



# Profiles of Acclamation

## FIVE NEW JERSEY BLACK HISTORY ACTIVISTS DISCUSS THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES ON PRESERVING BLACK HISTORY

**Linda Shockley, Shamele Jordon, Samuel Still, Guy Weston, and Dolly Marshall**

Some of the most passionate advocates and activists in Black history are people motivated by personal connections. Descendants of noted historic communities and descendants of historic figures very often grow up with oral history from ancestors, producing a curiosity for learning more and a sense of accountability for getting the facts right. There is a sense of pride in our heritage, and a sense of gratification in knowing we play a part in raising the profile of local history that may not otherwise be well represented in what we learned in school growing up. In this article, we hear from five such people to hear their personal stories, insights, challenges, vision for the future, and more. We will seek to continue this theme in future issues. Please email [publications@AAHGS.org](mailto:publications@AAHGS.org) if you have a story to tell or would like to recommend a story from your family or from your community

### **We Must Plan for the Future to Protect Stories of Our Past**

Linda Shockley  
President, Lawnside  
Historical Society



Growing up in Lawnside, New Jersey, we took the singular history of our community in stride—an all-Black incorporated town like no other in New Jersey. We had our own elected mayor and council, board of education, police

department, and a volunteer fire company that predated incorporation by fourteen years. We practically took it for granted.

Coming from a town known far and wide for barbeque ribs, corn on the cob, night clubs, and Sunday liquor sales, when I moved to Philadelphia, I had to remind Philadelphians that there was much more to little Lawnside than they might have thought.

Every Black history week, Dr. Roscoe Moore left his elementary school office where he administered polio vaccines and TB tine tests to tell us how, as a 1911 graduate of Howard University's medical school, he visited patients with his horse and buggy. He was a bibliophile, an archivist, a collector, and son of the second postmaster. I later learned he had this gem of a book called *A True Story of Lawnside*, by Charles C. Smiley, published in 1921. That book and interviews with Dr. Moore formed the basis of my high school paper on the town's history and helped me continue that pursuit in college.

I returned to Lawnside in the late 1980s after living and working as a journalist in New York for twelve years. Lamenting that our town had no Black History Month community-wide celebration, my sister and a few friends decided to stage a program in 1990.

Clarence Still, the de facto town historian and a member of the Still family, announced at the program that the town's oldest house, the Peter Mott House, was slated to be leveled to make way for a housing development. My older sister Chrissandra

Butler and her schoolmates Harold Conaway and Kizuwanda Olusola decided we needed to organize a historical society and meet at my house.

I had one question: “Can I come?”

Our mission was to save the house and commemorate its ownership by a free Black man and agent of the Underground Railroad. We drafted incorporation papers, bylaws, a constitution, created a board of trustees, applied for nonprofit, tax-exempt status, and negotiated with the developer to deed our society the property. Mr. Still was our founding president and our officers included Lineise Miller Marvin, a descendant of the founders of the Miller Funeral Home in the 1840s, and Arlene Artis, a member of the old Farmer family.

We finally obtained the deed—fittingly in February 1992. Then we started on the arduous road to raise the money needed to restore the 1845 two-story clapboard farmhouse. The gateway to grants and funding was listing the property on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. Once the State Historic Preservation Officer called it a significant surviving example of a home of a prosperous Black man in a nineteenth-century Black community, we were on our way. A local historian created our nomination pro bono, and the Mott house was listed in 1994. Two other properties have followed: Mount Peace Cemetery in 2009, and the Lawnside School in 2015. There will be more in the coming years.

After raising nearly \$650,000 from government and corporate sources over the past thirty-three years, we are embarking on growing program offerings, working with educators, promoting historical research, and inspiring the next generation of young historians. We have to continue to revise and implement our strategic plan.

