed, my mother sermonized about how my life as a native New Yorker would be different from hers. I would go to school the year round, with summers and holidays off. Unlike her, I would not have to stop school during cotton-planting and -picking season so I could work in the fields. Unlike her, I would not be raised on a diet of mostly biscuits, beans, and grits. Mommy would find today's preoccupation with vegetarianism absurd. To her, eating meat was a mark of prosperity. And while butter-soaked biscuits, sopped up in ALAGA syrup, were a Sunday morning staple (along with sausages), my brother and I

had balanced meals with equal portions of vegetables, starch, and meat for dinner. In fact, we had meat at almost every meal, and steak for dinner as often as possible. My mother cooked it rare—another northernism she imposed on us.

And we had as much candy as we could eat. Mommy never got enough, so our house had candy dishes everywhere and they were filled every week with a different kind of sweet. My friends would come to my house just so they could fill their pockets, and my mother gave it away as easily as she bought it. Every week, two or three bags of candy filled our shopping cart at the A&P Supermarket eight blocks away. And every Sunday, she would fill her pocketbook with sweets to sneak to us during the wild services at our storefront Baptist church.

Mommy had a sweet tooth; she also bought at least 2 gallons of ice cream to go with the cakes she cooked every week, and our Kool Aid was extra sweet since on top of the sugar used to make it, Mommy always added a quart of sweetened pineapple or orange juice. To this day, unless I am outdoors working up a sweat, I cannot drink plain water. I attribute it to having been brought up on Kool-Aid.

But there was something else to Mommy's sweet tooth. When she was young, she had a horrific accident. One Halloween or Christmas—I cannot remember which—she and her friends were running home with jars of candy they had collected from school and neighbors. Candy was something they got only a few times a year and they were especially jubilant. They were running and playing and singing when Mommy, not looking where she was going, fell and almost lost her eye as the jar implanted itself in her cheek. As she described it, glass and blood were everywhere. Someone got her to a doctor, but uppermost in her memory was that the white doctor callously dug around in her cheek, making her feel each slither of glass that he removed. Insensitive to her cries, he also did not seem to care whether he did a good job sewing her face together. Every time Mommy looked into the mirror, she probably remembered the ordeal. I did not connect the fall to the candy until I got older, but I like to think that with each bag of candy that she bought, she was giving that fall and that doctor the finger—figuratively speaking—saying “you can't steal all my joy.” Still, every time she told me this story, it made me feel so awful that I cried.

I cried too when she relayed the story of why, after graduating from high school (Figure 7) and attending college for a semester, she dropped out.

My grandfather did not have a chance to go to school but he was always trying to do better, which is why he did not rest until he equipped his house with a toilet and running water. Though illiterate, he had progressed from being a sharecropper to a landowner. A freemason, he was a striver.⁴ He wanted his kids to do better than him; so, he paid for his oldest living daughter to go to a southern Historically Black College and University (HBCU), one of the post-high school institutions that were established for black people after the Civil War to keep them from trying to enter white institutions of higher learning. No doubt he hoped that Mommy would escape the fate of most rural black women in northeastern South Carolina who worked not only in the cotton and/or tobacco fields but in white people's homes doing the cleaning, washing and ironing that white women, even those who were poor, got black women to do. In this, he was doing what striving rural black families did. Historians have called it the “farmer's daughter effect,” essentially educating the farm family's daughter since, without an education, they would have limited opportunity in a job market geared toward men's strength and mobility. While striving white rural families did this, upwardly mobile black families who could educated their daughters because they knew that black girls would eventually wind up doing domestic work for white families, the men of which were notorious for predatory sexual behavior (Bock 1969; Jones 1985, p. 91).

