

George Washington Fields, Esq.

# “Come On, Children”

The Autobiography of George Washington Fields

Born a Slave in Hanover County, Virginia

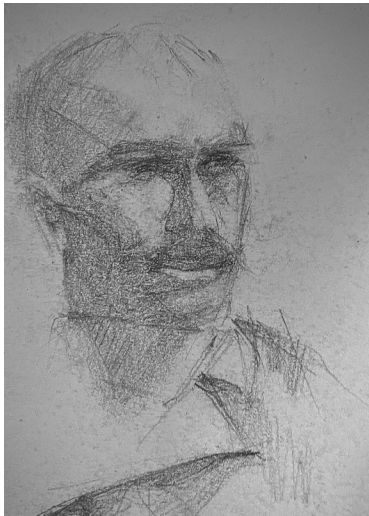


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# “Come On, Children”

The Autobiography of George Washington Fields

Born a Slave in Hanover County, Virginia



Edited by

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Ziff Professor of Law  
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The photograph of G.W. Fields on this book's cover is his only known contemporary representation. It is the formal graduation photograph for Cornell University's Class of 1890.

The sketch of G.W. Fields on the title page is by the wonderful painter Terry Plater, in preparation for the portrait that appears on the back cover. See <https://terryplater.com>.

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## Editor's Note

“As with much African American history, documentation of the story is not easy to find. Few enslaved people were able or permitted to write their own history, and early documents generally record their existence as property and rarely include their full names.”<sup>1</sup> This autobiography is a counterexample.

Bottom line, this autobiography constitutes a significant contribution to the impassioned literature of North American slave narratives. Like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and arguably Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), George Washington Fields delivers, along with considerable literary value, a feel for the realities of slavery that third-party accounts could never achieve.<sup>2</sup>

This autobiography's emergence, however, is a tale of pure fortuity. The tale begins in an unrelated story.

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<sup>1</sup> Sally H. Jacobs, *Ketanji Brown Jackson's Ancestors Were Enslaved. Her Husband's Were Enslavers*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/05/30/ketanji-brown-jackson-harvard-supreme-court/> (June 19, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> See also 17 WPA, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves—Virginia Narratives* (1941).

For decades Cornell Law School publicly prided itself on having an early law school graduate of color: Eugene Kinckle Jones Jr. of the Class of 1936. He came from famed Cornell University roots.

His father, Eugene Kinckle Jones (1885-1954), had earned a Cornell Master's Degree in Social Science in 1908. While at Cornell in 1906, he helped found the nation's first Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, which makes him one of the celebrated Seven Jewels of that influential organization.<sup>3</sup> He went on to great things. He became the first Executive Secretary of the National Urban League and served as a member of FDR's so-called Black Cabinet of advisors.<sup>4</sup>

In the father's time, "Cornell had an acceptable reputation as a liberal white institution among black intellectual circles."<sup>5</sup> After all, Cornell was championed for its forward-looking dedication to inclusion. It was founded in 1865 as, by the terms of its motto, "an institution where any person can find instruction," regardless of sex or color. But *affirmative* pursuit of inclusiveness lay far in the future, and so decades would pass before the first African Americans would graduate. That is to say, Cornell exhibited little active discrimination, but considerable indifference to the presence of Blacks.

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<sup>3</sup> See African American Fraternities and Sororities (Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks & Clarenda M. Phillips eds., 2d ed. 2012); Alpha Phi Alpha: A Legacy of Greatness, the Demands of Transcendence (Gregory S. Parks & Stefan M. Bradley eds., 2012); Carol Kammen, *Part & Apart: The Black Experience at Cornell, 1865-1945*, at 47-56, 70-71 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See Felix L. Armfield, *Eugene Kinckle Jones: The National Urban League and Black Social Work, 1910-1940* (2012).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 17.



Its location and cost and the small number of Blacks, in the school and in the town, were hardly a draw. Moreover, living conditions followed the pattern of Jim Crow, and so the Blacks who did attend Cornell lived off campus and socially separate from the White students.

Consistently with its race-blind attitude, Cornell University generally did not code students by race. Indeed, Cornell Law School did not start to do so until 1976! Accordingly, writing about the early Black students is a challenge, as is merely identifying them. One has to rely on secondary sources, like class notes or obituaries, for clues as to race. But which students should one investigate through those materials? Photographs might be somewhat helpful in selecting students to investigate. But, always unreliable, photographs of students were by no means common early on, nor comprehensive later on.