Our programming is making strides with grants from the New Jersey Arts & Culture Renewal Fund of the Princeton Area Community Foundation, the New Jersey Cultural Trust, New Jersey American Water Company, the UPS Foundation, the Zallie Community Foundation, the New Jersey

Historical Commission, the Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission, and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

The challenge remains to attract and engage talented younger historians, researchers, and students with the skills and the acuity to use new technology while being grounded in the foundational values of using primary sources and continuing to dig for our authentic history.

The Society was represented at the New Jersey Education Association convention in Atlantic City for the first time in November 2023. We are finally reaching out to schools in a systematic way. We were adopted by Braithwaite Communications, a Philadelphia marketing company, and our website, designed and maintained by Form+Facet, is attractive, engaging and interactive.

Presenting real facts is challenged by growing resistance to confronting discomfiting truths of the African American experience. Countless times Black people have been told “You have no history,” from Arturo Schomburg to Charles Blockson to fellow students at my local high school. Now when this truth is brought to the surface, there is a concerted effort to deny, suppress, or censor it.

Our further challenge is to nullify apologetics for the systemic inhumanity and injustice visited



Members of the NJEA Immersive Underground Railroad Experience Writers Group peer into the cellar at the Peter Mott House on a visit in September 2023. They are Tamar LaSure-Owens, Tariq Raheem, Talena Queen, Sundjata Sekou, Muneerah Higgs, Sari Alburtus, and Shan Byrd.

on Black people. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said.

I would suggest people doing this work coalesce to help one another navigate challenges met and overcome them to quicken the effectiveness of this movement.

### **Black History in Your Backyard: Preservation through Education**

Shamele Jordon

Host: Genealogy Quick Start  
(Live every other Tuesday @ 8 PM  
EST on YouTube and Facebook  
Live)



There came a point in my genealogy life when I needed to stop consuming knowledge and start sharing. I was a conference junkie. There wasn't a national conference that I did not attend. The growth of institutes increased the time I spent learning about family history research. Something had to change.

A few people, including Dr. Melinda Kashuba from the Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research, suggested I go into the schools to teach students. Laughable, I thought, but I eventually opened to the idea. After just one session, it was evident that K-12 education was the change I was looking for.

This led to the creation of “Visualizing the Past.” My desire to preserve Black history transformed from being a collector to bringing the stories of African Americans to life for students. When I shared my plans with my genealogy friend Sharon B. Gillins she remarked that I was exposing Black history in their backyard. (Yes, I thanked her for my cool new slogan.)

### **From Consumer to Producer**

The first curriculum I created was called “Civil War in Color.” Encouraged by Linda Shockley, president of the Lawnside Historical Society, I

presented my program to the superintendent Dr. Ronn Johnson. The next thing I knew, I was standing in front of the eighth-grade class telling the stories of the one-hundred-plus African American Civil War veterans buried in their town of Lawnside, New Jersey. We met weekly for eight weeks to map one of the cemeteries and created ArcGIS story maps about the veterans.

Formerly known as Snow Hill, Lawnside is New Jersey's only African American town. Established in 1926, this town contains three locations on the national and state registers of historic places. They are the Peter Mott House Underground Railroad Museum, Mount Peace Cemetery, which the students mapped, and the Lawnside School.

The next curriculum I created was again specific to Lawnside students. With the help of E. Muneerah Higgs, a retired Lawnside teacher, we created twenty Black history postcards on Lawnside people, places, and organizations. Each week we taught five postcards. Weekly students submitted artistic expressions showing learnings such as videos, artwork, newsletters, animations, writings, and commentary. Their submissions were thoughtful, creative, and brave. They inspired



Shamele Jordon (left) and retired teacher Muneerah Higgs (right) with postcards of historic places in Lawnside. These postcards, along with other educational information, were packaged for students learning virtually during the COVID pandemic.

me and reaffirmed my commitment to education as preservation.

### Instant Message from “CBS This Morning”

The biggest accomplishment was simply being there. I wanted to give them what I received as a Lawnside student. My days were filled with teachers stuffing me with examples of Black excellence daily. The excitement and energy of the students told me I met my goal.