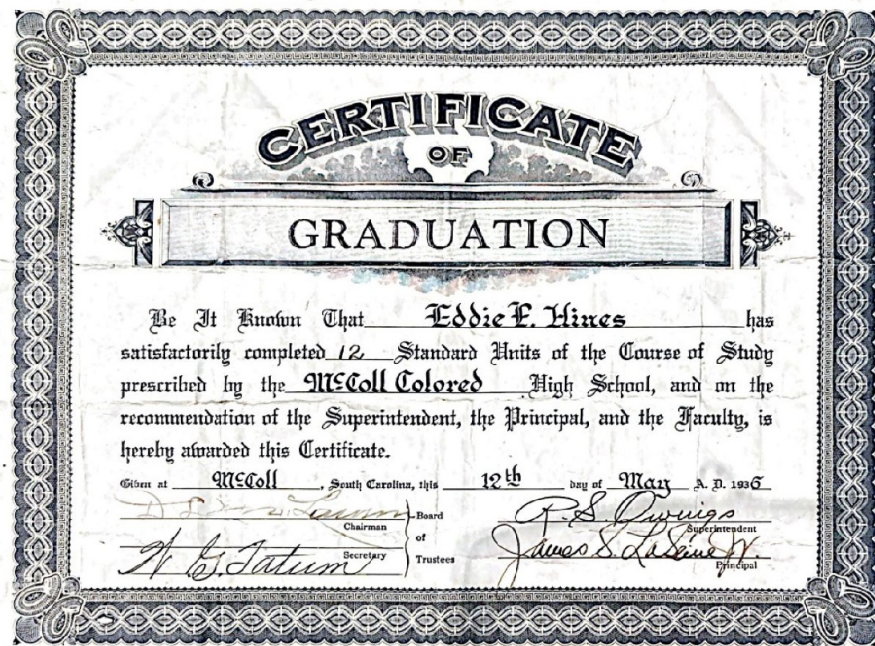


Figure 7. My mother graduated from the McColl Colored High School at a time when black and white education was separate and unequal.

I do not remember the name of the school but as Mommy tells it, she went for only a semester and left. She said she was miserable and homesick, but more than that, hungry—all the time. At home, she had loaded up on filling foods: beans, grits, peas, rice, biscuits, and chicken when they could get it. But as Mommy remembered college, there were small portions of food, and when meals were served, no one waited until the grace was finished before they grabbed the dishes and platters on which the food was served. I listened tearfully as Mommy relayed how she often got nothing or how, at one meal, she would only get rice and, at another, she could only grab the bread. After a semester of going without the kind of food she was used to, or enough to fill her up, she left. In the back of her mind, there was also the thought that she was being left behind by most of her friends and cousins who were leaving the South, heading north. She said that when she got to New York City, she found it the most beautiful, dazzling place she had ever been to or seen. She also said that she knew immediately that leaving school was a mistake, something she would regret for the rest of her life. She had dreamed of becoming a home economics teacher (probably the reason we had balanced meals); now, despite having graduated from high school, like most black women of working age in New York City, she could only clean white people's homes as a "live-in" domestic (Lerner 1973a; Jones 1985, p. 130).

Knowing what my historian self knows about southern HBCUs in the late 1930s, I can also surmise that Mommy felt out of place at this school. Most of the black teens who continued on to higher education came from urban areas or had parents who were working- or middle-class. They were not sharecropper's kids. Coming, as she did, from deep South Carolina cotton and tobacco country, with an education that more than likely prioritized industrial and domestic skills, it is unlikely that McColl's Colored High School had provided her with the prerequisite education and culture to make her feel comfortable.⁵ That she wanted to be a home economics teacher is also insightful since most HBCU's at this time did not focus on a classical education that made science, mathematics and literature central to their curriculum. They educated black youth to fill jobs that were at the

lower end of the job spectrum, and they prepared women to enter the female workplaces of teaching, social work and nursing. They also severely policed women's behavior, dress, and interaction with the opposite sex, the feeling being that educated women were representatives of the race and as such had to prove white people wrong about black women being sexually loose and available. If black women exhibited respectable behavior, it would, black leaders believed, ward off sexual attack and prove to white people that black people were worthy of full citizenship (Higginbotham 1994). Given what she probably encountered at her college, I can see that, to her, it made a lot of sense to follow her beckoning friends north—to Harlem, the Black Mecca.

But she was determined that her children were not going to have the kind of regret that she had. A super-striver, she pointed us in the direction of college *and* the black middle-class. It was NEVER up for discussion. She, not my father, bombarded my brother with tales of how he would become a Negro doctor and find the cure for cancer or her particular ailment, asthma.

