Greetings from the Library of Congress, and welcome to African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century. This is a podcast that draws from the Library of Congress’s manuscript collections to explore African-American history in the era of slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation. My name is Adam Rothman. I teach history at Georgetown University, and I’m currently a distinguished visiting scholar at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress.

In this episode, we will be reflecting upon an enigmatic collection of archival materials about a Black woman from Baltimore named Adaline Henson. She is, as far as I can tell, completely unknown. No historian or other scholar has written about her. No books or articles mention her, not even a blog post. Yet, here, in the manuscript collections of the Library of Congress, are a handful of documents that give us glimpse of her life.

All we have are a letter about her, a bill of sale, and two photographs. Yet, from this fragmentary record, we can glean a surprising about of information about her, which we must put into a historical context that helps us to understand her life. So, today, we go in search of Adaline Henson. And with her, the sometimes elusive history of African-American women in the 19th Century.

Joining me in this search today, I’m happy to say, is my good friend Professor Martha Jones. Martha is the Society of Black Alumni Presidential Professor and Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author and editor of several books, including most recently, Birthright Citizens: The History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America, which came out in 2018, and a vital collection of essays titled Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women.

Professor Jones has thought deeply about the joy and challenge of pursuing 19th Century African-American women’s history. And she also happens to be an expert on Baltimore, which is where Adaline Henson came from. Martha, welcome to the African-American Passages podcast.

Thanks for having me.
Adam Rothman: So, Martha, let me ask you this, had you ever heard of Adaline Henson before I called you up for this?

[0:03:00]

Martha Jones: No. I certainly had never heard of her despite having spent many years in the archives in Baltimore. I’m familiar with a great deal of material from this place and from this time. She’s not someone who’s ever surfaced in the historical record before.

Adam Rothman: Yeah, I think if anybody would know her, it would be you. So let me ask you this. We have these. We have a letter. We have a bill of sale. We have photographs. When you see a set of documents like this for the first time, as a historian, what goes through your head? How do you begin to approach the set of materials? What questions do you ask yourself?

Martha Jones: The first set of questions is, where did these materials come from? How did they wind up here at the Library of Congress of all places? As you said in your intro, these are really what we might call just shards of a life, very small glimpses of a woman who I certainly would like to know more about.

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But my first question is, how on earth did these materials wind up in such an esteemed place like the Library of Congress?

Adam Rothman: Yeah, and I think that puzzle deepens when we remember that the Library of Congress is a repository for the papers of presidents and politicians and powerful and influential and historically-significant people. So how did Adaline Henson sneak in here? Well, let’s tackle that question first before we get into the substance of the documents.

So these materials are part of a collection at the Library called The Black History Collection. It was first cataloged in the late 1990s, and it’s five boxes, about a thousand different artifacts. And it’s really a hodgepodge of all sorts of things that the Library has collected over decades.

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So the Adaline Henson materials are just one folder in one box of this collection. But I think what’s really remarkable, one of the really remarkable things about this collection is part of the collection is the story of how these materials came to the library in the first place. So the letter that we have is from a woman named Ida Greenwell, who was the
daughter of the husband and wife who owned Adaline Henson during the era of slavery.

The letter is from 1937, and it is a letter in which Ida Greenwell donates the bill of sale and the photographs to the Library. Basically because she wants Adaline Henson to be remembered, to be documented somehow in the nation’s archives.

So that’s how it came to the library, and I think there are lots of questions about that, which is why did Ida Greenwell think the library would be – would receive these materials and think they’re historically significant. So, Martha, what can you tell us about maybe the motive of Ida Greenwell to donate these materials to the library?

Martha Jones: The first thing I have to say is, as a historian, I love the hodgepodge, which is to say these collections that somehow make their way to the Library don’t fit, aren’t part of the major collections or figures. And it’s always true when you open a box that is miscellaneous or has a general kind of label on it, there’s always a gem inside. So I really appreciate you sort of unearthing this and letting us think about it.