Another accomplishment was featured in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*<sup>1</sup> by educational reporter Melanie Burney. Because of this, “CBS This Morning” instant-messaged me on Facebook. Unfortunately, the program had ended by the time they contacted us.

### Where Are the Black People?

What I love most about “Visualizing the Past” is the opportunity to unearth Black history in the backyards where there are no known historical figures. Although it has been challenging, using genealogical and historical research methodology has rarely let me down. In this particular case, census research exposed the African Americans. Also, historians like Charles Blockson provided a wealth of information to be followed up with additional research.

### Education Is Preservation

School administrations are looking for innovative ways to include interactive programming on diverse subjects. If you are looking for a way to preserve Black history, think about doing so in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of students.

They light up learning that there is a historical site down the street from their house, or across the street from the ballfield where they play. This excitement and connectedness not only enables them to retain this information, but also grounds them in a way that knowledge of national historical figures does not.

Inspire future adults by creating a space for them to investigate as citizen learners, connecting

with their community today and in the past. The methodology we use and the documents we enjoy are also fun for students. And guess what? They can actually read cursive too, so we can exhale a little.

- 1 <https://www.inquirer.com/news/nj-education-black-history-lawnside-underground-railroad-peter-mott-house-20210222.html> and <https://www.inquirer.com/photo/genealogist-teachers-team-up-teach-black-history-lawnside-new-jersey-20210222.html>

### The Dr. James Still Historic Office Site

Sam Still  
Executive Director  
James Still Historic  
Office Site and  
Education Center



Located in Medford, New Jersey, our site is a Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) State Historic Park dedicated to the life of Dr. James Still. He was an early nineteenth-century African American herbalist and entrepreneur. He had a thriving business that served the south Jersey and Philadelphia suburban areas. He was the older brother of William Still, who was a major abolitionist on the Underground Railroad. The site consists of Dr. James Still’s home and office, the latter of which is still standing. It is part of a twenty-three-acre state park—the only one in the state named after an African American.

My connection to Dr. James Still and William Still is that I am their second-great-grandnephew. My second-great-grandfather, Samuel Still, was James’s and Williams’s older brother and the first free-born child of Levin and Charity Still. Here, I will answer questions posed to me by *AAHGS Journal*.

I got started reading and telling my family history at the age of thirteen. My second-great-grandfather

Samuel Still was born 7 February 1805. I grew up attending the various Still family history days throughout southern New Jersey. My father had me cutting the grass and keeping Dr. James Still's gravesite cleaned up and researching Still family documents. We spent many afternoons hiking through the pine barrens, my father always pointing out places where my ancestors lived, and the trails to the cedar swamps and cranberry bogs around the homestead of Levin and Charity Still in Shamong, New Jersey. My father was one of the last Levin Still descendants who actually lived on the homestead in Shamong.

Because the 1980s, with the resurgence of African Americans tracing their ancestral roots because of Alex Haley's monumental novel *Roots*, many Black families were trying to make connections to their own roots. As we gathered at Still family reunions—primarily in Mt. Laurel, Lawnside, and Vineland, New Jersey—many of us made the assumption that we all were progeny of Levin and Charity Still. I remember having discussions with my father and other elders about the story of Levin's last name originally being Steel. It was quietly mentioned for me not to be concerned about that information. It was not until thirty years later that I really began my journey of fact-checking my family history.

Over the years, some family writers regurgitated “fakelore” such as William, James, and Peter Still all lived in Snowhill (Lawnside), New Jersey, negating the fact that they lived in Shamong. Also, the fact that in 1850, the list of children of Charity Still only listed fourteen and not eighteen children, as was claimed by Dr. James Still in his book. Fakelore stories were told of four unnamed children somehow growing up to adulthood and settling in other places in New Jersey, and that Levin Still was a descendant of a Guinea prince. Some of these claims have never been backed up by research by actual family members—or if so, never were told. Another fakelore is that Levin's son William Still lived in Camden, New Jersey, but the fact is that in 1844 he moved from Shamong to

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he lived for the remainder of his life. That same fakelore became the truth to many people. But for me, there were always some “facts” that just never connected.

