From Rappahannock to the White House, & Back Again

Generations of family history, land, and legacy

By: Ayana Summerlinrosa

The Old Home Place sits in Rappahannock County on land the Ficklin family has owned for over a century. For John Wrory Ficklin, it is more than a weather-worn structure slowly giving way to time; it's an anchor.

His grandfather, James Strother Ficklin, was born into enslavement in Rappahannock County. Separated from his mother and siblings early in life, Strother, as he was commonly called, served as a water boy and manservant for a local Confederate soldier during the Civil War.

Uncovering his grandfather's story reshaped John's understanding of local history. Far from the massive plantations often shown in popular media, he learned that by the 1850s, Rappahannock was largely an agricultural community made up of hundreds of farms, many of them smaller operations where enslaved people performed the daily labor that sustained them.

After emancipation, Strother moved to Ohio to work in stone quarries. He returned to Amissville and purchased 37 acres and two mules. He raised 14 children and built a life defined by independence, refusing to let his origins dictate his future.

John describes his grandfather's mindset in three words: *in spite of.* For John, that determination serves as both a foundation and a challenge: "That man jumped over all his obstacles. Why can't you jump over yours?"

Ficklin's book, *An Unusual Path: Three Generations From Slavery to the White House*, chronicles the distinct journeys of three men and the choices that shaped their legacy.

For John, the story was never confined to a page. Though he grew up in Washington, D.C., Rappahannock was always part of his childhood. His family regularly traveled down Route 211 to Amissville, watching the Blue Ridge Mountains come into view back when the road was still just one lane in each direction.

Those trips were more than childhood visits. They brought John back to a place that helped define his father, John Woodson Ficklin.

Born in 1919, John Woodson grew up on the family farm in Amissville. When he left Rappahannock in 1937, he stepped out of his farm dungarees, served as an Army medic during World War II, and ultimately put on a butler's tuxedo.

On February 18, 1946, he began a 44-year career at the White House. Known in certain circles in Washington, D.C., as "Mr. White House," he rose from butler to maître d', serving nine Presidential administrations and earning the trust of multiple U.S. Presidents and First Ladies.

His work brought him into the company of world leaders and cultural figures, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower. John Woodson assisted Eisenhower with his signature charcoal grilling, a memorable connection that grew from his lifelong love of outdoor cooking.

John Woodson and his older brother, Charles, the maître d' at the time, created the legendary eggnog recipe that became a White House Christmas tradition. In an interview with John Woodson, a *Washington Post* reporter said, "The eggnog was delicious and was allegedly strong enough to change a Democrat into a Republican and a Republican into a Democrat."

Yet when John Wrory remembers his father, he does not start with State Dinners.

"I was always in awe of my dad," Ficklin said. "I was a daddy's boy."

Behind the high-profile career was a playful, devoted father who loved taking his sons fishing on the Chesapeake Bay and to the beach. On the water, he shared stories of growing up in Rappahannock and passed along the values his own father had taught him: do every job to the best of your ability, never let adversity stop you, and honor family and faith.

Because of his military service, John Woodson was eligible for burial at Arlington National Cemetery. But he chose Amissville instead, where he was laid to rest beside his mother, Vallie Lee Davenport Ficklin Smith, and siblings near Bethel Baptist Church.

Washington was where he built an extraordinary career.

Amissville was home.

John Wrory Ficklin's own career carried the family legacy even further. Building a career in national security, he served at the highest levels of federal government inside the White House.

His work on the National Security Council staff spanned eight Presidential administrations, including George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. After 40 years in public service, he retired as the longest-serving staffer at the time.

During his career, John had weekend duty when what he described as an all-African American team was managing national security operations at the White House, with General Colin Powell at the head of the table. He remembers the significance of the historic moment: "The world would be stunned," he thought, knowing what it meant to see an all-African American team running national security operations at that level.

There was just one problem: John didn't write down the date.

Years later, while doing research for his book, *An Unusual Path*, he tried to reconstruct the timeline, even reaching out to the former deputy director of the Situation Room for assistance. They still could not pinpoint the exact day.

That experience stayed with John as he began working on his book. What started as a desire to honor his family became an effort to document what might otherwise disappear. Tracing his lineage back to 1855, John, with help from his wife, Patrice, spent countless hours in archives, cross-referencing military records, land deeds, census files, letters, photographs, and oral histories.

And then there was the family Bible.

The Bible was a treasured heirloom that John knew from childhood. Over the years, it came into the care of his Aunt Flossie, the youngest child of James Strother Ficklin and Valley Lee, and was often part of family stories and conversations. It also became an important part of John's research.

Inside its pages was a record of family births, deaths, and marriages that George Ficklin Keyser, aka Cuzzin Joe, used to hand-draw the family tree, connecting branches of the Ficklin family and helping John piece together the lineage he was tracing.

After Aunt Flossie's passing, her granddaughter entrusted the Bible to John. His background in photography and archival preservation helped him recognize its condition and understand the importance of caring for it.

He also made the Bible part of *An Unusual Path*, featuring images of it in the book, including a photograph of the worn volume with his grandfather's glasses resting on top of it.

The land held its own stories. After John's cousin, George Keyser, consolidated ownership of the family acreage and bequeathed the Old Home Place to him, the property became his to maintain. Today, his own sons have walked through the house and across the land.

Pieces of the story are still coming to light.

Two sisters, Annie Brent and Helen Brent, are buried on John's property. Both were married to his grandfather, James Strother Ficklin, at different points in his life. Strother and Burrel Smith, Vallie Lee's second husband, are also buried on John's land.

Fieldstones mark their graves, but there are no names identifying which grave belongs to whom.

For John, making sure those names are remembered is part of preserving history. It is also at the heart of AAARC's work to document Rappahannock County's African American history.

"I think I've made that next generation's job a lot easier," John said.

Meet John Ficklin

This November, John will return to Rappahannock County for a book-signing event hosted in partnership with AAARC, Scrabble School & Rappahannock Historic Society. He will share his story and discuss *An Unusual Path: Three Generations from Slavery to the White House* with the community.

The event will offer an opportunity to hear directly from John, learn more about his family's history, and ask questions about the research behind the book.

Book-signing details will be announced closer to November.