I got the message differently. Not only did she tell me about her college mistake more times than I can count, but whenever I went to work with her, which was often, I got "the speech." I first heard it one day when she was on her knees scrubbing a white family's floor with a rag. I asked her why she did not use a mop. She replied, "They don't need one, they have me." And then she launched into the sermon which was on "repeat" throughout my childhood and adolescence: "I do this because I have to, because I didn't stay in school. I do this so that you will have a better life and so that you can make something of yourself. Listen to me (as if I dared not pay attention). If I ever catch you on your knees cleaning anyone's floor, other than your own, I will personally kick your ass all over that floor and wipe it up with you. I made a mistake but you're not going to do this for a living. WORK DON'T HAVE TO BE THIS HARD. You hear me?" Like her other sermons, if I heard it once, I heard it a thousand times.

There were other motherisms that I imbibed, many of which I am sure were connected to the fire that took Allie Mae's life. Mommy, who grew up with oil lanterns, NEVER used candles and was always afraid that our Catholic neighbors, who kept prayer candles lit, would burn down our project apartments. Although we cooked on a gas stove, she was always worried that it might blow up. I do not know how the fire that took her sister was connected to electricity, but since electricity did not get to rural South Carolina until the early 1940s, she grew up mostly without it, but apparently was still scared of it (Brown 1998). She was afraid to leave small appliances plugged in, and during thunderstorms, she unplugged everything and made us sit silently. This meant that we could not watch TV if a storm was brewing. If it was night-time, and thunder and/or lightning were in the air, we had to sit in the dark without making a sound. Unlike my father who swam like a fish, Mommy did not know how to swim and would not go anywhere near the water, which probably accounts for the prayer she said each and every time we were driven through the tunnels under the Hudson River going to New Jersey. On the few occasions that we went to the beach, she put her feet in the water but that is all. She had not been allowed on South Carolina's Myrtle Beach because while she was growing up, it was for white people only; black people were restricted to the more northern Atlantic Beach.⁶ She was a regular killjoy at Coney Island, one of New York's public beaches/amusement parks. Once in a while, she let me and my brother go into the water with Daddy, and only once do I remember her going on an amusement ride. It was during a church outing to Rye Playland, another New York beach/public amusement park. I remember it because an attendant had to stop the turtle ride to let her off. The ride was just what it advertised, slow, like a turtle. But she cried and pleaded so hard that the attendant took pity on her and let her off.

This side of my mother gives me pause because it does not jive with other sides of her or with what scholars know about migrants—their willingness to take risks and venture into the unknown (Goldbach and Schlüter 2018; Jaeger et al. 2007). It is also inconsistent with her defiance of her father's wishes that she go to college. Rarely did rural black wives or daughters exert authority in black rural households. Daughters were expected to and usually did do what their fathers told them to do (Clark-Lewis 1994, p. 61; Jones 1985, pp. 103–4). So, while my mother probably should have stayed in college, her exit was a serious exercise of personal autonomy.

Looking at her with a historian's eye, Florence was actually a modern black woman, a New Negro Woman, if you will.⁷ If she were white, growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, she might have expressed her independence by getting a job, bobbing her hair or wearing flapper clothes, by voting, and by insisting that her partner use a condom during sex. Being circumscribed by race, black women like my mother were cheated out of the limited choices that white women had. Still, by the time she migrated, somewhere between 18 and 20 years old, she had already escaped a child marriage like the one her mother had been subjected to. Unlike her mother, who at age 20 was anchored to the rural south, had given birth to four children and lost two of them, Mommy had traveled over 600 miles and planted herself in the largest city in the world and started calling herself Florence. She had managed to wait nine years longer than her mother had to get married and did not have her first child until she was 27. At 27, Grandma Lillie was illiterate, had already given birth to five living children and one stillborn, was doing farm work, and hand washing and ironing her own family's clothes and the clothes of white people who paid her a pittance for her backbreaking hard work. Had Mommy stayed in Clio without being in school she would have spent endless hours in the cotton fields. As the oldest girl of four living siblings, her life would have been filled with work, work and more work.⁸ By contrast, Mommy graduated from high school and traded backbreaking farm work for live-in servant work. After marriage, she switched to living-out domestic work, which gave her more control over where and how long she would work, and who she would work for, as well as the wages she received.⁹ And unlike her mother who never voted, Mommy moved to a city where she could vote and did. The more I think of it, the more I realize that Mommy may have been afraid of electricity, water, and amusement park rides, but she took chances, asserted her independence, left agricultural labor, broke the cycle of serial pregnancies, and asserted her right to vote as an American citizen. Florence Gray was a modern, forward-thinking woman (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A young Florence Gray.

