

JCSCORE

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

FROM COTTON TO COCA-COLA: A FAMILY HISTORY CASE STUDY ON THE LIMITATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO CLOSE THE GENERATIONAL WEALTH GAP

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine
Emory University

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 2, Issue 2 | 2016

Copyright © 2016 Board of Regents of The University of Oklahoma on behalf of the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies.

Permission of the Publisher is required for resale or distribution and for all derivative works, including compilations and translations. Quoting small sections of text is allowed as long as there is appropriate attribution.

FROM COTTON TO COCA-COLA: A FAMILY HISTORY CASE STUDY ON THE LIMITATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO CLOSE THE GENERATIONAL WEALTH GAP

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine
Emory University

This article is a family history that supported the relationship between slavery and generational wealth. The research documented the history of two Moffett families who were probably not related biologically—a White one who owned a Black one with the same last name. However, the two family histories revealed a larger and more complicated narrative about the origins and intractable roots of American inequality that follows the trail of my slave ancestors to one of the most well-known and wealthiest international corporations in the world—from cotton to Coca-Cola. This is the account of a set of conditions that, while assisting Whites to acquire generational wealth, prevented Black people from doing the same. The piece discusses how generational wealth is accumulated and maintained and argues that higher education alone has provided limited opportunities for Black families to acquire and maintain generational wealth. Recommendations included attention to individual and institutional racism, particularly the structural factors that White families have used to leverage their income and wealth, notably government programs, political and social contacts, access to financial resources, and privileged information about economic opportunities.

My happenstance journey from preparing a family tree for an upcoming Alabama reunion to writing about slavery and the inequality of wealth accumulation in the United States started when I collided into the notorious “brick wall.” I could not verify the first names of my Moffett slave great-great-grandparents. This frustrating dead-end is not unusual for African American amateur genealogists. Slaves were listed by name for the first time in the 1870 federal census (Burroughs, 2001). In the 1850 and 1860 federal slave schedules, my ancestors were considered human chattel, assets, and property. They were listed in census grid tables that identified the slave owner by his name but designated slaves by their gender, color (Black or mulatto), estimated age, and physical handicapping condition. The absence of my ancestors’ names in census data was

symbolic of the horrors of slavery itself: not just their loss of identity, but loss of their humanity, history, and culture. I was determined to restore their names.

It was at this point that I reluctantly decided to take the advice of more experienced African American genealogists who recommended that, in order to find more information about my slave ancestors, I should research the family's slave owners. Initially, I was not interested in the painful experience of discovering my ancestors' enslavers. However, what I found surprised me and sent me down an entirely different path.

My research documented the history of two Moffett families who were probably not related biologically—a White one who owned a Black one with the same last name. (It was not unusual for slaves to adopt their masters' name (Gutman, 1976). However, the two family histories revealed a larger and more complicated narrative about the origins and intractable roots of American inequality that follows the trail of my slave ancestors to one of the most well-known and wealthiest international corporations in the world—from cotton to Coca-Cola. This is the account of a set of conditions that, while assisting Whites to acquire generational wealth, prevented Black people from doing the same.

This essay describes how stolen Creek Indian land and slave labor in the 1800s were the sources of intergenerational wealth for four connected White families from bordering Alabama and Georgia counties--the Moffetts, Flournoys, Hurts, and Woodruffs. With the federal government gifts of stolen Indian land and slave labor and subsequent inheritances, marriages among them, kinship relationships, and nepotism, the four White families for centuries acquired and maintained wealth, privilege, and

influence that have continued to benefit significantly their descendants. Juxtaposed are stories about my Black Moffett slave ancestors and their descendants who tried to establish a base for generational wealth first through hard work and later through higher education. The outcome is predictable. My family's wealth paled in comparison to the generational wealth of the Whites who owned my Alabama slave ancestors.

The Black Moffetts: "Making a Way Out of No Way"

According to my maternal grandfather, Robert Lee Harris, Sr. (1892-1980), my great-great grandfather's name was Jim, and White people called my great-great-grandmother Old Hag, a pejorative term for an aged decrepit woman. There are no words to describe how pleased I was when I discovered my maternal great-great-grandparents' names on the 1880 census. Old Hag's name was Harriett Moffett (1835-1928) and Jim was confirmed as James Moffett (1820 - last documented in 1910 census).