Ida Greenwell’s letter written in 1937 is very important, in part because she narrates the life or a version of the life of Adaline Henson, but also because she does, indeed, tell us part of how she wants not only Henson to be remembered, but how she wants her own family to be remembered.

She reveals to us that while her father was not a slaveholder, he was willing to purchase an enslaved woman back in 1861; Adaline, to, in essence, rescue Adaline from sale away from Baltimore, further south, likely to Georgia, where certainly she would have encountered an extraordinarily harsh fate.

So Ida wants to tell us something about her family and their relationship to the institution of slavery, I would say, her family as a sort of ally, a compatriot to Adaline. And so that’s one part of the story here, how do Americans generally, how do Southerners, in particular, want to be remembered with respect to the institution. And at least this family wants to be remembered as having allied itself with an enslaved woman who was attempting to resist being sold away further south.
Adam Rothman: So the story that Ida Greenwell narrates is basically one where her parents essentially rescued this woman from the slave trade by purchasing her. There is a lot of irony [laughter] and paradoxes in there.

Martha Jones: It is. And she’s very clear, right. She said my father was not a slave owner. Well, of course he was...

Adam Rothman: Yeah. [Laughter].

Martha Jones: …in a literal sense. But I think she’s trying to convey a cultural sense, right, in which this was not a household that was dependent upon in its most explicit sense in owning enslaved people, maybe.

Adam Rothman: And the overall framing of the letter or the way that the letter frames the life of Adaline Henson, is essentially that she was a faithful and loyal servant to her parents, to her family. So it’s essentially a narrative of a faithful slave, and then subsequently a servant, right?

Martha Jones: Yes. She explains Adaline was part of the family: loved, respected, a lady, and, yes, faithful unto death is the way in which Ida ends this letter. And we can recognize, I think, in these terms and in this characterization…

Adam Rothman: And it was a long lifetime. She lived, according to Greenwell, to be 98 years old.

Martha Jones: A somewhat stock stereotypical narrative that southern slaveholders also promoted, this notion that slavery had not been a harsh or exploitative relationship, but instead, had been a familial one. And this, while I think I would term this more myth than history, is an essential component of the story that Ida Greenwell wants to tell, one about a woman who was, as you put it, rescued from the auction block by her family, and then, in exchange, if you will, became a loyal servant and family member for the remainder of her long lifetime.

Adam Rothman: And spent the entire second half of her life with Ida Greenwell’s family. Just to punctuate that point, there’s a line in the letter where Greenwell writes, “We all loved her dearly. She would have given her life to save ours.” So she really emphasizes that kind of reciprocal connection between them.
Martha Jones: Yeah, I think it seems important to underscore this is a letter that’s written from Ida’s perspective looking back, it seems, 20 years after Adaline’s death. And so we can appreciate the sentiment, on the one hand, on the face of this document. On the other hand, also appreciate the ways in which certainly I want to understand how Adaline, herself, would have narrated this story.

Adam Rothman: I want to hypothesize that there was more to this relationship than what Ida reveals, certainly more to Adaline’s life than simply her fidelity to what was one time a family who claimed her as property.

Adam Rothman: I think that’s so important. In a sense, though, this set of archival documents is entirely one-sided. We get Ida Greenwell’s perspective on Adaline Henson, but we don’t get Adaline Henson’s own perspective on her life. So it’s our task as historians to try to read between the lines or against the grain or in conjunction with other documents that might provide a more complete picture of what’s really going on here. So let’s follow – let’s see what we can do to follow Adaline Henson’s own life trajectory to piece together these fragments…

…to try to put together a picture for everybody who’s listening. So here’s a few things that we know, or at least that the documents tell us about Adaline Henson. Because, in addition to the letter, we also have a bill of sale. And, in fact, it’s the bill of sale that Ida Greenwell is actually presenting to the Library of Congress and just providing context for it.

But in the bill of sale, Adaline Henson is sold by a man named James Cunningham of Anne Arundel County to marry Elizabeth Price, who is Ida Greenwell’s mother. She is sold for 70 – what is it? Let’s see, $75.00. She is described as a colored woman or negro about 40 years old.

