

# African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century

## Episode 1: Prologue

[00:00:00]

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

[Singing]:

Do lord, do lord, do remember me, do lord, do lord, do remember me, oh  
do lord, do lord, do remember, oh do lord remember me, oh when my  
blood runs chilly and cold, do remember me, oh...

[00:00:26]

*Adam Rothman:*

Greetings from the Library of Congress and welcome to *African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century*. This is a podcast series 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.

[0:01:00]

For the past several months, I've been scouring the manuscript collections at the Library looking for archival material connected to African-American history from the 19th century. The Library's manuscript holdings are vast - "nearly sixty million items in eleven thousand collections," boasts the Library's website. Many of these collections are the papers of famous and powerful people, presidents, cabinet officers, and Supreme Court justices. Scattered across these collections are thousands upon thousands of documents that are relevant to African-American history, but only a tiny fraction were actually written by black

people themselves. Their voices are harder to find, especially for the era before emancipation in the 19th century, when most African-Americans were enslaved and denied the chance to read and write. But they are there, too.

*[0:01:58]*

You can find their voices in fragile documents that tear and crumble; in collections that were microfilmed in the 20th century to ease wear and tear on the documents, and increasingly, in digital formats on the web, as the Library digitizes important collections so that the public can access them without having to visit a library at all. The Frederick Douglass Papers, for example, have been digitized and are now online. The digitization of archival materials is a great advance in convenience for scholars and students, but it is decidedly less romantic to click on a digital file than to open a mysterious box given to you by a curator, carefully remove the bundle of papers inside it, untie the ribbon that holds them together, and slowly turn the pages so that they do not fall apart, as you struggle to decipher writing that sometimes seems impossible to read. Well, come to think of it, maybe that is not so romantic after all.

*[00:03:00]*

But where would historians be without archivists? We'd be in trouble, I can tell you that. My own ability to navigate these vast holdings depends on all the painstaking work that the professionals at the Library have done to preserve and catalog these manuscripts. Detailed finding aids, which can be searched online, allow researchers to identify the content of each collection and guide us towards the most relevant resources. As one of world's greatest libraries, the Library of Congress has some of the best curators in the business. They set the standards and the protocols. They innovate new and useful ways to describe archival materials and make them accessible to scholars, students, and the public. They know their collections well. A juicy tip from a helpful archivist can set a researcher off and running in the right direction. That happened to me more than once over the last few months here at the Library. And so in this podcast series, we will be speaking with archivists from the Library as well as some of my historian friends and colleagues, as we explore three black lives from the 19th century, people who are documented in the Library's manuscript collections in fascinating ways.

[00:04:19]

I've chosen three captivating stories for this podcast series. At least I found them captivating, and I hope you will too. Each episode presents a conversation between scholars about a different person whose life is documented by a unique set of textual and visual materials. These three lives showcase the diversity of black experiences in 19th-century America. They include an African-born Muslim named Omar Ibn Said who survived the traumas of enslavement and the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean to become a figure of some renown in the United States. They include an enslaved woman from Baltimore named Adaline Henson who dutifully served the same white family for more than fifty years and was even buried alongside them. And they include a freeborn man of color named Robert Pinn who joined the Union Army to fight against slavery and for his rights. He lost his right arm but gained his citizenship.

[00:05:28]

These two men and one woman -- Omar Ibn Said, Robert Pinn, and Adaline Henson -- lived dramatically different lives but their archival legacies all ended up in the same, unlikely place: the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. How did they get here? What can we learn from the autobiographies, essays, and photographs they left behind? How shall we do them justice? These people have been mostly forgotten, but they deserve to be remembered, and we can learn a lot from them. This is *African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century*. I hope you will listen in.

[00:06:17]

For those who are interested, our theme song for *African-American Passages* is "When My Blood Runs Chiller and Cold," sung by John Gipson and recorded by John and Ruby Lomax in Merryville, Louisiana in 1937. This song is one of thousands of audio recordings that have been digitized by the extraordinary American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

I'd like to thank the Kluge Center for Scholars at the Library of Congress for the opportunity and support needed to produce this series. Additional thanks go to Guido Ambasz, Beverly Brannan, Adrienne Cannon, Mary-

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Thanks very much. I hope you enjoy the series.

*[00:07:12]*

*Singing:*

Do lord, do lord, do remember me, oh do lord, do lord, do remember me,  
oh do lord remember me, oh when my blood runs chilly and cold...

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*[End of Audio]*