In 2010, I began dissecting all the material I could find on my family history. I wanted to go deeper than what was on the surface. I started fact checking the fact checkers. Also, other Still family members began discussing with me how we all were connected. Some said they could not find any connections to Levin and Charity Still's progeny. There were so many who were frustrated that they could not make the connection, so they just decided to go along with the status quo beliefs. I began questioning the family historians. All the so-called facts did not add up. Everything was not as clean and simple as some historians or griots stated. I read a book by a family historia, Lurey Khan, who wrote that my fourth-great-grandfather's last name was “Steel” prior to settling in New Jersey. I wanted to read for myself and find out more about the Levin Steel family from Maryland's eastern shore. I found that allegation to be true. So why did Levin choose the name “Still” and why not “Johnson,” “Bustill,” or “Smith”? Were all the Stills in New Jersey and surrounding areas blood related? What was the connection? When Levin made the trek to New Jersey, was he visiting other family members who also escaped that peculiar institution of enslaved people and settled there? I was always amazed that no one around me had really done any research, or were just saying they hadn't. What about this Saunders Griffin, supposedly Levin's white enslaved people owner? What about his wife Sidney (aka Charity) Still; was she really on the same plantation with Levin? What about her family?

There are so many questions that I was sure there were clues to the truth. I wanted to travel and do my own research. But where to start with so many unanswered questions? With all my research and passion, I suppose it was my destiny that I am in the position I am in today, and that



Dr. James Still Office Historic Site

is the executive director of the Dr. James Still Historic Office Site.

Our nonprofit organization was, for a time, under the tutelage of the Medford History Society, but in 2019 we were able to create our own organization. The organization is the Dr. James Still Historic Office Association with an IRS designation of 501(c)(3).

We are also very proud of our joint efforts with New Jersey DEP to finally get the go-ahead to restore Dr. James Still's office. We look forward to preserving the office back to its 1855 look. It is the association's responsibility to create an interpretive center in Dr. Still's office.

One of the major challenges is obtaining grants for the restoration and the interpretation center at the site. Another challenge is tracking when grant applications are due, especially when given a short period prior to the due date.

Words of wisdom I would say to anyone who undertakes preserving an African American site: first, stay true to the historical content; second, create networks with like-minded organizations; and third, remember that it is about passing on our history and legacy to the young people. First,

as African Americans, much of our connection to our original culture has been buried or lost to us. But our significance in building America is all around us and it is important for us to research our history, discover it and tell it. It is important to know where we come from, and that our enslaved Africans were not just uneducated enslaved peoples but survivors. Second, learn patience and do not overextend yourself.

### **Preserving and Protecting Timbuctoo, an Antebellum Free Black Community in Westampton, New Jersey, New Jersey**

Guy Weston  
Managing Director  
Timbuctoo Historical  
Society



The mission of the Timbuctoo Historical Society is to seek, document, preserve, interpret, and perpetuate the history and heritage of Timbuctoo, an unincorporated community in Westampton Township, New Jersey. Our community was settled beginning in 1826 by formerly enslaved and free Black people. Our society was founded in 2019 to provide a community-based mechanism to manage historic preservation activities in Timbuctoo.

I was introduced to Timbuctoo by my "elder" cousin, Lillian, as a young teen. At that time, I learned it was a place in New Jersey where my great-grandmother and her siblings grew up. She was born in 1902. When I was in my mid-twenties, my mother and I went to Lillian's house, because she planned to pass our Timbuctoo property on to my mother. Lillian had become the caretaker of our land in Timbuctoo when her mother's health declined. Now Lillian was getting older, and she wanted to pass the property on to the next generation. My mother and I were flabbergasted when Lillian presented the deed and other documents. All but one were handwritten, dated as early as 1829. That day I learned that my

fourth-great-grandfather actually purchased his first Timbuctoo parcel in 1829 and our family lived there for about 100 years. My great-grandmother and her siblings, who were his grandchildren, began moving away to Philadelphia in the early decades of the twentieth century. Philadelphia was the closest big city and had better employment opportunities. By the 1930s, almost all of them had moved and their father had passed away. The house was eventually destroyed in a fire, but fortunately, various family members kept the taxes paid, so the property was intact for my mother to inherit in 1989.