So she’s already 40 years old when this sale happens. The sale takes place in December of 1861, which means that Adaline Henson was born around 1820, let’s say. All right. So those are some basic biographical information that we can learn from the bill of sale. But there’s actually a lot that we can do around that to try to understand the kind of world that Adaline Henson grew up in and lived in until she was in her forties.

So let’s start with this question of what it might have been like to be a Black woman an enslaved person in Baltimore before the Civil War. And,
Martha, can you help us understand what that – what’s going in Baltimore between 1820 and 1860 that might be a useful context to understand her life?

[0:15:00]

Martha Jones: Sure. Baltimore is the third largest city in the United States. So it’s to say that this is a place of consequence on a national scale by the time the Price family purchases Adaline in 1861. This is a city that has long been home to the largest free African-American community in the country, by 1861, some 25,000+ people, very few enslaved people. And so, in this sense, Adaline and her status is somewhat exceptional in a city like Baltimore. Probably by 1861, there are no more than 1 or 2,000 enslaved people. And so she’s surrounded, if you will, by a teeming metropolis.

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One in which African-Americans have built institutions like churches, fraternal orders, benevolent societies, schools, and she occupies a somewhat exceptional place as being someone who is still bound to labor first for, it seems, James Cunningham and then for the Price Family. 

Adam Rothman: Yeah. So there’s this rich African-American community life in Baltimore, in part because of the large free Black population. But there’s this other thing going on in Baltimore, as well, up through 1861, which is the pressure of not just slavery, but the slave trade. The sale of enslaved people from the upper South to the deep South. And Baltimore is an anchor of the domestic slave trade. So enslaved people and free people of color in Baltimore would have lived in the constant shadow of the threat of being sold.

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Martha Jones: Yes. This is a familiar challenge, and danger both for free people of color and for enslaved people throughout what we call the upper South, including Maryland. And Baltimore is a city that is visited by slave traders. That seems to be the case for James Cunningham, his anticipation that he can bargain with a slave trader and sell Adaline and other enslaved people further south.

Kidnappers, who are going to patrol, to some degree, the city of Baltimore but certainly the environs around Baltimore as African-Americans both enslaved and free are coming and going from a city like Baltimore; that is a very precarious sort of circumstance. So one of the things we can, I think, safely imagine is on the mind of someone like Adaline is this domestic slave trade.
It is not an unfair, unknown institution. It is decried to an important degree in a city like Baltimore, both by African-Americans and by White Americans as well for its cruelty and its indifference to the humanity of African-Americans. So she likely would have known what awaited her if she were to become caught up in the slave trade.

And she certainly would have reason to want to remain in a place that while Baltimore is certainly troubled to an important degree by the Civil War, itself, in this period, it still offers relatively stable and safe haven for African-Americans even with the upheavals of the war.

Adam Rothman: For one thing, Maryland doesn’t join the Confederacy.

Martha Jones: Yes.

Adam Rothman: It stays in the union.

Martha Jones: This is a union state.

Adam Rothman: It’s a union state. And the fact that she’s sold in December of 1861 is quite auspicious. The letter from Ida Greenwell says that Cunningham, who had owned Henson, was going to send all of his slaves to Georgia for sale, as “he wanted to get to what he could out of them before they would be freed.” So it seems like Cunningham saw the handwriting on the wall and was trying to basically cash out before emancipation.

Martha Jones: I wonder what you thought about that. Did you think – do you think that the handwriting was on the wall with respect to slavery? Certainly, for enslaved people, uh, for African-Americans, generally, the war is already understood to be a war against slavery and not simply to preserve the union. But I wondered about people like James Cunningham or the Price Family.

