

Nostalgia in the House of Fordham

Prominent Southern Black Leaves a Legacy of Memories

By EUGENE ROBINSON, *The Washington Post*

The way his sassy daughter tells it, Maj. John Hammond Fordham, "too slow and lazy and aristocratic to say good morning too loud," would stroll at a regal pace from his law office to the house for dinner, which was on the table at 2. This was during the major's ample middle years, the first few years of the new century.

On some days the sunlight would glint off his mahogany skin, highlighting his sharp cheekbones. On days when it rained he would approach through the gloom as slowly as ever, refusing to hurry.

His wife Louisa, my great-grandmother, would look down the street and see him coming on those rainy days. "Hammond!" she would yell; but he was oblivious. When he finally reached the house, she would tell him he had looked like a fool strolling through the rain.

"Not as much of a fool as I'd look running through it," my great-grandfather would reply. Then, removing his tailored jacket, now sopped and shapeless, he would make her exasperation complete with just the right touch of gall. "And now, madame, you may lay out some fresh clothes for me."

The house that Fordham walked home to so slowly, the white house he built on the northwest corner of Boulevard and Oak in Orangeburg, S.C., is the house in which I grew up. Sadie Smith, my grandmother and the major's only surviving child, has lived in the house for almost all of her 95 years; she lives there to this day. Her daughter Louisa, my mother, save brief interruptions, has never lived in any other house.

Moving, Moving, Moving

Americans have always been thought restless, but it seems that at some fairly recent point restlessness escalated into something like a case of bad nerves. People suddenly took to moving, moving, moving again, living within a new set of walls every five years or so, regularly stuffing their households into cardboard boxes to be carted away. There is nothing inherently wrong with this; indeed, a lot of people have no choice but to join the peripatetic swarm and look to some Other Place for the

work or the climate or the ambiance they need. Something is lost, though.

Whenever you put a house into cardboard boxes, seal them with stiff brown tape and load them into a truck, you lose something. The word for what gets lost is elusive. Continuity comes close, essence perhaps closer. I prefer resonance, because that is what I feel when I go home to Orangeburg: reverberations, subtle ones, vibrations of fact, fable, legend, history that all play against an unchanging background, and are somehow heightened by that fact. The resonance can barely be heard, or felt; and yet it is as unmistakable as a fingerprint.

It is a characteristically Southern structure, a two-story house with white wooden siding and a wide front porch that serves as an auxiliary living room during the warm months. The porch is furnished with a swing, a folding chair or two and a piece of furniture we called a "glider"—a metal seat, painted white, that sways from a platform instead of being suspended from the ceiling like a proper swing. While my sister Ellen and I passed long summer nights in the swing, straining to touch the ceiling with our toes, the adults sat on the glider and let it move softly to the quiet rhythms of conversation.

Pianos Needed to 'Breathe'

Above the glider is a tiny window. Inside, on the other side of the wall beneath the window, we always kept a massive black upright piano. The window was designed into the house, my grandmother says, because of the belief at the time that pianos needed to "breathe" fresh air. (The piano has been gone for several years, a donation that now sits—breathless?—in the basement of the Methodist Church, our church, down the street.)

On the family room wall near the window there is a daguerreotype portrait of Louisa Gertrude Fordham. It shows her with classic good looks, wearing a high-collared blouse and the kind of winsome, romantic look associated with Victorian heroines. Her eyes gaze into the room with emotion, and what looks like a little sadness.



The house built for John Hammond Fordham's family in Orangeburg, S.C., in 1903 has been

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home to three later generations. Fordham was an Army major, a tax official and attorney.

On another wall in the same room, above a fireplace that was bricked over decades ago, is a similarly formal portrait of the major. Here there is no romance. His eyes are as dark as pieces of coal, his skin just a shade lighter. He looks self-possessed, confident, formidable. He was all those things; and this powerful image of him is as much a part of the house as any wall or beam.

The major, like a surprising number of blacks in the South, was able to seize that window of time between the end of the Civil War and the passage of racist Jim Crow laws early this century and use those years to his best advantage. The Reconstruction era is somewhat tarnished in the popular imagination, thought to be a

Please see LEGACY, Page 7

LEGACY: Memories of a Black Family

Continued from 6th Page

time when carpetbaggers roamed the ruins of the Confederacy and made off with whatever hadn't been nailed down.

