



The Indomitable George Washington Fields: From Slave to Attorney

Kevin M. Clermont

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This book relates the fortuitous discovery of a significant historical figure: George Washington Fields (1854-1932). Fields was known to have entered with the first law class of Cornell University and earned his LL.B. degree there in 1890. But his back story before college was unknown, and hence the significance of his life after graduation was unappreciated. It turns out, although the university's records were previously silent on this, that Fields not only was the new law school's first African-American graduate, but also was in the first graduating group of African Americans from Cornell University as a whole. Even more distinctively, he was the only ex-slave ever to graduate from that august university. Fields' significance is not so locally confined, however. Born into slavery in Hanover County, Virginia, he started at the bottom. But he, along with his remarkable family, made a historic escape to Hampton at the height of the Civil War. He next worked to support the family, and still pursued an education at the storied Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. Later going North, he worked for nearly a decade, including stints as manservant for various luminaries, before completing his legal studies. He then went home to Hampton where—though blinded in 1896—he continued to overcome, eventually becoming a leading attorney of the region. Most important, in his later years, he wrote an autobiography. This book presents in full form that hitherto unpublished work, rediscovered in the archives of a Hampton museum. The autobiography ranks as a major slave narrative. It is an incredible document, telling a riveting tale of escape and triumph, while conveying a sense of this great and greatly likeable person. He recounts his story with a special blend of humor and wisdom, laying out in no uncertain terms the set of values that guided him through his fascinating times. Before and after that autobiographical centerpiece, the other parts of this book provide context and fill gaps in the five-act life story: the wrenching antebellum life of a slave family, the dramatic escape during wartime, the rebuilding of family life during the South's Reconstruction, the necessary move up to the North for more work and schooling, and finally the return to Hampton for a largely happy and very productive life. The resulting book has potential for use by history, Africana, and law students, and should have appeal for Civil War and Virginia history buffs. Yet it is, if nothing else, a great read for just about anyone.

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