You know, do they really think slavery is over as an institution, and so are gonna sort of cut their losses, as Cunningham is characterized here, or if there was more ambiguity. I really did wonder what you thought about that because I think I’m not sure.
Adam Rothman: I think Cunningham might have been reading the tea leaves in Maryland. And even if he doesn’t necessarily imagine the Civil War overthrowing slavery as it eventually did, I mean, I don’t think – I think most people didn’t see that coming even as late as December 1861. He might have seen emancipation or some kind of threat to slavery taking place in Maryland.

Martha Jones: And that’s been true in Maryland for a long time, which is to say Maryland will participate in this domestic slave trade precisely because the institution is increasingly precarious as we go forward.

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Adam Rothman: Yeah. So emancipation does, in fact, take place just, I think, in Maryland just three years after Adaline Henson is sold to…

Martha Jones: Yeah, November of 64.

Adam Rothman: Yeah. And, of course, that is an extraordinary moment in American history, in African-American history. But the responses of newly-freed people to the condition of emancipation is widely varied. There are people who leave their owners, who migrate, you know, long distances. Either they’re in search of family or just to plant down roots in a new place. There are people who stay where they are and make claims to the land that they had worked for so many years. But then there’s Adaline Henson, who stays with the Prices; stays with the Prices for the next 50 years.

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Adam Rothman: And it’s almost like emancipation makes – at least in the representation of her life in Greenwell’s letter, it’s like emancipation is a non-event.

Martha Jones: Hmm. You know, you say that, and, yet, I wanna come back to the bill of sale, if I could because there’s a detail in the bill of sale for me that is intriguing, and that suggests to me that despite her plight in 1861, despite being sold by Cunningham to the Prices, Adaline is fashioning herself or being fashioned as someone who is certainly more than property here. And what’s the clue for me? She has a second name. She has a last name. And it is, in fact, not Cunningham’s name.

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Martha Jones: Not the name of her owner, which if that were to be the case, it wouldn’t surprise us that she was given or adopted the name of an owner, nor does she adopt the name Price even as she has lived with the Prices. Instead, she’s Adaline Henson. And we don’t know, at least not yet, where the
name Henson comes from, but on this document, it gives her a kind of autonomy, a kind of personhood that I think should intrigue us.

Which is to say the acquisition of a name, particular a second name for enslaved people, is part of that process of becoming autonomous or becoming free. And while we don’t yet know where the name Henson comes from, it is a suggestion – I know we’re gonna talk a little bit later about how her name changes. It is in the acquisition of a name that we begin to see the ways in which maybe for the first time…

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…an enslaved person is beginning to craft an autonomous identity. So I’m deeply intrigued by this, and in part because I read many bills of sale and other documents related to transactions like this one in Baltimore. And it’s just as likely that an enslaved person would have one name. They would have a name. They would be described as colored or negro. They would have an age. They might be uniquely identified by a scar or their height, or their skin color, or the texture of their hair. But Adaline has a name. And I do think that’s a powerful, at least, sign that she has an identity that is distinguishable from the people who own her.

[0:25:00]

Adam Rothman: And Henson is a very intriguing name because there’s a more famous African-American Marylander with the same last name Henson; Josiah Henson, who’s…

Martha Jones: That's great. [Laughter].

Adam Rothman: …a fairly well – you know, he’s a well-known figure in African-American history. He is said, I believe, to be the basis or one of the inspirations for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. So we have no idea but we at least speculate that maybe they’re related.

Martha Jones: Yeah, and we know from other contexts that enslaved people are quite purposeful when they go about adopting names, particularly in this era. So many people named – adopt the name Freedman, for example, or Freeman, as, right, a very clear assertion, right, of this transition from slavery to freedom.

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So rarely is a name an accident. It is much more often a reflection of a kind of choice or a kind of identity.
Adam Rothman:

Martha, one of the things I appreciate about your analysis of this bill of sale is that a bill of sale is really the epitome of the commodification of a person. And, in that sense, also, the dehumanization of enslaved people. I mean, they’re reduced to being treated as objects and commodities. But, here, just in looking at her name, you’re recovering a bit of her own identity.

The other thing about this collection materials is that we have, beyond the bill of sale, which is such a demeaning kind of document, there’s also two photographs of Adaline Henson.