Having discovered James and Harriet Moffett, I kept searching for more records about them. I was not successful. For most African Americans, years of researching census data, wills, deeds, births, marriage and death records will eventually lead to nowhere. Black families often did not report births, marriages, and deaths, and more importantly, many White court officials did not care about recording the information. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, White southern census enumerators were neither well educated nor qualified, and the Black population was illiterate and rightly suspicious of Whites asking questions about their relatives. Enumerators often did not record any data about Black families, or they recorded inaccurate and/or incomplete information often obtained from children in the home or neighbors. Ages of individuals

were estimated and changed in the censuses over time. Family members who were designated as mulatto in one decade could be labeled Black in another. Complicating matters, many southern county and state officials did not understand Black dialect.

After encountering so many challenges, I resigned myself to the fact that the Black Moffett family's history would be a "short read." Unlike most White families, my Moffett family tree started with my great-great-grandparents after Emancipation. Official historical records are not definitive about when Alabama slaves gained their freedom. Although James and Harriett were no longer slaves after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the slave master would not let them leave the plantation. An Alabama Historical Association highway marker¹ confirms that Russell County Alabama slaves were not freed until May 28, 1865. My ancestors and other slaves were legally free in 1863 but were held in captivity an additional two years and four months. The historian Henry Louis Gates (2014) wrote that at the end of the Civil War some 3.4 million Blacks remained in slavery in spite of the Emancipation Proclamation. Gates (2014) corrects the perception that Lincoln freed the slaves; instead he said, "Black people freed themselves" (p. 5).

When my great-great grandparents, James and Harriett Moffett, walked away from the Moffett plantation, they were illiterate, had no skills other than cultivating cotton, no money, and no land. Furthermore, their lives were always in jeopardy because there was no protection from White "night riders" who murdered newly freed slaves at will. So it's understandable that they did not venture far from the plantation. They had nowhere else to go.

¹ Russell County Historic Highway Marker at Rutherford and Mandy Roads.

Like other newly emancipated slaves, James and Harriett Moffett and their seven children probably worked as sharecroppers for the families of their former masters. Sharecropping was not much better than slavery. Former slave owners offered former slaves portions of their land to plant crops in exchange for a portion of the yield. Former slaves worked tirelessly from “can see to can’t see” (sunlight to sunset), and the landowner even charged sharecroppers for using his tools and the mule (Sitton & Utey, 1997, p. 35). If they did not make the required yearly quota, sharecroppers could end up owing the landowner. The fact that they were sharecropping for the same people who enslaved them and kept them in bondage over two years after they were legally free speaks volumes about the plight of James and Harriett Moffett after emancipation. It’s noteworthy that as late as 1920, Black people in Russell County, Alabama were still sharecropping 73% of all the county’s farmland (Lyles, 2010).

There is one inspiring story about James Moffett during this period of abject poverty and subsistence living. I found the 1867 voter registration record for James Moffett and his son Isaac. These newly emancipated men, along with hundreds of others, stood in line to take the Loyalty Oath to the United States and register to vote as dictated by the 1867 Reconstruction Act, although they did not gain full citizenship and actually vote until the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1868. Nonetheless, James Moffett’s voter registration surely restored some of his dignity.

My great-grandmother, Sarah Moffett Harris (1867-last documented in 1940 census) was born the year her father, James Moffett, registered to vote. She had eight children. It seems odd to younger relatives that several of my first cousins, in their late 70s, remember “Grandma Sarah” who was born in 1867. The fact that I have living

relatives who remember my great-grandmother, who was two years old when her parents were finally emancipated, places slavery in a larger historical timeline. Contrary to the perceptions of most Whites and many Blacks, slavery did not happen so long ago that Black people have forgotten the stories about their slave ancestors' existence.