At least I thought it was intact. It turned out that new deeds were not always executed when one generation passed the property on to the next. As a result, we only owned one-fourth of the property. My great-great-grandfather had three siblings. He took over the property when his parents died and raised his family there. However, his siblings never transferred their interest to him. To obtain clear title, I had to find the descendants of those siblings and ask them to “speak now or forever hold their peace” regarding any claims to property that, legally, had belonged to their ancestors as well as mine. Fortunately, we only got one response, and the title was settled quickly. However, the process of finding the names of all those distant cousins required countless trips to the state archives to research my family tree. This was in 1992, long before online genealogy records and search engines. That was my introduction to genealogy, and I was fascinated.

Fast forward to 2009. Temple University and the National Park Service approached our municipal government about doing an archaeological work in Timbuctoo. Archaeology in New Jersey? The word “archaeology” conjured images of exotic locations: Egypt, Pompei. Perhaps an Indian Reservation, but New Jersey? Through this project, I learned that pieces of broken glass and pottery or construction bricks provide insight into the community’s past. For example, inexpensive bricks probably meant



Fifteen-year-old A. J. Weston and eight-year-old Maya Weston help with archaeological dig, along with Marilyn Pfifer

the house was occupied by people of limited means. Multiple “Dixie Peach” jars suggest the occupants of the house were Black. Archaeologist Christopher Barton, who served as the site’s principal investigator, became my mentor and eventual colleague.

Barton is known for collaborative or community-based archaeology, which insists on meaningful participation of descendant communities. On that basis, a multidisciplinary advisory committee had been formed to help plan the excavation and interpret findings. As Timbuctoo descendants, my mother and I served on two such committees.

History research was needed to facilitate interpretation of archaeological findings. Local historians presented their findings at our meetings from time to time. There I learned things I didn’t know could possibly be known. Deed research identified the names of all of Timbuctoo’s original landowners, and mostly Quaker sellers. Deeds and corporation certificates as early as 1826 identified organizers of our schools, churches, and other institutions, as well as their activist missions. Obituaries in the local white newspaper reported on notable Timbuctoo citizens as early as 1851. I became a voracious reader, eventually transcribing some such documents to make them available to the public, and even finding new ones.

Fast forward again to 2019. For various reasons, I decided that historic preservation could happen more efficiently and effectively outside of a municipal government with its frequent leadership changes. I established a nonprofit corporation called the Timbuctoo Historical Society, and eventually resigned from the township's committee. In our first year of operation, we obtained ownership of the Timbuctoo cemetery facilitated, in part by my transcription of the 1854 handwritten deed of record in 2017. In 2021, I wrote "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century." While only 8,500 words, it is by far the most comprehensive history of Timbuctoo published to date. We also have other scholarly papers, deeds and newspaper transcriptions, and other educational material available on [www.TimbuctooNJ.com](http://www.TimbuctooNJ.com). These are my proudest accomplishments: obtaining ownership of the cemetery and writing various publications to raise the profile of Timbuctoo in New Jersey history and African American history. Our website had 7,999 visitors in 2023.

We look forward to continuing to find new ways to engage the public and would be happy to hear your suggestions at [info@TimbuctooNJ.com](mailto:info@TimbuctooNJ.com).

### **Cemetery Preservation Is Essential**

Dolly L. Marshall  
Historian and Preservationist  
Descendant of James Forten

I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Dolly Marshall, and I am a historian and preservationist. I am also the historic preservation specialist for the City of Camden, New Jersey, and a trustee of a national historic and Underground Railroad site named Mount Peace Cemetery. My area of expertise is restoring historic African American cemeteries and documenting the many untold stories they contain.