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And I want to focus on the one of her as a younger woman because we suspect that this photograph – actually, it’s a tintype. I should be accurate about that. This tintype was taken around the same time, probably, as the bill of sale was done. So maybe a couple of years after. So we’ve seen so many, you and I as historians of slavery, so many bills of sale. But it’s very unusual, very unusual to have a bill of sale accompanied with photograph of the person who’s identified in that bill of sale. So that might be another way of recovering a bit more of her individuality here. So we’re looking at this photograph now – or, sorry, tintype, and it’s a really poignant image…

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…of Adaline Henson in an oval kind of portrait. The portrait is in an embossed paper frame. And, Martha, just tell us what you see in this photograph. For those of you who are listening, you’ll be able to find this photograph on the podcast website and look at it for yourself.

Martha Jones:

When I saw this photograph, the first time you shared it with me, I understood immediately why this folder was one you wanted to spend more time with and talk about. Because it is poignant. It is even arresting. First and foremost, I think for the image of Adaline, herself, who is looking directly at us into the camera. Likely, this photograph is taken in a studio, which would have been typical for 1861.

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And there’s no embellishments or detail behind her, and so it’s a rather stark portrait. But she looks at us with a kind of seriousness. I think it’s a somber portrait. She would have had to hold her pose for at least a little while in order to get the photo just right. We notice her clothing. She’s shot from the chest up. And so we can see her, perhaps, it’s a dress or jacket with brass buttons, a small – it looks like a lace collar; a very well-
tailored piece, perhaps her best clothing she’s donned for this occasion. She has on a brooch…

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…a colorful brooch that’s been watercolored in by the portrait studio just to bring out its detail. So she’s got jewelry, perhaps earrings, and shiny probably brass buttons that run the length of the front of her jacket. So we get the sense of, I think, her own dignity and forthrightness, but also, her possession of some articles of refinement, which is to say sometimes we see portraits where people have borrowed the clothing, and it’s ill-fitting because it wasn’t made for that individual. This – the fit on her neck and on her shoulders just lead us to, I think, imagine that this actually was clothing that was made for her.

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The last thing I will say, if I could, is just that maybe this portrait is remarkable for what’s not here. There are many portraits of African-American women, enslaved women, particularly domestic workers from this era, in which you would find a figure like Adaline in the company of a child, a white child, a child of the household in which these women were held as slaves. There is no child here. Again, I think reinforcing that sense of Adaline as a kind of autonomous individual here, and so I compare it to the rather ubiquitous image of the enslaved woman holding the white child, who is her charge and that marks her indelibly as an enslaved woman.

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Here, I would say did we not have the documents, we might conclude that Adaline was a free women rather than enslaved because of her clothing, her jewelry, and because she’s depicted alone.

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Adam Rothman: We’ll come back to Professor Jones in a minute, but I wanted to learn more about the photographs of Adeline Henson, so I asked Beverly Brannan for some help. Beverly is the Senior Curator of Photography at the Library of Congress. When I told her about these photographs, she was intrigued, and like me and Martha, she wanted to find out as much as she could about the striking portrait of the younger Adeline, so I had a conversation with her about what she found out. Hi Beverly!

Beverly Brannan: Hi!
Adam Rothman: We have this really remarkable portrait of Adeline Henson, and it’s really this portrait that caught my attention with respect to this collection, and I was just wondering, you’re a curator of photography and you’ve seen a lot of photographs, so as an expert in photography, help us understand what we can learn about Adeline Henson from looking at this photograph as an object.