In March of 1892, my great-grandmother Sarah Moffett Harris gave birth to her sixth child, Granddaddy Robert Harris (1892-1980). Robert was born in some sharecropper shack near the Moffett plantation at a time when the Ku Klux Klan was terrorizing the South as described in Ida B. Wells' (1892) pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*. While the Klan was lynching Black men to protect the "virtue" of White women, White men, as always, had sex with Black women whenever they wished. So Robert, like a considerable number of others in the South, had a White father whose name no one in the family can verify. His White father was undeniable. Robert's mother and his siblings were dark with distinctive African features. Robert's skin color was so light that he could have "passed" for White if he had left Russell County, Alabama and relocated to the North. He stayed and married a dark-skinned woman, Rosie Lee Kimbrough Peabody in 1911 and did whatever he had to do to make a better life for his family. They had four children—the youngest, my mother, Sarah Harris Jordan, was born in 1919.

In spite of his fourth-grade education, Granddaddy managed to acquire acres of undeveloped farmland, most of it near the plantation where my slave ancestors toiled. Robert accumulated more land and money by acting as the local "Black banker." Black people could not routinely borrow money from White banks then and now. If they needed money for funerals, bail, medical bills, etc., Black people received money from

family members, the Black church, or from Black lenders in the community. Robert Harris also rented houses and sold land.

Robert Harris Sr., with land and little cash, managed to provide for my mother, Sarah Jordan (1919 - 2003), and her siblings a standard of living that was superior to most Blacks in the South. Unlike the White Moffetts, he was not, however, able to supply them with a college education. In fact, my mother walked the six-mile round trip to Spencer High School across the river in Columbus, Georgia, because White people in Russell County, Alabama did not build the first Black high school until 1945. My ambitious mother never got to go to college.

Robert Harris, Sr. later became a minister and presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Granddaddy was a small businessman, a building contractor, and a proprietor of a gasoline station, cleaners, and a small café. The family worked in most of these mom and pop, “make do” establishments. As a teenager in the early 1960s, my sisters, female cousins, and I pumped gas and worked as cashiers in the gas station. We counted money, rolled coins for bank deposits, and recorded information in Granddaddy's ledger books. Despite the lack of real capital, Robert Harris' business acumen, his natural intelligence, his light skin color (valued by both Blacks and Whites), his standing in the Black community, and his ability to work closely with a few White businessmen, set the trajectory for my family's upward mobility. However, my family's current upper middle class status contrasts dramatically with the story of the generational wealth of the four White families.

The White Families: Moffetts, Flournoy's, Hurts, and Woodruffs

The Moffett: Stolen Land and Stolen Lives

Henry Moffett (1795-1860) was born in South Carolina (noted in 1850 census) and was a descendant of Scot-Irish immigrants from Virginia (Russell County Heritage Book Committee, 2003). Like most Scot-Irish immigrants, the Moffett clan did not likely come to America with inherited wealth. When and why Henry ended up in Russell County, Alabama is unclear. Perhaps he caught “Alabama fever” (Baptist, 2014, p. 93) during the Alabama territory period and believed that the state, with its free or cheap land and slaves, would make him wealthy. Henry Moffett was not wrong about Alabama’s potential. According to Ellisor (2010), the Cusseta Treaty of 1832 and the Second Creek War of 1836 significantly increased his land holdings. First, under the Cusseta Treaty of 1832 the federal government required Creeks to give up any claims to 5,200,000 acres—acres that were then deeded to White “settlers” who, by violence or fraud, eventually took all of the Indians’ Alabama land. It’s not a coincidence that the same year, 1832, Henry built a plantation considered one of the finest properties in the area (Russell County Heritage Book Committee, 2003; *Sketches of Alabama Towns and Counties*, 1937). The next increase in Moffett’s wealth occurred in 1836, the year the Second Creek War began in Russell County. The war resulted in the forced removal of 20,000 Creeks from Alabama to Oklahoma, an expulsion commonly known as The Trail of Tears. Once again Moffett’s government-assisted land acquisitions expanded after the Creeks were forced to leave their homeland.

How much cheap or free land did Henry Moffett acquire from the federal government? According to records from the U.S. General Land Office (US Department of Interior, n.d.), Moffett owned 3500 acres in Russell County, Alabama and approximately 2700 acres in nearby counties—a remarkable largesse of 6200 acres or

10 square miles. Obviously, he needed lots of workers to tend his plantation, and there was an abundance of slaves to purchase or trade in Russell County. Nearly 54% of the total population was slaves (Carey, 2011). Federal slave census schedules noted Henry Moffett owned 96 slaves, certainly including my great-great-grandparents James and Harriet Moffett.

