

# My Family Up

---

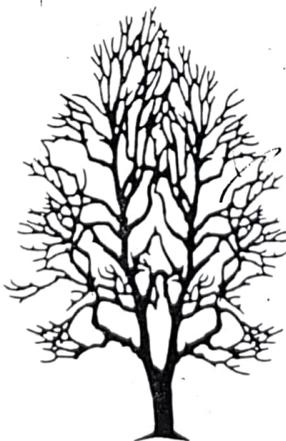
# From Slavery



Grandma Grace



Grandpa Levi



Viola Wright-Powell

## My family up from slavery

Grace Wright Fitchett was born a slave in Virginia in the year 1825, where she lived until her death on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1939. Having lived 114 years when she passed, she was the oldest resident of Northampton County. The local newspaper stated her age incorrectly at 109 years, but remembered her fondly in her obituary as "highly respected." Of note in her obituary was the list of her accomplishments and some of her descendants. Today, nearly two centuries after the birth of "Grandma Grace," her descendants continue to achieve great things, of which this family can be quite proud.

During her lifetime, Grandma Grace was married three times. Her first husband a slave was lynched. Her second husband, our decedent, a man by the name of Wright, became a runaway slave during their marriage and was never heard of again. It is not known how many children they had together, but of those children there were four boys.



One of the sons born to Grandma Grace and Wright was named Levi. He was born in 1861. As an adult, Levi was a well respected man in the



*Sarah Powell Weber*

Capeville community. He later became the constable (or police officer) over all the Blacks in Capeville. At one time he served as Justice of the Peace. Levi married Sarah Coston, and they had twelve children; Lummie, Viola, Naomi, Sophronia, Blanche, Beulah, Cornelia, Theodore, Henry, Willie, and two others who died quite young.

My mother was Levi's daughter, Viola. She married Albert Powell in 1912, and I was born on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1913. My name is Sarah Powell Weber, and I am the oldest living descendant of the Powell-Wright families.

During my childhood, I was fortunate enough to know my great grandmother, who I called Grandma Grace. My grandfather, Levi, built two rooms onto his house for Grandma Grace to live in her later years. When we Powell children would go to visit, we would sit around Grandma Grace's feet and listen to her stories and her wisdom. I'd like to share some of that with you.

Grandma Grace spent her childhood as a slave, watching over the master's children. At the age of 9 or 10, she was required to accompany the master's children to school each day. Her duty was to carry their books, be sure the girls' bows were on straight, and other such tasks. The young slaves were expected to stand, never sit, in the back of the schoolroom all day, waiting to perform their duties. It was never assumed by the white slave owners that these slave children might actually learn something during those days at school. But of course, it was impossible for them not to learn as they observed the lessons day after day.

When she would return to the slave quarters at the end of a day, Grandma Grace would teach the other slave children all that she had learned at the school that day. Without the benefit of pencils and paper, she would teach with what was available. She would pick up a



stick and write her lessons in the dirt. If the letter of the day were "A," she would scratch a large "A" on the ground and proceed to spell words such as "apple" with the letter of the day. In this way, Grandma Grace helped these

children learn to read who otherwise would have been illiterate.

Many years later, Grandma Grace was still teaching others. By the age of six, I learned the states and capitals from Maine to Florida with the help of my great grandmother.

As well as teaching us, Grandma Grace would share stories of her childhood. Her mother worked in the Big House, and Grandma Grace told us of the system by which her mother helped the other slaves find a

small bit of enjoyment in the harsh lives they led. On Saturday nights, once the Big House was quiet, the slaves would hold forbidden parties. These parties were held way back in the woods so the master would not be awoken by the sounds of homemade instruments, and the voices of slaves dancing and enjoying corn liquor.

Of course, these parties were dangerous because of the risk of discovery. For this reason, Sunday mornings were a time to worry about whether the master had heard their revelry. The slave women who worked in the Big House had the job of determining if master knew anything about the night before. If the master and his family left for church without any indication of a problem, the slave woman would stand on the veranda to announce the news. For appearance sake, she would be sweeping. But her real reason for standing on the veranda was to sing a message to the slaves in the quarters. She would sing a spiritual, "Way down yonder in the valley by myself, couldn't hear nobody sing." Upon hearing this song, the slaves would know they had safely enjoyed another Saturday night party.