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Beverly Brannan: The photograph is a tintype, which is a photographic image on a metal base, and this kind of photography was in use from the mid-1850s until the early 20th century, but it was most heavily used until about the 1880s. They were most frequently about two by three inches, which could easily be mailed or carried in a pocketbook or a pocket. They needed some kind of protection to keep the image from getting scratched or bent. Usually they were in a case or a frame or a paper matte. In this instance we see the least expensive form of protector, a paper matte. It’s not the absolutely least expensive form because it’s on thick paper embossed with a fancy pattern; it’s not a plain sheet of paper. On the back there’s more information. We see that the price for a dozen of these cards, as they were called, was $2.50 a dozen, that’s 21 cents a piece, that about two dollars - three dollars and twenty-five cents in today’s money. We can see the photographer’s name and address on the back. It was John C. Baum. He had licenses in Washington, D.C., for both studio and traveling photography between 1862 and 1866, so possibly, he was one of the photographers who went to military camps around Washington to photograph soldiers so they would have pictures to send home. The address on the back of the tintype is 1st Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, which puts him in a lower class neighborhood. It suggests that he catered to a largely working-class clientele, and a directory of Washington, D.C. photographers of the Civil War gives an additional address of 498 Pennsylvania Avenue. Matthew Brady’s studio was at 625 Pennsylvania Avenue, and Alexander Gardner’s studio was nearby at 7th & D, as was Clara Barton’s Red Cross headquarters. For Adeline Henson to have sat for him, she probably came to Washington in 1866. That was the last date he maintained a studio in Washington. The family lived - Price family with whom she came to Washington lived at B Street north, which in 1934 became Constitution Avenue. This would have been a short walk to Mr. Baum’s studio.

Adam Rothman: That’s ok. So it seems like there’s a whole little neighborhood or district of photographers.

Beverly Brannan: Correct.

[36:25]
Adam Rothman: In downtown Washington. Let me ask you a question about the tintype as an object. You actually and a team here at the Library actually took the tintype out of the matte, right, to take a look at it?

Beverly Brannan: No, we didn’t take it out of the matte. We looked at the back of it and our conservators were able to use some special equipment to read what was under the dollop of glue that was holding the tintype onto the letter that came in as a package to the Library. So that’s how we got the photographer’s name.

Adam Rothman: Fantastic, well thanks for doing that. I knew there more secrets inside the photograph. I’m just glad you were able to get at them.

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Beverly Brannan: We recently purchased the Howland album, the Emily Howland album with the early photograph of Harriet Tubman. We purchased it with the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture. The backs of those pictures told us so much more about the photographs that it was easy to justify doing it again in this case to look at the back.

Adam Rothman: That’s a great tip for anybody doing historical research. Always turn the document around and see what’s on the back. That’s great, wonderful. Do you happen to know if Frank Baum, I’m sorry, John Baum, did any portraits of other African Americans in the 1860s?

Beverly Brannan: We don’t know. We have only a few instances of his being mentioned and we haven’t seen others of his pictures but now that we know this, we’ll be alert to it because I consulted with several other photography historians who knew the name but didn’t know the pictures but now we’ll certainly be alert to it.

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Adam Rothman: So this is the first tintype we have from John Baum?

Beverly Brannan: That we know of.

[Crosstalk]

Beverly Brannan: Now we have to turn them all over.

Adam Rothman: Yeah, ok. Oh wow. So what do you think we learn about Adeline Henson from thinking about this tintype as a portrait, for what it says about her, her demeanor, her presentation, that sort of thing?
**Beverly Brannan:** Adeline Henson was concerned about her appearance. We can tell from looking at this picture. Although her expression reveals little, except maybe sadness, we can tell from the way she carries herself that she cared about who she was as a person. She was neat, tidy, modest, and up-to-date in her clothing.

**Adam Rothman:** Thanks for that description. That really brings her image very much to life. Let me ask you one final question. What do you think it is that these photographs from the 19th century give us that maybe more conventional textual, written material does not?

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**Beverly Brannan:** There’s an immediacy of looking at somebody’s face, looking at their eyes, that you don’t get from reading. The two forms of information complement each other and give at least a two-dimensional, we can’t have a three-dimensional impression of them, but they do give a second dimension to a written document.