With this economic capital of free land and slaves, Moffett had positioned himself to gain the cultural, political, and social connections he needed to financially advantage generations of his descendants by providing higher education, social contacts, community status, and networks of power and influence. By the 1850 census, Henry's wealth was secured, and he and some of his family members moved a short distance across the river from rural Russell County, Alabama to the thriving new commercial city of Columbus, Georgia. However, he kept his Alabama plantation where the family often spent their summers. This was a common pattern for enslavers in the area. Russell County, Alabama was noted for the quality of its fertile cotton land. It was the place where slave owners built their plantations, raised crops, kept their slaves, and made large sums of money. They built their elegant homes in Columbus, Georgia.

Across the river in Columbus, Henry expanded his businesses. He owned shares of Mobile and Girard Railroad and a cotton warehouse (Brannon, 1959). Local historians wrote that his warehouse was so vast it could hold 15,000 bales of cotton (Telfair, 1929, p. 119). To provide a current perspective on size, a bale of cotton weighs 500 pounds and one bale can produce 1200 men's t-shirts. In the 1850s, an adult male slave was required to pick 200 pounds of cotton a day (Baptist, 2014).

Henry Moffett and his wife Dorinda had 6 children, 3 sons and 3 daughters. Henry provided a college education for his sons and an additional medical education for one. The sons of Henry Moffett had no male heirs, and there would be no Moffett legacy had not two of his daughters, Emma and Eugenia, married prominent men. Emma attended Patapsco Female Institute, a finishing/boarding school in Baltimore and Springler Institute, a finishing school in New York City where she studied music, French, and Italian. Emma traveled extensively and lectured in the United States and Europe (“Obituary,” 1908). Her sister Eugenia also attended Patapsco Female Institute. However, she returned to Columbus after boarding schooling and married Robert Flournoy (1826-1896) in 1855. This marriage was fortuitous in consolidating the wealth of both the Moffetts and Flournoys.

The Flournoys: Acceptance into Southern Aristocracy

Robert and Eugenia Moffett Flournoy lived in Russell County, Alabama on acquired and inherited land. The couple was well known among the regional and the state landed gentry. Their portraits and names are catalogued in *Early Georgia Portraits 1715-1870* (Bright, 1975) in the National Portrait Museum in Washington, D.C., (R. Murphy, personal communication, October 14, 2014). Eugenia is noted in the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The Moffett-Flournoy wealth was considerable. The 1860 census recorded that Henry Moffett owned 96 slaves who lived in 22 slave houses; his son-in-law, Robert Flournoy, had 83 slaves in 35 slave houses; and Henry’s son, Charles, had 17 slaves in 6 houses. Together the Moffett-Flournoy family owned thousands of acres of land and

200 slaves in 63 quarters. According to the website of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (n.d.), 76% of White families in the United States in 1860 did not own a single slave. Only 1% of families owned 40 or more slaves and just a *tenth* of 1% owned 100 or more slaves. The Moffett-Flournoy families, with their 200 slaves, represented the elite among slave owners in the country.

Robert's nephew, John Frances (1847-1936) was in the cotton warehousing business in Columbus. In 1887, he started the Muscogee Real Estate Company, later called the Flournoy Realty Company, and developed distinguished homes and neighborhoods in the city. He was president of the Columbus Railroad Company from 1887 to 1902 and founder of the Coweta Power Company, later acquired by the Columbus Electric and Power Company (Telfair, 1929). Today the Flournoy Companies, headquartered in Columbus, consist of Flournoy Development, Flournoy Properties, and Flournoy Construction.

The Hurts: Living an Opulent Life

The wealth of Robert Flournoy, son-in-law of Henry Moffett, was enhanced by the marriage of Robert's sister, Frances, to Joel Early Hurt (1821-1865). Joel Early Hurt owned 104 slaves in 1860 census and his combined real estate and personal property was valued at \$104,000, 18 million in today's dollar (Williamson & Cain, 2016).