In brief, who knew if Eugene Kinckle Jones Jr. really was the first law school graduate of color for Cornell?

I now do. In late 2004, taking a break from reading page proofs of a new book, I chose to wander virtually in the Cornell University Library's digital card catalog. Because I was proofreading a section on the jury, I searched for trial by jury. I so stumbled on the thesis of one Washington Fields, Cornell Law School Class of 1890, entitled "Trial by Jury."

Procrastinating some more, I looked for the thesis in the law library's caged Cornelliana collection. The thesis turned out to be a beautifully written rebuttal of what I had just proofread. Fields characterized himself "as being in entire disfavor of jury trial and in favor of its speedy abolition." My views, and modern empirical research, pointed the other way. But several of my colleagues had persisted in views that matched Fields' position. So I mischievously thought they

might find their ally from 1890 to be a source of discomfort, if not a reason to convert to my modern position.

Thus I was led to wonder who this guy was. By 2005 I had retrieved from storage the university records on him. They were scanty in those early years. They said of “G(eorge) Washington Fields,” that he was born April 25, 1854, entered Cornell in 1887, received his LL.B. in 1890, lived later at 124 Wine Street in Hampton, Virginia, and died in Hampton on August 19, 1932. More intriguing was that it included a copy of the *Alumni News* obituary:

G(EORGE) WASHINGTON FIELDS '90, a lawyer in Hampton, Va., died at his home there on August 19. Mr. Fields was butler for many years for former Governor Alonzo B. Cornell, and then entered Cornell where he received the degree of LL.B. He built up a large law practice among the colored and white population in Hampton. He became blind a number of years ago but continued in his profession.<sup>6</sup>

Whoa! A butler? Colored population? The *Ithaca Journal* obituary of August 24, 1932, was basically identical, but it called him George W. Fields<sup>7</sup> and added: “He had many friends among the colored people of Ithaca during his residence here. He was a popular figure at reunions of his class.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cornell Alumni News, Sept. 1932, at 8, [dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/27038/1/035\\_01.pdf](http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/27038/1/035_01.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> He definitely went by George before and after law school, not G. Washington or simply Washington.

<sup>8</sup> In Ithaca, New York, he lived downtown on Albany Street, on Wheat Street (now Cleveland Avenue), and finally at 7 Esty Street, as I

Mysterious but intriguing, because I knew Fields could not have been Black. After all, I knew that Eugene Kinckle Jones Jr. had been Cornell Law's first Black graduate. So, off I went to the listing and ranking of lawyers in the 1930 *Martindales's American Law Directory*. It listed him as "colored," gave his legal ability its middle ranking of "fair," and reported him as good at paying bills. Next, the 1930 U.S. Census located him at 124 Wine Street and described him as "Negro."<sup>9</sup> Here was virtual confirmation that I had stumbled upon a startling fact: the first of Cornell Law School's Black alumni had graduated 46 years earlier than previously thought.

That was enough for me to deputize our custodians to search for rumored composite photographs of the law school's early classes. In deep, deep storage, within a forgotten attic, they found a framed presentation of the formal photographs of 31 of the 32 graduates of the law school's Class of 1890. Among them was the photograph of G.W. Fields that adorns the cover of this book.

From all this came a 2005 article in the form of an imagined debate between Mr. Fields and me on the merits of the civil jury.<sup>10</sup> Not earthshaking, but its preamble revealed what I had learned of my debater, "whom we now serendipitously know to be one of this nation's very first law-school graduates of color. Previous Cornell Law School records had not reflected this fact."

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have since learned. Regarding reunions, he attended at least his Twenty-Fifth Reunion in 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Later I was to see his mother and family regularly described as mulatto, as in the 1880 Census.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin M. Clermont, *Trial by Jury: Point/Counterpoint*, Cornell L.F., Spring 2005, at 10; see *infra* page 136.

The internet of today is so much richer than it was in 2005, when I first investigated George Washington Fields, that it is different in kind, not degree. The online community proved vibrantly helpful as well.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, many new books on the Black experience have since emerged. None is more relevant to my topic than Carol Kammen's marvelous tome from 2009, *Part & Apart: The Black Experience at Cornell, 1865-1945*.<sup>12</sup> By prodigious research, she vastly increased the number of known early Black graduates of Cornell University. At the same time, she provided a wonderfully insightful account of their experiences at the school.