**Adam Rothman:** Who was it who said the eyes are a window to the soul?

**Beverly Brannan:** That I don’t know but I have heard it before.

**Adam Rothman:** I think of that looking at this portrait of Adeline Henson.

**Beverly Brannan:** She was very careful about not revealing too much.

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**Adam Rothman:** As you just heard from both Beverly and Martha, John Baum’s photograph of Adeline Henson is a valuable complement to the bill of sale and Ida Greenwell’s letter about her. It helps us to imagine her as a woman poised on the edge of freedom at the end of the Civil War. So I’m struck that Beverly detected sadness in her expression and Martha called the tintype a somber portrait. There’s no glimmer of joy at the coming of emancipation, perhaps because Adeline Henson’s life does not seem to have changed much, as we will see. Still, it’s impossible to know what was really running through her mind or filling her heart as she sat there in Baum’s studio in Washington, DC. Because none of her own testimony’s in the records. This is what makes her elusive. So let’s return now to my conversation with Professor Jones and explore what happened next to Adeline Henson and see what more we can learn about her.
I just want to return to the letter and trace Adaline Henson’s life a bit further into the 19th Century and towards her old age. So in the letter, Ida Greenwell certainly describes Adaline Henson as a domestic servant of the Price family, somebody who stayed with them, somebody who looked after the children. Greenwell writes, “My mother died when we were all young. She watched over us and carried out our mother’s wishes as far as possible.

She was a lady in her actions and was treated with the greatest respect by everyone who entered our house.” Then Greenwell says something very, really, intriguing and a little bit disturbing. She writes, “She did not associate with colored people unless it was the help in our house.”

So, you know, Greenwell is really trying to make an argument that Adaline Henson’s life was the Price family, was Ida’s family, and not a kind of independent existence with ties to other Black people. And I should add that at this point, sometime during or just after the Civil War, the Price family move from Baltimore to Washington D.C. So for the second half of her life, until the early 20th Century, Adaline Henson lived in Washington with the Price family.

But what do we make of that assertion that Adaline Henson did not associate with quote/unquote “colored people unless it was the help in our house?”

This is probably the most, from a historian’s perspective, the most provocative line in this letter that Ida Greenwell pens in 1837 [1937] because it so extreme in its characterization of Adaline. She “did not associate with colored people unless it was the help in our house.” And knowing, as we do, that Adaline lives first in Baltimore, and then in Washington D.C., where, you know, the streets and the alleys would have
been, you know, regularly teeming with African-Americans, be they enslaved in the early part of her life, and certainly free people...

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subsequent, it is difficult to imagine that she didn’t associate with any other African-Americans, with the exception of those in the household. You might say it makes her sound a little bit like a prisoner.


Martha Jones: And that might be one way to, I think, read this. But I think we need some help, if I could put it that way, with some other materials, about this family, about Adaline, about this household to help us appreciate whether, in fact, Ida is overstating the degree to which Adaline was sort of bound by this household for the entirety of her life.

Adam Rothman: And I would add into her death.

Martha Jones: Into her death.

Adam Rothman: Because at the end of Greenwell’s letter, and this is quite striking as well, she writes that “my sister and I took her remains to Baltimore for burial at Greenmount Cemetery, Baltimore. Every member of the family alive was present. We had a white minister and a white undertaker.” So even in death, Ida Greenwell and her family sort of absorb Adaline Henson into their household.

And I actually called the Greenmount Cemetery to see if I could verify this or find more information. And what’s really interesting is they actually have the records of the Price family lot, and they have the record of a woman named Adaline Dixon being buried there in 1917. Now, many of those details are consistent with Greenwell’s narrative. You know, it suggests that’s Adaline. She was around 98 years old when she died, and she was buried with the Prices.

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But there’s this one detail

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that’s a little arresting, which is that her last name is Dixon, not Henson. So what is going – so there’s a new mystery to be solved here. How did her name change, provided it’s the same woman, and I have to believe it was. What explains the change of name from Henson to Dixon?
Martha Jones: Mm-hmm. You know, I want to say about these lines that you’ve read from the letter. You know, I think that Ida Greenwell believes that she’s honoring and raising up the status and the esteem of someone like Adaline to characterize her as having lived her – much of her life, certainly the long last decades of her life, only among and with white people. Right.