By the 1850 census, Joel Early Hurt, like Henry Moffett, had moved to Columbus, Georgia and built an Italian-inspired home, Dinglewood², on 30 acres of land where "no expense was spared" (Worsley, 1951, p. 221). He transported his Russell County slaves, perhaps some of my ancestors, to Dinglewood to assist in the construction.

² Dinglewood Estate, 1429 Dinglewood Street in Columbus, GA, is listed on The National Register of Historic Places.

Joel's ostentatious displays of slave-acquired wealth were remarkable. The mansion was three stories high with three-sided verandas. The home was furnished with imported English mahogany and rosewood pieces. The fireplace mantels were imported marble, the doorknobs made out of silver, and the "curtains flecked with gold" (Worsley, 1951, p. 223).

In 1866 during the Reconstruction period, Joel sent his wife, Frances Flournoy Hurt, and the newly widowed daughter, Julia, to Paris to escape conditions described as military rule by the Union Army, "carpetbaggers in control, and the Negroes freed not wanting to work" (Worsley, 1954, p.222). While in Paris for two years, Julia's wealth permitted her to move in French society. She met Emperor Napoleon III and was the constant companion of Napoleon Bonaparte's great nephew, Jerome Bonaparte. He showered her with many gifts, including a diamond necklace and a diamond and lapis brooch with the Napoleonic Bees, the royal emblem of the Bonaparte family. Julia later married Leonidas Jordan in 1868, one of the richest men in Georgia, whose wealth in 1860 was recorded as \$262,000 or 47 million dollars in today's currency.

The Hurts: From Slave Owners to Visionary Atlanta Businessmen

There was another slave-owning Hurt family in Russell County. Joel Early Hurt (1821-1885) had a younger cousin also named Joel Hurt (1850- 1926), who became one of the most powerful and well-respected businessmen and developers in Atlanta's history. Joel was born into a prosperous and well-known slave-owning family in Russell County. His father, the county sheriff, owned slaves and a sawmill in the area. His maternal grandfather, who owned 190 slaves in 1860 and had over 1400 acres of cheap or free land from the federal government, was a member of the state legislature and had

financial interest in local railroads. Although the family's resources decreased after the Civil War, Joel and his brothers managed to graduate from college and one brother attained a medical degree (Galloway, 2013; "Genealogy and history trails," (n.d.); Southern Historical Association, 1895).

In 1875, Joel left Russell County for Atlanta to work in real estate and insurance. Joel Hurt was an extraordinarily successful businessman. He was responsible for Atlanta's first electric streetcar; the first skyscraper, the Equitable Building; the development of the neighborhoods of Druid Hills and Inman Park; the construction of the Hurt Building, still an Atlanta landmark; and the Trust Company Bank, now SunTrust Bank.

However, the Hurt family's history of brutalizing slaves in Russell County, Alabama (Works Progress Administration, 1941) seemed to follow Joel to Atlanta. Part of his wealth, like his ancestors, was built on the labor, suffering, and enslavement of Black people. Joel Hurt is identified in Douglas Blackmon's (2008) Pulitzer-winning book, *Slavery by Another Name*, as a primary participant in the cruel and illegal system of Black "convict" leasing. Blackmon estimated that between the end of the Civil War and World War II over 100,000 Black men were held against their will in a vicious and unimaginable hell of forced labor in mines, farms, lumber camps, and brickyards in the South for "crimes" like changing employers without permission, vagrancy, selling corn whiskey, unpaid debt, no evidence of employment, using obscene language, and gambling. These men would literally vanish from rural roads, and many of their relatives never found them.

Joel Hurt used the “new slaves” for his Georgia Iron and Coal Company and, at one point, held 175 men in his “slave mines.” These mines, according to Blackmon, were the most notorious examples of crimes against humanity. According to the state’s investigation records, Hurt’s prison guards believed they “could never do enough whipping for Mr. Hurt” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 349).