In 2005, there was a website entitled "The First Black Law Students and Graduates of White Law Schools."<sup>13</sup> Its focus excluded Black law schools, such as the nation's first, Howard University's School of Law, founded in 1869 and for a very long time the only such law school. The website no longer exists, and it had lots of errors. But the information it contained was basically this:

1869—George Lewis Ruffin, Harvard Law School  
 1870—Gabriel Franklin Hargo, University of Michigan Law School

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<sup>11</sup> Special thanks go to Drusilla Pair, an Instructional Technologist in Distance Learning at Hampton University, who is researching George's brother James and brother-in-law Madison Lewis, and to Ajena C. Rogers, a national historic park ranger, who is James's great-great-granddaughter.

<sup>12</sup> The book briefly includes George Washington Fields. Kammen, *supra* note 3, at 19, 121. The author expanded on him and my research in Ithaca J., July 13, 2013, at 7A.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.forfutureblacklawstudents.com/blacks.html>.

1879—Alexander Clark Jr., University of Iowa Law School

1880—Edwin Archer Randolph, Yale Law School

1891—Rufus Lewis Milford Hope Perry, NYU Law School

1892—William Green, University of Wisconsin Law School

1894—Ida G. Platt, Chicago Law School (now Chicago-Kent)

1896—William W. Ferguson, Detroit College of Law (now Michigan State)

....

**1936—Eugene K. Jones Jr., Cornell Law School**

Thanks to all the new resources, the picture looks different today. Both George Washington Fields '90 and Cornell Law School played a much more important historical role than anyone had suspected. Together they now place fifth on the list. Indeed, Cornell could not have placed higher on the list, because Cornell Law School did not even exist when number four entered law school. Moreover, none of the other schools included an African American in its *first* entering class.

We now also know of more Black graduates of Cornell Law School. Between George Washington Fields 1890 and the previous recordholder, Eugene Kinckle Jones Jr. 1936, we now count these recipients of the LL.B.:

1892—E.U.A. Brooks (and LL.M. 1893)

1911—John Lawrence Brown

1912—James Claus Thomas Jr.

1913—Richard Anderson Rice

1927—Joseph Roosevelt Houchins (and S.J.D. 1934)

1927—Frederick Wilson Wells

1928—William McKinley Banks

Each of these men has an interesting story. For example, Edward Ulysses Anderson Brooks was born in Elmira, New York, in 1872, as the youngest of eleven children to formerly enslaved parents from Virginia. In 1890 he graduated from Elmira Free Academy, and he topped off his Cornell Law School career with an LL.M. in 1893 to become the first Black to earn a graduate law degree. He practiced law in Elmira from 1894 to 1901. During that time he became a minister. As such, he served in and around the Ithaca area, in Waverly, Utica, Auburn, and other places, and also served as the director of the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Colored People in Auburn. In 1911 he graduated from the Auburn Theological Seminary, and in 1913 he became pastor of Dyer Phelps Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in Saratoga Springs. This impressive career led him to become Alpha Phi Alpha's second honorary member in 1908.<sup>14</sup>

George Washington Fields started that trickle of Black law students who passed through Cornell during the early years. Most importantly, he opened the door for the growing number of African Americans who have since followed him to graduation from Cornell Law School.

As to early diversity at the law school more generally, the composite photograph of its Class of 1890 includes two Japanese students: Gitaro Narukawa and Matsugu Takemura. They were not the first, as Keigo Harada and Masayasu Naruse had entered with the school's first students in 1887 and graduated in 1889. Indeed, Naruse got a Master

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<sup>14</sup> See Skip Mason, *Skip's Historical Moments*, <http://www.skipmason.com/hm/hm24.htm> (May 25, 1999).

of Laws in 1890, when the school awarded its first graduate law degrees. All were part of the wave of Japanese students who went abroad for further university study during the Meiji modernization.<sup>15</sup> There was some geographic diversity among the North American students, as Cornell Law School was on its way to becoming a national law school. There was a classmate from Canada. Still, 85% were from upstate New York. Moreover, Fields had no female classmates. The school's first woman graduate was Mary Kennedy Brown in the Class of 1893.<sup>16</sup>

But back to George Washington Fields. My local rediscovery of him for Cornell Law School migrated into Cornell University's revised history too. As well it should have. He was enrolled in the law department of the university, which was just an academic department. He was thus part of the university's Class of 1890, which was in fact the first Cornell class to include African American graduates. Thus, Cornell University, founded in 1865 as open to all, now claims him as a pioneering graduate on its website.<sup>17</sup> Cornell Law School touts him too.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding early diversity at the university as a whole, the University Archivist and head of the Division of Rare

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<sup>15</sup> See Kevin M. Clermont, *When East Met West: 125 Years of Japanese Law Students at Cornell*, Cornell L.F., Spring 2013, at 4.