3. On Black Women, Memory, and History

The foregoing short narration of the lives of Lillie Thomas Hines and Eddie Florence Gray is my argument for using memory as a way of expanding the archive on black women's history and the history of the black family. The family history presented here lifts these women from the one-line entries in the census and brings context to the few documents that evidence their existence. Without my memory, the document that verifies the pen fire that killed my mother's younger sister and shaped her upbringing is just that—a piece of paper with writing on it. The candy dishes that spotted our household take on a different meaning in the context of Mommy's horrible accident. And that accident—accessed only through memory—evidences the kind and effect of the medical care African Americans were subjected to in the Jim Crow era. The absence of Lillie Hines's headstone in the Hines family plot goes unnoticed and unanalyzed, and my mother's day-work has no context. This piece of social history suggests a lot about, and allows for a peek behind, the prevailing stereotypes of black women, and the defenses they mustered to hide their true selves. I maintain that while traditional sources give us the skeleton of these two black women, my memory gives them flesh. Given that *all* historical sources are suspect,¹⁰ especially those traditionally used to access African American women, and that we can never recapitulate the past as it actually was, with this narration and forthcoming memoir/autobiography, Lillie Thomas Hines and Eddie Florence Gray escape anonymity and enter the American and African American historical past as fully formed citizens.

And yet, the methodology used to uncover their history lands Lillie Hines and Eddie Florence Gray in the middle of a long-standing debate about the uses and legitimacy of memory/autobiography (and oral history) in the practice of history.¹¹ Summarizing a commonly held belief among scholars, American historian Bernard Bailyn wrote that memory is “ultimately emotional, not intellectual.” He dismissed memory as a historical source because it is “not a critical, skeptical reconstruction of what happened,” but a “spontaneous, unquestioned experience of the past.” (Bailyn 2001) David Blight, an Americanist and African Americanist, seems to agree. He wrote that “History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be critical and skeptical of human motive and action and therefore more secular than what people commonly call memory.” (Blight 2002). Weighing in heavily against the use of memory in the practice of history, renowned psychiatrist W. Walter Menninger argued against using memory to “faithfully recall past events.” (Menninger 1996). There are limits, he argued, to the “accuracy of human memory” as individuals regularly “recall history that wasn't” and reconstruct the past “like they want it to be.”¹² Even as the historical profession has evolved and begun to accept oral histories and memory as acceptable historical sources, there is still a debate as to the legitimacy of memory as history.¹³

I, however, believe, as did Arthur Schlesinger Jr., that scholars who dismiss memory or memoir/autobiography as a legitimate source are wrong. “If the actors themselves gave lucid and urgent testimony as to why they lived, struggled, died, is it not a form of intellectual arrogance for historians to come along later and pretend to know better,” asked Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1971). I believe it is not only arrogance but exclusionary, one of the reasons why there exists such a paucity of sources from which to retrieve the history of the black woman and family. Memoir/autobiography/oral histories all expand the archive by making black voices that are absent from university and government archives accessible. They allow black voices to escape burial in the special collections of university libraries (where black women's organizational histories often sit in uncatalogued boxes) and escape the policing techniques of the gatekeepers of the historical profession. Along with historian Paula Fass, I believe that memoirs pay attention to the “social details of life.” (Fass 2006). As this relates to black women, memoirs and autobiographies help us

understand how racism and sexism have been processed over time and in everyday life. Their concern with the self, while ultimately going against the “objectivity principle” that governed the professionalization of history for most of the twentieth century (Novick 1988), will help us penetrate the survival tactic of dissemblance that was and still is deployed by black Americans.¹⁴