The Woodruffs: Building the Coca-Cola Empire

Joel Hurt’s wife, Annie Woodruff of Columbus, Georgia, was the daughter of George and Virginia Woodruff. George Woodruff, whose slaves worked in his Columbus home, founded Empire Mills, which provided wheat and corn for the Confederate army (Telfair, 1928; Kennedy and Galer, 2004). His wife, Virginia, joined the United Daughters of the Confederacy during the Civil War and remained active in this group until her death in 1911 (“Obituary,” 1911). Shortly after Joel moved to Atlanta, he asked Annie’s brother, Ernest Woodruff (1863-1944) to come to Atlanta and run his streetcar business. This company eventually became Georgia Power, part of the Southern Company, now one of the largest utilities in the United States (Blackmon, 2008). Soon Ernest succeeded his brother-in-law Joel as president of Trust Company Bank. In 1919, Ernest purchased Coca-Cola from Asa Candler for \$25 million (Chronicle of Coca-Cola, 2012). In 1923, Robert Woodruff (1889-1985) Ernest’s son and nephew of Joel Hurt, became president of Coca-Cola. Robert Woodruff’s legacy and the national and international Coke empire are well known. In 2014, Forbes Magazine ranked Coca-Cola as the fourth most valuable brand with a value of \$81 billion (Bailey, 2014).

Slavery and Generational Wealth

I followed the trail and connected the dots from the fields in Russell County, Alabama where my slave ancestors picked cotton to the executive suites of Coca-Cola in Atlanta. The story started with Henry Moffett (1795-1860) who owned my great-great-grandparents, James and Harriett Moffett. Henry's daughter married Robert Flournoy (1826-1896). Flournoy's sister married Joel Early Hurt (1821-1865). Joel's cousin, also named Joel Hurt (1850-1926) married Annie Woodruff. Joel's brother-in-law and business partner was Ernest Woodruff (1863-1944). Ernest's son was Coca-Cola magnate Robert Woodruff (1889-1985).

Many Whites believe that slavery has nothing to do with them. Whites often respond, "We never owned slaves." This assertion reveals all the reasons why so little progress has been made in solving the problem of wealth inequality. As previously noted in this article, there is some truth to Whites' denial of active participation in slavery. Seventy-five percent of White families in the United States in 1860 did not own a single slave. However, this statistic does not address the fact that the institution of slavery built America's economy that primarily benefited Whites and their heirs, whether they owned slaves or not.

Edward Baptist (2014) estimated that in 1836 slaves, who were only 6% of the population, produced half of the US economy, some \$600 million. By 1850, slaves were worth \$1.3 billion, one-fifth of the nation's wealth. Slavery didn't just enrich the South, but also drove the industrial revolution in the North. The cotton picked by slaves in the South ended up, for example in Lowell, Massachusetts' textile mills where, in 1832, local mills used 5.5 million pounds of cotton each year. Slavery, according to Baptist,

was clearly the engine that drove America's economic success, the development of American capitalism, and the cornerstone of White generational wealth.

Generational wealth and generational poverty are both well-researched topics in the historical, sociological, and economic literature. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) detailed how centuries of federal affirmative action programs for Whites and systematic and structural discrimination of Blacks are the primary causes of the wealth gap. Additional research documents that rich families do not lose wealth quickly nor do poor families rise out of poverty quickly. It takes about five generations for the advantages and disadvantages of family background to disappear in America. In other words, children growing up in America today are just as likely — no more, no less — to climb the economic ladder as children born more than a half-century ago. If you are growing up poor today, you appear to have the same odds of staying poor in adulthood that your grandparents did (Tankersley, 2014). On the other hand, if your grandparents were wealthy, you are likely to stay wealthy.

Regarding current and future implications, the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites persists and will likely grow wider in the future because in the next 30 years, the largest transfer of wealth in US history will take place when baby boomers will give their heirs \$30 trillion dollars, primarily wealth accumulated through homeownership (Badkar, 2014). According to *Washington Post's* analyses of 2013 Federal Reserve data (Fletcher, 2015), Black families' property wealth (what a family owns in real estate, cars, boats, minus the debt) equals \$41,581; Whites' property wealth is \$233,793. Closing the Black-White wealth gap requires addressing the continuing legacy of slavery on Blacks'

economic conditions. Without acknowledging this atrocious legacy, viable solutions seem unattainable.