<sup>16</sup> See Kevin M. Clermont & Lyndsey Y. Clark, *Mary Kennedy Brown: Our First Woman Lawyer's Dramatic Life*, Cornell L.F., Fall 2015, at 10.

<sup>17</sup> See *Our Historic Commitment*, <https://diversity.cornell.edu/our-story/our-historic-commitment>.

<sup>18</sup> Most recently, the school commissioned the pictured portrait of him hanging in the school's foyer.



Cornell Law School's Foyer, with George Washington Fields'  
2022 Portrait by Terry Plater

and Manuscript Collections, who has written a nice history of Cornell, describes it so:

Cornell also admitted international students from almost the very beginning. Ezra Cornell's 1870 diary includes a list of "where students are from." In 1870 there were students from twenty-eight states, Washington, D.C., and eleven foreign countries, including a student from Japan. While there were black students during the 1870s, most were from Cuba and the Caribbean. Three African American students, Charles Chauveau Cook, Jane Eleanor Datcher, and George Washington Fields, graduated in 1890.



Today, minority students comprise over 25% of the undergraduate population.<sup>19</sup>

Of those first three African American graduates of Cornell University, Charles Cook and Jane Datcher were interesting young people, well-to-do cousins from Washington, D.C., who received the Bachelor of Letters and the Bachelor of Science, respectively.<sup>20</sup> George Washington Fields was nothing of that kind. For one thing, he is the only ex-enslaved person ever to graduate from Cornell!<sup>21</sup>

Yet, what route did he follow before appearing in Cornell's Class of 1890? That remained quite mysterious—until I stumbled across a reference to George Washington Fields' autobiography. For background research, I was reading a fine book on the history of Hampton, Virginia, and in an appendix it made casual reference to “a copy of the George Washington Fields manuscript autobiography” that the author had obtained from the Hampton Association for the Arts and Humanities.<sup>22</sup> Whoa, again! The Association no longer exists, but my librarian managed to learn that the Hampton History Museum had acquired the unpublished document.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine D. Engst, Cornell University, in *Founded by Friends* (2007), [http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/5418/1/Engst\\_CU.pdf](http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/5418/1/Engst_CU.pdf), at 19.

<sup>20</sup> See Kammen, *supra* note 3, at 22-28, 121.

<sup>21</sup> For more detail on this background, see Kevin M. Clermont, *The Indomitable George Washington Fields: From Slave to Attorney* (2013) (self-published book).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890*, at 180 (2d ed. 2004).

<sup>23</sup> The manuscript was found in the History Museum among the collected papers of Hamilton H. Sandidge “Sis” Evans (died 1981), who

*“Come On, Children”*: *The Autobiography of George Washington Fields, Born a Slave in Hanover County, Virginia* turned out to be, put simply, an incredible document. It recounts his march from slavery to a successful career as a blind lawyer. It does so with a special blend of humor and wisdom, laying out in no uncertain terms the set of values that guided him through his fascinating times. It convinces any reader that this was a great (and greatly likable) man—and that his mother truly was a great woman. As a friend of mine reacted: “It would be so wonderful to understand his mother’s secret force—if only ‘Come on, children’ would even get mine off the couch, much less out of slavery!”

The manuscript was in rough shape, however, with numerous page fragments out of order and various sections repeated in somewhat different terms. It contained small sections in which the blind man’s hands had shifted on the keyboard to type what seemed to be gibberish, which therefore required decoding by reconstructing which keys he had meant to strike. There were signs of some retyping, and also minor editing, probably by Fields and certainly by others, with interlineations and asides.

So I have further edited it. I corrected minor errors in the writing. I mainly added a lot of commas, formatted paragraphs, and inserted headings, all to make it more readable. I annotated it by means of footnotes, so that the reader can follow the chronology and the geography, and I provided illustrations. But I retained his words and his voice.

The autobiography’s focus is the first half of his life, the years from his birth as an enslaved person in 1854 until his

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was a preservationist connected with the Association. She may have helped edit lightly the manuscript of the autobiography.

debut as a Cornell student in 1887. Accordingly, I added to this book an Epilogue that focuses on telling the mainly untold latter half of his life story, covering his subsequent professional years and family life and, finally, a bit more on his Cornell experience.