Importantly, this is not “rebellious history,” the term used by historian Annette Gordon-Reed to describe Saidiya Hartman’s historical imagining of some black women in the early twentieth century. I did not imagine the fears my mother developed as a result of the fire; I lived them. Had she kept a diary, she doubtless would have written about the callousness of the doctor who dug into her face after her accident. Instead, she repeated the story to me, over and over and over. Though unlikely, she might have also written of the emotional distance between herself and my grandmother, something I experienced. She did not. Instead, like a mantra, she told me her mother was mean and her stories allowed me to interpret the absence of a headstone on her mother’s grave. All of which speaks to the importance of the oral tradition in my family, as well as these women’s subjectivity. This is not “speculative fiction,” (Gordon-Reed 2020), another term used by Gordon-Reed to describe Hartman’s innovative way of dealing with the archive’s erasure of black women.

Hartman, herself, describes her approach as “critical fabulation,” wherein she augments her extensive research into traditional documents, documents that render black women invisible, with imaginings. These documents, she argues, “yield no picture of the everyday life,” of the black woman, “no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such face might demand.” (Hartman 2008, p. 2). In her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, a book about young working-class black women in the early twentieth century, Hartman takes a deep dive into institutional records which predictably characterize these women as deviant. She uses these records to tell a different story. As she puts it, she has “pressed at the limits of the case file and the document, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms and amplified moments of withholding, escape and possibility. . . .” (Martin 2019, pp. xiv–xv).

Like Hartman, I want to rescue black women from the archive that buries them in anonymity, stereotype, invisibility and obscurity. In combining my identity as a genealogist, professional historian, daughter and granddaughter—without privileging any one of them—I have tried to do this with my mother and grandmother. With this short narration, I have tried to demonstrate the power of autobiography/memoir to liberate black women, and, by extension, them and theirs from the violence of the archive.

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Notes

- ¹ While some see a difference between memoir and autobiography, for the purposes of this piece, I am treating them as the same. In this respect, I am challenging traditional approaches to historical writing by taking an interdisciplinary approach. For the advantages of this approach, see Willard-Traub (2007).

- 2 For a poignant examination of the ways white people rationalized black feelings or non-feelings about death and separation, see Williams (2012). For the ways that early capitalism eliminated the feelings of black people, see Morgan (2021).
- 3 Though my grandfather's siblings names are listed in the census, I have not been able to recover the names of my grandmother's siblings.
- 4 For an excellent discussion of black manhood, freemasonry, and striving, see Summers (2004).
- 5 For an explanation of the typical high school curriculum in the rural south in the early twentieth century, see Anderson (1988).
- 6 For a history of segregation of South Carolina's beaches see King (2012).
- 7 For a discussion of what it meant to leave the rural South and become a New Negro Woman, see Lindsey (2017).
- 8 Historian Jacqueline Jones underscores the arduous life of the wife and oldest daughter in a sharecropper household (see Jones (1985), *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 87–89).
- 9 Through a series of in-depth interviews, historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis explains the difference between live-in and live-out domestic work and how black women preferred the latter because it allowed for more independence and control over the kind of work one would do and for whom (see Clark-Lewis (1994), *Living In, Living Out*).
- 10 See, for example, the discussion regarding facts and fiction, memory and history in Greene (2004) (see also Schlesinger (1971)).
- 11 Rather than take this essay far afield of its purpose by explicating what some believe to be the differences between memoir and autobiography (which I think are minimal), I will treat them as one unit.
- 12 Menninger (1996), pp. 98–99. The issues surrounding history and memory make for lively discussion and debate.
- 13 For example, several contemporary scholars give their understanding of the difference between history and memory on the Choices Program of Brown University (see <https://www.choices.edu/?s=history+and+Memory> accessed on 14 December 2024). Of course, an entire journal, *History and Memory*, has been dedicated to the different ways that we understand history and memory. Established in 1989, it is published biannually by Indiana University Press.
- 14 Historians often point to the “problems” with the WPA narratives as an example of how untrustworthy narratives/oral histories can be. While the WPA narratives do have particular weaknesses, I maintain that some of the same problems exist with sources regularly accepted as legitimate. For a look at the issues surrounding the WPA narratives, see Onion (2016). https://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/07/can_wpa_slave_narratives_be_trusted_or_are_they_tainted_by_depression_era.html (accessed on 23 January 2026).

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