College Degrees Can't Close the Generational Wealth Gap

My family's efforts to establish generational wealth started with my grandfather, Robert Harris (1892-1980), who unlike most Blacks in the segregated South, worked for himself. However, Granddaddy Harris' entrepreneurial efforts did not result in any sustained or economically viable businesses. Most of the family's rural farmland in Russell County, Alabama remains in the family today as undeveloped, undervalued property.

My family's only plan for upward mobility and hopes for generational wealth were vested in higher education. Our movement from poverty to upper middle class status, started by my grandfather, Robert Harris, was primarily based on his descendants' college degrees earned with scholarships and loans. However, his first descendant to graduate from college did not occur until 1960. The oldest son of slave owner Henry Moffett graduated from the University of Georgia 109 years earlier in 1851.

My three sisters and I have nine college degrees among us. However; our family does not have a history of generational wealth like the White families in this essay who took advantage of government handouts like slave labor and confiscated Creek Indian land that established their wealth even to this day. Individual and institutional racism, particularly the structural factors that White families used to leverage their income and wealth (political and social contacts, access to financial resources, and privileged information about economic opportunities) were and continue to be unavailable to Black families.

Although higher education is a viable option for Black generational wealth, recent analysis of two decades of research (Emmons & Noeth, 2015) concluded that for Black and Hispanic families “higher education alone cannot level the playing field” (p. 3) and continues to impact current class structures. The data suggested that higher education protects the wealth of White and Asian families during economic and financial downturns. For college-educated Blacks, on the other hand, during three periods of recession (1992-2013), their net worth decreased by 56% while Whites rose by 86%.

Another robust qualitative work by Gaddis (2015) compared employment opportunities for White and Black graduates of elite top-ranked universities versus high-ranked but less selective institutions. The researcher created matched candidate pairs and applied for 1,008 jobs on a national job-search website. Birth records were used to control for differences across social class and within racialized names. His results confirmed that although a degree from an elite university resulted in more employer responses for all candidates, Black candidates from elite universities did as well as White ones from less selective universities. More troubling, according to Gaddis (2015), Blacks faced a “double penalty” (p. 1451), they were offered jobs with lower starting salaries and lower prestige than their White peers. In an interview (*University of Michigan News*, 2015), Gaddis stated, “Education apparently has its limits because even a Harvard degree cannot make DeQuan as enticing as Charlie to employers” (p. 3). Other researchers have added to this body of research noting that unemployment for Black college graduates is 12.4% compared to just 5.6% for Whites. Even Black college graduates with high demand STEM degrees fared poorly (Ross, 2014). Starkman’s

(2014) words are sad but true: “African Americans’ accomplishments, on their own, will never, ever be enough to dig them out of the hole they’ve been thrown into” (para. 15).

Epilogue

My family’s current economic status says more about unique circumstances and sheer luck than our family’s exceptionality. Things could just have easily been different. We could have ended up in poverty. I am very proud of my strong, determined, and well-educated family, but as our journey continues, the economic outlook for generational wealth is hopeful yet uncertain. However, I worry about the negative effects of the Great Recession (2007-2009) on the millennial generation born between 1981 and 1996.

I expect my newly freed great-great-grandparents, James and Harriett Moffett, worried the same way the day they walked off that miserable plantation in Russell County, Alabama. Even now, 150 years later, Black people still live a precarious existence in America where the future of each generation can change precipitously and unpredictably.

References

- Badkar, M. (2014, June 12). We're on the verge of the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of the world. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/biggest-transfer-of-wealth-in-history-2014-6>
- Bailey, S. (2014, December 2). Investing in Coca-Cola: The world's largest soft drink company. Retrieved from <http://marketreallist.com/2014/12/importance-coca-colas-iconic-brand-name/>
- Baptist, E. (2014). *The half has never been old: Slavery and the making of American capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Blackmon, D. (2008). *Slavery by another name: The re-enslavement of Black Americans from civil war to World War II*. New York: Doubleday Books.
- Brannon, P. (1959). Moffitt Mill. *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, 21, 84.
- Bright, M. (1975). *Early Georgia portraits 1715-1870*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press. Personal Communication from Office of Collections Information and Research, National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution on October 14, 2014.
- Burroughs, T. (2001). Finding African Americans on the 1870 census. *Heritage Quest Magazine*, 91, 50-56.
- Carey, A. G. (2011). *Sold down the river: Slavery in the lower Chattahoochee valley of Alabama and Georgia*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press.
- The chronicle of Coca-Cola: A man named Woodruff. (2012, January 1). Retrieved from <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/history/the-chronicle-of-coca-cola-a-man-named-woodruff>
- Coates, T. (2014, June). The case for reparations. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2014/06/>
- Ellisor, J. T. (2010). *The second Creek War: Interethnic conflict with collusion on a collapsing frontier*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Emmons, W. R. & Noeth, B. J. (2015, August). Why didn't higher education protect Hispanic and Black wealth? *In the Balance: Perspectives on Household Balance Sheets*. St. Louis, MO: Center for Household Financial Stability of the Federal Reserve Bank.