That image is one perpetrated for the most part by the white Southerners who used it as a justification for the repressive legislation that was to follow. It is largely a lie.

On Jan. 15, 1908, Fordham said this in a speech he gave to a white audience at the Opera House in the state capital of Columbia:

"Forty years ago the Negroes of the South did not own a square foot of ground nor a roof to cover them. Now, on the other hand, there are 130,000 farms owned by Negroes valued at \$350 million; 150,000 homes outside the farm ownership, valued at \$265 million and personal property valued at \$165 million; 12 Negro banks; three magazines; 450 newspapers; 800 physicians in practice; 300 lawyers; 30,000 schoolteachers; 300,000 books in the home. So starting from nothing, here is an accumulation of a billion dollars.

Determined to Educate Children

"When the work began, not 1% of the Negro adults of the South could read or write. Today 50% can do so, 55% of the children are attending school and with more facilities more would attend. . . . It can be said to our lasting credit that no matter what the cost, if we have to do with one meal a day and one suit a year, we are determined to educate our children."

A faded copy of that speech survives among the papers that my family has saved through the years. It is written on the back of official stationery of the Office of Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue for the district of South Carolina, a post my great-grandfather held. For a time he was the second-ranking federal tax official in the state. It was a political post; the major was a politician.

Sadie Smith is the only one left who really remembers him. She is frail now, unable really to walk, confined to the first-floor bedroom that once was used by her father and mother. She dresses every day, always with her hair done, always wearing a string of beads and

a hint of perfume at the hollow of her throat. She spends the day sitting in her chair as if it were a throne. Her hands are so soft; they rest in mine like a baby's.

But her mind is still sharp, conjuring aphorisms and *bon mots* at a marvelous pace. "Laugh and the world laughs with you," she told me recently. "Cry and they all laugh at you."

She was always the sassy one of the major's brood, carefree, the social animal, the complete lady. J. H. Fordham had nine children, three of whom did not live past childhood; but he only had one Sadie. It is left to her to be historian, and she tells wonderful stories of her father, how handsome he was, how he was always journeying to political conventions and other important affairs, how he maintained an office for a while in Charleston and each year allowed one of his children to come down to spend the summer with him by the sea. It was a childhood of formality and some privilege. She is quick to point out that the family never had real money, not the kind that survives more than a generation. But they were comfortable, prominent and possessed of a deeply felt pride that seems never to have flagged. She has always known who she is.

Never Wears the Color Green

She never wears the color green, and here is why: At some time before she was born her mother decided to come to Washington for a presidential inauguration. This might have been in 1877 or in 1881; she cannot remember the details, and I have not been able to fix the date precisely. But she does know that there was a baby in the house at the time, a baby who had just taken sick.

Louise Fordham had bought a bright green taffeta dress for the inauguration. While she was away in Washington, her baby died. After she came back, she never wore green again, and neither did any of her daughters.

A house accumulates so much over the years, and every time I go home I find more documentation of our family and especially of the major. We have an Orangeburg City Directory from 1916-17. The boosterish preface notes that Orangeburg, pop. 7,000, was then first in production of cotton in the state and second in the Unit-



Louisa Fordham

John Fordham

ed States in the number of individual farms. "Orangeburg business men are alive, wide awake, active, energetic and progressive, and the Chamber of Commerce urges business enterprises and manufacturing interests to investigate our advantages when seeking locations."

The preface also informs the reader that an asterisk "is used to designate the names of colored persons. . . ." And there, on page 130, are the Fordhams, duly asterisked. There is John H., listed as an attorney (the only black lawyer in town), his daughter Florella (the only black nurse in town), son Marion (proprietor of one of two black pharmacies in town) and Sadie (the only black music teacher in town). The rest of the Fordhams are not evident; by then many had scattered, to Cincinnati, to Florida, to other places.

We have a copy of the major's marriage certificate. He and Louisa G. Smith were married Aug. 5, 1875, in Charleston. The document is done in a nautical motif, with a drawing of a dockside scene over which stretches the banner: "Sailor, there's hope for thee." A flag on one of the vessels in the drawing says: "Don't give up the ship."

We have a copy of a letter sent in 1903 from then-Vice President Theodore Roosevelt to the major: "Your letter of the 27th touched and pleased me, and I thank you for it. Believe me, I appreciate your kindly interest." That is the text of the letter in its entirety; in his

own hand Roosevelt wrote, "With real regard" and signed his name. The contents of the major's original letter that prompted the reply are unknown.