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This is a kind of – I don’t know what we call it: a backhanded compliment?

Adam Rothman: [Laughter]. Yeah.

Martha Jones: But so it is all the more, I think, suspicious [laughter] for being this kind of exaggerated sort of compliment that she had so little to do with African-Americans. I think it tells us a little bit about how Ida Greenwell herself might have viewed African-Americans both on the streets of Baltimore and Washington, but in the rituals of life and death and burial. But, yes, I want to talk about the change of name because we’ve already talked about the degree to which having two names is a distinguishing dimension of this person we want to know so much more about.

And now we learn, at least at the end of her life,

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she has adopted a new last name. Now, there’s an easy hypothesis, but it’s one that runs counter to the narrative that Ida Greenwell has offered us.

Adam Rothman: Can I say it?

Martha Jones: Please.

Adam Rothman: Yeah, she got married.

Martha Jones: She got married, of course. And then – and so she adopts a new name, which is Dixon. And this, of course, runs counter to the story that Ida Greenwell has told us. Ida Greenwell never reveals to us that Adaline not only acquires a new name but has clearly relationships with other African-Americans in Washington, including, it sounds like, intimate relations, and family, a different sort of family than the family that Ida Greenwell has described to us in her letter.
Adam Rothman: That’s so interesting. You just can’t read these letters at face value. You have to dig a little bit deeper.

Martha Jones: Yeah, you just can’t.

Adam Rothman: So there’s one other document that I think might also shed a little bit of light on this question. The second photograph in the collection, which you can recognize as a more conventional photograph, is described - there’s a caption that describes the photograph as a picture of her, of Adaline, when she was old, taken July 1913. So this would put her at around 90 years old. And it’s a little bit faded but still another striking photograph of an old African-American woman, all dressed in white, sitting on a stoop. Because of the fading of the photograph, it’s very difficult to read her expression. But even this tells us something. Martha, what do you think this photograph tells us?

Martha Jones: Well, this is wonderful, right, because the technology of photography has changed over

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– between these two photographs, the one taken in the 1860s, and this one in 1913, such that we get something that we’d recognize today as a snapshot taken outside. It looks to me that Adaline is posed here on the stoop or the steps of the home. I think this would have been Ida Greenwell’s home in Washington by 1913.

But it goes back to the point we were making earlier about did she or did she not associate with other African-Americans? Well, we see her sitting on the stoop facing the street, and it’s not hard, of course, to imagine in a city like Washington that she is out here enjoying the sunshine…

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…but that there is foot traffic,

that there are neighbors, passersby, delivery people, workers, how deep her sociability went, it’s hard to say. But one needn’t go much farther than the front stoop in a city like Washington to encounter and come to know other African-Americans living in nearby homes or on their way here and there. It’s another moment in which I suspect Ida isn’t telling us enough about Adaline’s engagement with a bigger world than that of the Price Family.
Adam Rothman: Yeah. Yeah. And I think just sitting on the stoop, it’s really a kind of bridge space between the inside of the house and the broader life of the city.

So, in some ways, it’s an apt metaphor,

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I think, for Adaline Henson’s life, sort of caught between maybe. Thank you, Martha, that’s really quite insightful. And I’ve just appreciated this whole conversation with you. Thank you so much for your expertise on these documents, really helping us to read them, to read what’s there, and also to recognize what’s not there.

And I think those are part and parcel of the challenges of doing African-American women’s history certainly in the 19th Century, but it’s also true of history in general. So I just want to conclude on this note. So in Ida Greenwell’s letter, she writes, “I wish to present to the Library of Congress, the bill of sale of a colored slave. It may be of some value in years to come.”

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Well, it may have taken 80 years, but I think we can safely say that we have found the value in this collection.

Martha Jones: Absolutely.

Adam Rothman: Martha, thanks for joining me and thank you all for listening. This has been African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century.

[Side conversation]

[End of audio]