His tone is curious, especially his frequent self-reference in the third person as Cock Robin, his enslaved nickname. I suspect this autobiography was written late in life, perhaps for his new grandchild born in 1927. This would help explain why he so emphasized his early life, which would be of more interest and less known to his progeny than his life as a lawyer. The grandson is indeed the person who originally donated the manuscript to the Association.

More recently, I have come across another account of the enslavement and escape of George Washington Fields' family.<sup>24</sup> Alice Mabel Bacon, an important White teacher at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, wrote a magazine account in 1892, just after the death of the mother, from information "gathered from the lips of her children."<sup>25</sup> First, although Fields wrote his memoir years later, the two accounts exhibit similarities. He is, after all, telling the same story. But I see no sign whatsoever that he relied on Bacon's article. Her account is a very different work. Totally different in language, style, and outlook, it also differs in many small factual details. Second, since some of the factual differences concern matters that Fields would be unlikely to misremember or fictionalize, such as his brother's name, I see no reason to think that the earlier account is more reliable. Worth

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<sup>24</sup> Alice M. Bacon, *From Slavery to Freedom* (pts. 1 & 2), 21 S. Workman & Hampton Sch. Rec. 46, 62 (1892).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 46.



2020 Historical Marker by Hanover Courthouse

noting is that Alice Bacon was herself writing many years after the events.

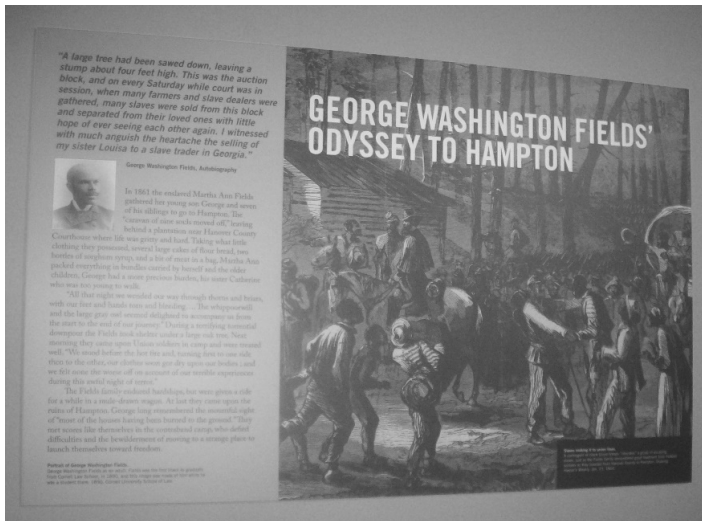
The story of Martha Ann and George is no longer lost.<sup>26</sup> As a result of my rediscovery of the autobiography, Virginia has embraced its celebrated citizens. I close with a sampling of pictorial evidence.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Together Drusilla Pair and Ajena C. Rogers have produced a dramatic interpretation of the autobiography. See Bernice Bennett, *Flight to Freedom: "The Fields Family and Freedom's Fortress,"* <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/bernicebennett/2014/03/14/flight-to-freedom-the-fields-family-and-freedoms-fortress>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZXs0NRVShg> (excerpts). Incidentally, another dramatization is Valerie Davis's *From Tragedy to Triumph: The Martha Ann Fields Story*, which is viewable at [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=999877460794846](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=999877460794846).

<sup>27</sup> The picture of the historical marker is from <https://www.hanoverhistorical.org/gr/300/fieldsmarker.jpg>. The image of the government building is from <https://richmond.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/more-than-just-one-narrative-hanover-government-building-renamed->



Hanover Government Building Renamed in 2020



2013 Contraband Exhibit at the Hampton History Museum

after-woman-enslaved-at-site/article\_d36b7970-406c-58c1-80d8-c2e50802f163.html. The photograph of the museum display is from Drusilla Pair. The poster is from <https://www.montpeliercenter.org/>.

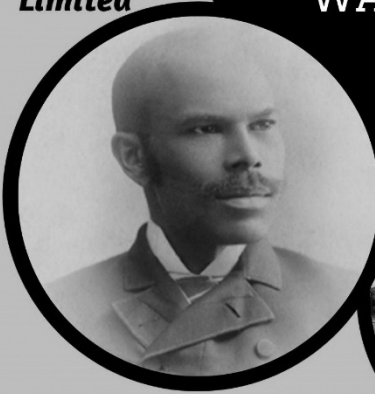


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George Washington Fields, Esq.

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Born a Slave in Hanover County, Virginia

# Descendants of Washington and Martha Ann Fields