- Fletcher, M. A. (2015, January 24). A shattered foundation. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2015/01/24/the-american-dream-shatters-in-prince-georges-county/>
- Gaddis, S.M. (2015). Discrimination in the credential society: An audit study of race and college selectivity in the labor market. *Social Forces*, 93(4), 1451-1479.
- Gates, H. L. (2014, February 10). Slavery by the numbers. *The Root*. Retrieved from http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2014/02/slavery_statistics_28_to_know_for_black_history_month.html
- Galloway, T. H. (2013, August 16). Joel Hurt (1850-1926). *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/business-economy/joel-hurt-1850-1926>
- Genealogy and History Trails of Russell County Alabama. (n.d.) *Joel Hurt*. Retrieved from <http://genealogytrails.com/ala/russell/bios.html>
- Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. (n.d.) *Slaves and slaveholdings*. Retrieved from <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/slaves-and-slavehol>
- Gutman, H. G. (1976). *The Black family in slavery and freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon.
- Hammett, L. B., & McGinnis, C. B. (2012). Rare artifacts belonging to the Oglethorpe chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, and the women who donated them. *Muscogiana Journal*, 23(1), 32-54.
- Kennedy, L., & Galer, M.J. (2004). *Historic Linwood Cemetery*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.
- Lyles, J. (2010). *Images of America: Phenix City*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.
- Obituary section (1908, November 3). [From *The Atlanta Constitution*]. Retrieved from ProQuest Historical Newspapers. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/hnpatlantaconstitution2/docview/496181799/C78685C8821F4107PQ/1?accountid=10747>.
- Obituary section (1911, January 23). [From *The Columbus Daily Enquirer*]. Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/atlnewspapers/id:aga1911-0435>

- Ross, J. (2014, May 27). African-Americans with college degrees are twice as likely to be unemployed as other graduates. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/african-americans-with-college-degrees-are-twice-as-likely-to-be-unemployed-as-other-graduates/430971/>
- Russell County Heritage Book Committee. (2003). *The heritage of Russell County, Alabama*. Clanton, AL: Heritage Publications Consultants.
- Sitton, T. & Utley, D. K. (1997). *From can see to can't see: Texas cotton farmers on the southern prairies*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Sketches of Alabama towns and counties, vol 3*. (1937). Birmingham, AL: Alabama Genealogical Society.
- Southern Historical Association. (1895). *Memoirs of Georgia: Containing historical accounts of the state's civil, military, industrial and professional interests, and personal sketches of many of its people, vol 2*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Historical Press.
- Starkman, D. (2014, June 30). The \$236,000 hole in the American dream. *The New Republic*, 245(12), 30-35. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/118425/closing-racial-wealth-gap>
- Tankersley, J. (2014, January 23). Economic mobility hasn't changed in a half-century in America, economists declare. *The Washington Post*.
- Telfair, N. (1929). *History of Columbus, Georgia: 1828-1928*. Columbus, GA: The Historical Publishing, Company. Retrieved from <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=22823>
- University of Michigan News. (2015, March 5). African- Americans with 'elite' college degrees have little advantage in job market. Retrieved from www.ns.umich.edu/.22725-african-americans-with-elite-college-degrees- have-little-advantage-in-job-market
- US Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov>
- Wells, I. B. (1996) *Southern horrors and other writings: The anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells*. New York: St. Martin's Press.