*Reverend Albert Powell*

Some of the things I learned from Grandma Grace were things I overheard and didn't understand until years later. I remember once, when I heard an argument between Aunt Sophronia, Aunt NeNe, and Grandma Grace. During those years, young couples could not court unless my grandmother or great grandmother sat near enough to hear everything that was happening. My aunts were arguing with Grandma Grace about something she knew about one of their boyfriends. She was threatening to tell what she knew to their mother. I heard one of my aunts complain, "What do you know anyway? You never even got married." Grandma Grace insisted, "I did! I jumped the broom three times!" As a child I had no idea what she meant. It wasn't until years later, when I saw Kizzie jump the broom in Alex Haley's *Roots* that I realized jumping the broom was the only way my



great grandmother could be married as a slave.

Education was important to my family. My mother taught school during the day, and at night would teach in our home. Her night school was for Black teenage males who worked in the fields and could not get a regular education. My father built benches in our home for these to sit while my mother taught them. In return, those who could afford it would pay my mother 50 cents a week.

I received my formal education in schools that were opened for Blacks in the county. When I was ready for high school, the only school for Blacks was a Baptist run school that was twelve miles away from our home.

Many Black children did not choose to continue their education through to high school, but my brother Reverend (Albert) and I were determined to finish, no matter what it took. Our father would buy us our books and paper, and a few pencils that we had to make last the entire year. For a while, we were lucky enough to be able to share a ride to school each day with some fellow students, since no buses were provided for Black students.

One year in May, though, the person who drove us decided to stop attending school. His license was expired, and he could not afford to pay the renewal, so he stopped driving the car. Some of the students who

rode with us stopped their education, but Reverend and I were not about to give up an entire year's worth of schoolwork with less than two months left. So we



made the decision to walk the twelve miles to and from school each day.

Every morning, with the moon still shining, we would start our journey to the school. And each night, we would finally return home long after the sun had set. Sometimes during those long walks, buses would pass by full of white children, comfortable on their way to school. But we continued to walk each day, even when the weather was bad.

I remember one particular day, when we walked to school in a terrible downpour. By the time we finished our twelve-mile journey, we were drenched, our clothes sticking to us. There was no way we could make it through a day in those uncomfortable, soaked clothes. Fortunately, the principal of the school knew that my brother and I were walking to the school each day, so he was prepared for us. When we arrived at school, he took us aside and gave us dry clothes from the clothing donations made to the church.

During the summer months, my brother and I would work in the potato fields to earn money. In the afternoon, the plow would turn over the plants. That is when we would start working to remove the potatoes and place them in piles. The following morning we would pick up the potatoes and put them in barrels. This had to be done very early, because if the sun got too high in the sky it would burn the potatoes on the ground. My brother and I would fill sixty or seventy barrels of potatoes between the two of us each morning. We were paid ten cents a barrel.



*Dr. Elbert Powell*

I had another job that to this day holds bad memories for me. As a teenager I worked in Webster's Bean Factory. We would go to work on a Saturday morning to can the beans. Between noon and one p.m. we were let out of the factory for lunch, but after that, we were like prisoners. The boss would lock us in after lunch and we were not allowed back out until all the beans in the bins were canned. Usually this meant no break for dinner, and often we would not be let out of that factory room until the following morning.

The members of the Powell, Wright and White families have faced adversity through the generations, but we have worked hard, and come quite far from Grandma Grace's early years as a slave. We have much to be proud of. Many of our family members have attended prestigious schools, including: Hampton University, Howard University, University of Virginia, Union University, University of Maryland, Salisbury State

University, Longwood College, City College of New York, Bowie State College, Tennessee Tech University.



personnel, preachers, and an author, a dentist, and a college dean.

With the strength and talent that has been nurtured in each generation of this family, the descendants of Grace Wright Fitchett, and her son Levi Wright, are sure to continue to achieve great things for many generations to come.



OLDEST RESIDENT  
OF  
NORTHHAMPTON COUNTY, VA.  
"Aunt Grace Fitchett"  
114, Was Highly Respected Old Negress"

Northampton County's oldest resident, "Aunt Grace fitchett, 114, highly respected colored woman of Cheapside, died April 15th, 1939, at her home. "Aunt" Grace's descendants are among the outstanding Negroes of the county, with five of them teaching in the schools of this section; they are: Mary Nottingham Smith, supervisor of the Negro Schools in Accomac; Martha N. Bailey who has taught for 35 years in Northampton; Naomi Wright Stevens who has taught for 15 years; Cornelia I. Wright, who has taught for 12 years and Vivid Banks, who has taught for the past several years in Accomac. Others of her descendant have been prominent in the community life in which they lived.

The old Negress was for many years a member of the capeville A.M.E. Church and she is buried in the church cemetery. Born a slave, she is said never to have held any resentment and to have always advised her children and grandchildern to respect members of the white race.

She is survived by a son, a daughter, 39 grandchildren, 88 great-grandchildren and 23 great-great-grandchilren.