

George Washington Ellis 1875-1919

Excerpts from a presentation given by Rebecca Ehrich
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Weston's Black heritage includes a notable lawyer, author, scholar and diplomat. Given the rather grand name of George WASHINGTON Ellis, we get our first hint that his family expected great things of him.

His parents, George and Amanda Jane Ellis, were born into slavery in Missouri and there is evidence that his father may have served in the Union Army, stationed at Fort Leavenworth, just across the river from Weston, MO.

We know that his mother was intent on young George receiving as much formal education as possible. The Colored Children's school in Weston went only through eighth grade, so George and Amanda sent their gifted young son to Atchison, Kansas to complete high school, which he did by the age of 15. He was accepted to the University Of Kansas School Of Law and graduated in less than 3 years.

We know that in 1900 he was married to Eva Johnson and they were living with her parents in Lawrence, Kansas. Eva died that same year, at just 23 years of age. The young widower likely did not see that a bright, accomplished Black man had many opportunities in the Midwest. He traveled to Washington, DC where he attended Howard University and also to New York City where he studied at Guntan's Institute of Economics and Sociology. He became interested in African culture and began studying and writing about it during that time.

George W. Ellis secured a job in Washington, D.C. as a clerk in the Interior Department and from there was appointed Secretary of the American Legation in Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa. The American Legation was a precursor to the official American Embassy. He was charged with exploring and collecting data about the indigenous African tribes in Liberia, with the aim to expand and shape how the United States approached international diplomacy in Africa.

Liberia has been home to dozens of indigenous tribes for thousands of years. On the older European maps, it was described as "The Grain Coast" and "The Windward Coast." Starting in 1822, the American Colonization Society and other groups in the United States negotiated some coastal land as the area where American free People of Color could return to escape their limited opportunities in the U.S. as well as attempt to "civilize" the "natives", which is another term for converting them to Christianity.

These Free Blacks were later joined by thousands of recently manumitted enslaved people, many of whom were emancipated by their owners on the condition that they would leave the U.S to live in Liberia. This was done as the former slave owners felt that those people still enslaved would be unduly influenced by the Free Blacks and seek to escape their bondage.

Liberia's early days were ones of struggle and hardship for the settlers. The Republic did endure and did provide a haven for many who had not found the United States a welcoming or safe place for Black people. So, one can only imagine what a sense of wonder the eager young diplomat, George Washington Ellis, must have felt upon arriving in Monrovia in 1902. He likely boarded a ship in Baltimore and sailed from a place where he and his family had struggled against the forces of the American Caste system that relegated him, in spite of his education and dignified comportment, to a very low rung on the ladder, with few opportunities to realize his potential.

Arriving in Monrovia, Liberia, he must have felt like he was on another planet. It wasn't just the heat and humidity (although admittedly, summers in Missouri would be great training for West African coastal weather!) In Liberia, he could enter any business or restaurant, THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR, sit where he pleased, expect to be waited on promptly and served respectfully. He could make eye contact with all he met. He didn't have to step off the sidewalk onto the muddy street when White people passed by. Everywhere he turned he saw Black professionals and skilled artisans. He was called "Sir" and "Mister" instead of "Boy", or worse. No doubt, George Washington Ellis felt relief to be able to escape the American Caste system and his pre-ordained place in it.

George Washington Ellis then embarked on the greatest adventure of his life. He was there to do a job of studying and writing about indigenous Liberians. The one group that really captured his attention was the Vai tribal group. They had migrated from the Sahel at the end of the great Kingdom of Mali in the 14th century. Many were followers of Islam although many others still practiced their traditional religions, or both. What made them stand out to Mr. Ellis was the fact that they are one of the few indigenous groups in West Africa to have their own written language.

Ellis spent eight years visiting, living with and studying the Vai people. He wrote several treatises which culminated in his book, "Negro Culture in West Africa", which has recently gone back into print. Remember that this would have been at the time that the pseudo- "science" of Eugenics was gathering steam in the United States and Europe, to the extent of being taught in some medical schools.

This so-called discipline functioned to stratify humans into "superior versus inferior" categories, with Northern and Western Europeans definitely included in the upper echelon of superiority and everybody else falling in line underneath. This junk science was used as fodder for the acceptability of African chattel slavery and subsequent proliferation of Jim Crow laws in the United States and later copied by the Nazis in Germany in order to validate their claim that Jews, gypsies and other "Non-Aryans" were essentially sub-human and not deserving to exist.

George Washington Ellis, in his writings on the Vai people, goes to great pains to refute the common stereotype existing in the United States, and elsewhere, that Africans were "savage, uncivilized, ugly, dull-witted, and backwards." That, in fact, the Vai and many other African indigenous groups were HIGHLY civilized with sophisticated art, religion, moral codes, rule of law, strong family and kinship connections, healing arts, military acumen and advanced survival skills in general.

Mr. Ellis donated a large collection of Vai physical culture, including artwork, tools, clothing, furniture, toys, religious items and the like, to the National Museum of Washington, which was the precursor to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. He was a prolific writer and scholar and earned many honors from the wide variety of learned societies of which he was a member.

A small example includes his being elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain, the American Sociological Society, the American Society of International Law and a decorated Knight Commander of the Order of African Redemption, to name only a few.

George Washington Ellis left Liberia in 1910. He eventually joined his widowed father, who had joined the Great Migration and left Weston, Missouri and moved to Chicago, Illinois. George Washington Ellis formed a legal practice there and died of cancer at the age of 44 in 1919.

In his short life, this son of Weston, Missouri, set out on a journey that would take him far, far away from Weston's Mill Creek, where he was likely baptized and played. His destiny took him away from the warehouses where his father was a laborer and away from his beloved mother, Amanda Jane, who surely missed her gifted, handsome son, but knew that he needed to go to where he could have a better chance to realize his full potential. GEORGE WASHINGTON ELLIS (1875-1919)

Credits:

Historical Preservation Society of Liberia George Washington Ellis, K.C., F.R.G.S. - "Negro Culture in West Africa" Bibliolife publisher James Ciment, "Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It", Hill and Lange, publisher. 2013 Isabel Wilkerson, "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents", Random House, publisher, 2020

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