To give you some background, cemeteries—along with schools and churches—were some of the first enterprises founded by African Americans after Emancipation. These institutions formed the center of communities that were established by newly freed men and women. Founded in 1900 Mount Peace Cemetery, a historic African American burial ground located in Lawnside, New Jersey, contains countless narratives of the African diaspora. During this time, African Americans were excluded from white-only cemeteries. Originally known as Free Haven, Lawnside was a stop on the Underground Railroad and was settled by people who were formerly enslaved and those who were free people of color. This community burial ground was created to provide a place where African Americans could be buried with dignity. It is the final resting place of many notable African Americans, including Civil War veterans, educators, abolitionists, ministers, and activists, as well as everyday people who did some extraordinary things.

My work started out as an avocation because I was not motivated by money but was driven to right the wrongs through historical research and educating the public about my various projects. My work is centered on restorative justice because I unearth overlooked and untold history that has been forgotten due to erasure in the historical narrative. All of my projects relate to this type of restoration. I personally have fifteen ancestors buried at Mount Peace Cemetery, including my maternal great-great-grandparents, two sets of great-grandparents, as well as many great-aunts and uncles and cousins. Therefore, I was initially motivated to rediscover my own ancestral heritage.

I got started with genealogy over fifteen years ago, however I have had an affinity for cemeteries since childhood that developed into my preservation acumen over time. Both of my parents, Roosevelt and Roberta Marshall, taught me the importance of knowing our family history, which



Behind the scenes picture of my upcoming documentary film, with cinematographer and editor Brandon Strauss.

included regaling me with stories of different ancestors who came before me.

One of my recent and rewarding accomplishments was producing my first documentary film on the extraordinary life of Rev. Alexander Heritage Newton. Reverend Newton is buried in Mount Peace Cemetery and was an abolitionist, Civil War veteran, minister, and author who was very prominent during his lifetime, but whose achievements remained widely unknown outside of history, military, and religious circles. I look forward to sharing my film with the public in 2024. Another thing I am especially proud of is that I was honored with the Award of Recognition by the New Jersey Historical Commission for public service and preserving and sharing history in the state of New Jersey.

I've experienced a great amount of death and loss in my lifetime, most recently the passing of my mother, Roberta Ruth Marshall. She was my champion, my biggest supporter, and is my role model in everything I do. I am tasked to preserve her legacy now, in addition to coping without her physical presence. Grief in and of itself can stop you in your tracks and leave you with broken pieces of your former self. It has been challenging

to navigate the array of emotions I feel within and without my area of study and the insensitivities people display toward death. I am so grateful that my mother was the first teacher and continually inspired me as a woman and an educator. I am comforted by her lasting influence on me and find solace in the daily little reminders she continues to send me.

I am passionate about sharing African American and African diasporic history through cemetery preservation. It is equally important to me to spread awareness about the practice of ritual, remembrance, and commemoration in regard to African American burial customs as well. These traditions form an integral part of our cultural

heritage and shared past, therefore we all must learn how to become better stewards of our history. Moreover, with the current atmosphere in this country, which includes book banning and the elimination of African studies in schools, cemetery preservation is more impactful than ever. African American and African burial grounds are under a continuous threat of displacement and erasure, which is why African American cemeteries and their historiographies need to be rediscovered, rewritten, and preserved for future generations. To counteract the misconceptions and gaps in historical record, I plan to produce more documentary films, actively research, and continue to collaborate with as many Black museums, schools, and libraries as I can. This will reinforce the agency of every person of African descent in telling and interpreting their own history.

If you take away one thing after reading my story, I hope you will appreciate how telling stories through cemetery preservation relates to our collective history and helps amplify voices of those left out of the historical narrative, and positions us with the knowledge and understanding to shape a better future.