More significantly, we have a faded newspaper clipping—date and source unknown—that forms the standard reference on Maj. John H. Fordham's life. The first paragraph refers to him as "one of South Carolina's most prominent colored men. By his own efforts and perseverance he has overcome all obstacles and has come to the front, respected, esteemed and admired by his legion of friends."

The clipping shows that he was born in Charleston March 9, 1854. (I was born exactly 100 years and three days later.) He went to a school called Avery Institute, read law under an attorney named E. B. Seabrook and was admitted to the bar in 1874. "His success in that profession has been a marked one. Owing to his intimate knowledge of law, keen, searching interrogatory, he has made criminal law a specialty and at the same time a decided success."

He moved to Orangeburg and engaged in a little land speculation (this is from family memory, not from the newspaper clipping). He bought the land on which the house sits, as well as several other parcels around town, and over the following decades sold off most of the property, apparently making tidy profits.

Coroner and Postal Clerk

The clipping describes the major's entry into politics: his appointment to fill an unexpired term as coroner of Orangeburg County. From 1877 to 1887 he was postal clerk of the railway mail service in the area. His allegiance was to the Republican Party; in 1887 he was an alternate delegate to the Republican Convention in Chicago.

"It was during this year that Major Fordham became a recognized leader and entered actively in the deliberations of state matters in South Carolina, in his party," the clipping states. In 1889 he received his appointment as deputy tax collector, and in 1893 he "retired to private life and again resumed the practice of law." He ran for Congress once but withdrew in favor of another candidate. He came out of his retirement for a time to take his old job with Internal Revenue, then gave it up for good.

His title came from his rank in the Carolina Light Infantry. He rose through the ranks to captain, then be-

Please see **BLACK LEGACY**, Page 30

BLACK LEGACY

Continued from 7th Page

came a major with the formation of "the first colored brigade organized in the South." In summary, states the anonymous clipping, "He is a progressive man and an honorable, upright citizen."

In Orangeburg he first built a temporary house, behind the site of the current house. It was 1903 before he finally got around to erecting a structure that did him and his family justice. A copy of the construction contract between him and a builder named W. Wilson Cooke has survived the years, lying for decades inside a sturdy black safe the major kept in his bedroom. He took the combination of the safe to his grave; a locksmith had to be called to open it.

The house cost \$1,326.54. The major agreed to pay \$400 when the foundation and framing were completed; another \$400 when the house was "raised and closed in"; \$350 when "floors, ceilings, piazzas and plastering" were completed, and the balance, \$176.54, when all interior and exterior work save painting and plumbing was done. The contract was executed on June 18; the last payment was made on Sept. 26.

My grandmother remembers leaving the house each day on her special errand: to go to the post office to fetch the family's mail. She went by horse and buggy. "And I was the only colored girl in town who had a horse and buggy," she says. It is astonishing to me what people her age remember, what transformations of the world they have seen. Just a nudge jogs Sadie Smith's memory; the mind is still clear. She saw it all, since 1903, from one house.

Sadie remembers the wars. During World War II she was a neighborhood captain; she stood on the porch in the evenings and enforced the ban on visible lights, pulling over motorists in violation.

Her marriage to Eugene Smith was a happy one; he died in 1954. She named her daughter after her mother—Louisa Gertrude. Louisa married Harold Robinson in 1952, with the ceremony taking place at the house, and they decided to stay in Orangeburg. My sister and I grew up there with no lack of adult attention from our parents, Sadie and her sister Florella.

We grew up with that specific resonance around us. It existed in the names of things, like the lot next to the house that my grandmother called The Croquet Ground because that is what they had played there when she was growing up. The resonance was in the antiques, the musty things we would find in the attic storage rooms or in the shed in the back yard: my mother's favorite old doll, a portrait of Sadie and her siblings, the major's correspondence, the fat and well fingered family Bible that was purchased in 1890.

In a way too much is made of race, and in a way not enough is made of it. That holds true generally, and in this case as well. Part of the major's considerable pride, and that of his family, was racial. They delighted in their prominence and in the major's celebrity largely because they had vaulted the barriers into a style of life that many Southern whites resented. They had proven something, and their house was part of the proof.