

Robert Russa Moton

I am Robert Russa Moton; let me reflect just for a few minutes on my parents and my early youth.

My Father, Booker Moton, was born a slave in Amelia County. He was sold to Doctor Alexander of Charlotte County. After the death of Mr. Alexander, my Father hired himself to Mr. John Crowder of Prince Edward County.

When the Civil War broke out, my Father joined Mr. Crowder's brother-in-law, a Colonel Womack of Cumberland County. The two men, one Black and one White, had a strong relationship; I was told that the bond between the two was so strong that nothing separated them except the death of Colonel Womack. As I recall my Father's account of it, his death came near Petersburg in one of those famous charges.

My Father told me of an experience near Petersburg where he accidentally got within the Union Lines and was told that he could stay with the Yankees if he desired. But, he had made a promise that he would stick with the Colonel until the end of the war.

After the war, Father went back to the Crowder Plantation where he remained until Christmas 1866 when he married my mother, Emily Brown. They were married at the old Plantation House of the Hillmans of Amelia County.

My Mother, Emily Brown, like her own mother, was a woman of very strong character in many ways; very much like my father.

In January 1867, Father hired himself to Mr. Samuel Vaughan of Prince Edward County. Because of Father's experience and demeanor, he was made Foreman (Headman) of the inhabitants of the Plantation. The family continued to live in Amelia County.

It was in Amelia County that I was born on the 26th day of August, 1867. Among some of my earliest recollections is one of my Father coming to pick us up. He was driving a team of 4 mules hitched to a farm wagon and took me and Mother to the Vaughn Plantation in Prince Edward County where Father had been working. It was a long drive and the weather was icy cold. I was wrapped in an old gray blanket and a blue Military overcoat to protect me from the bitter cold. Here in an old house in the rear of the main house (Maple Shade) I spent most of my youth.

For many years, Mother was Cook and Father led the Farmhands on the Plantation. Because of my parents relationship with the household, and because

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I was the only child near the Big House, I received much attention from the Vaughn Family. I can never forget Mrs. Vaughn – Miss Lucy, we called her, as was the custom; not only of the colored people, but among the white folks also – and her three daughters, Misses Patty, Jennie and Mollie.

I was big enough to carry Miss Lucy's Key Basket. The Key Basket carried every key to every room on the property, and this was considered a great honor for a small Negro boy. It signified that I was a trusted part of the family, because the family's valuables lay in one or another of these rooms – yet I was favored to be the one to carry the basket for Miss Lucy. From beginning to end of each day, I was ready to follow Miss Lucy around and provide the Key Basket as she needed it. I took the duties of my office very seriously. As I grew older, my duties increased until I assisted her and her daughters in taking care of the fowls, (she had a great many kinds).

As proud of the duties I had, there was one position I wanted; that was House Boy. This position was held by Sam Reed, the general House Boy, and waiter in the family. Miss Lucy had promised me that when Sam was big enough, he would be transferred to the Farm and I would take his place. Sam helped the Cook, made all the fires, was in the Big House most of the time, and he wore good clothes. Sam was a good acrobat and singer and a favorite of the Plantation. Under Sam's direction, I practiced many of his routines and we were frequently called into the Big House to perform. But, there was one thing I had against Sam. He grew so slowly it seemed I would lose my chance to become the House Boy! Sam was finally moved to doing other duties in the field and I was given the House Boy position.

Oh! The joy I felt when told that I would wait on the table for breakfast the following morning, and how Mother and Sam instructed me on my new duties! The young ladies of the house made me a couple of suits, which I wore on special occasions. There was clearly more to my position than was first apparent.

Mr. Willie Vaughn, the only son, was my model. I copied his laugh, his walk, his dress, the way he handled his knife and fork, and other characteristics. The way I presented myself must have amused those who observed me. But, aside from its humorous aspect, this contact with the Vaughan family was a valuable training and educational time in my life.

My Mother, who knew that education was important, made me devote an hour each night to my blue backed Holmes Primer. She was my teacher and one of the very few colored women who could read and write.

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One of the saddest recollections of my childhood was the death of Mrs. Vaughan. I shall never forget the wailing by the colored women and the sadness of the men. There must have been three to four hundred people on the Plantation.

Mrs. Vaughan, like her husband, possessed a very beautiful character, and was loved by everyone on the Plantation. In spite of my youth, I knew that the loss of Mrs. Vaughan would affect many people. There was not a family that had not at one time or another been helped by her kindly personal attention to their needs and difficulties.

Several years later, Mr. Vaughan was married to Miss Pattie Perkinson, the daughter of Captain Perkinson, the head of another fine Virginia family, who owned a large estate a few miles away. I didn't really approve of the marriage. I was not so worried about the marriage as I was about the position I held in the Vaughan household. I was anxious that whoever took "Miss Lucy's" place should not interfere with my position. I was doing just about as I wished, and running things much to my own liking.

My Mother was still Cook and my Father was running things as Headman on the farm. I was pleasantly surprised when "Miss Pattie" came to Pleasant Shade. The things that had been feared regarding her were not fulfilled. Miss Pattie insisted that Mother continue my lessons and encouraged me in many ways.

In the Fall following this event, a school was opened for the colored children a few miles from the Plantation. This was the first school for Negroes in that area; truly, this was the first school of any kind, there had been no public school of any consequence for either white or colored children before that time.

The Vaughans were of the finest type of Southern family – kind, thoughtful and generous. They were people of considerable wealth and at the top of the social scale in the community. They were the most popular among the Negroes in the community. They visited Negro churches and prayer meetings; and Negroes frequently visited the old Jamestown Presbyterian church to which the Vaughans belonged. For many years they conducted Sunday School in the afternoon at Jamestown Church for colored people. The Vaughan's never lost any prestige or social standing in the community by being kind to and helpful to colored people.

After the death of Mr. Vaughan, many things changed at Pleasant Shade. The farm was divided among the children. Most of the colored people moved away. My Father went to live with a family of Morton's who were connected by

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marriage with the Vaughan family. Mr. J.X. Morton had a son, Ernest, who had become one of my best friends. As time went by, our friendship became stronger; he left his parents to be with me and my colored friend, Lee, and we did the same towards Ernest. We neglected everything that we could with impunity in order that the three of us could be together. My Father did not wholly approve of this relationship; he would say quite often that we were "too thick to thrive". Later in life, I understood what he meant.

Ernest went off to Virginia Polytechnic Institute. The weeks following his leaving were dull and dreary for us at home. I continued to work on the farm and when the weather did not permit farm work, I went to school. I anxiously awaited the Christmas Holiday when Ernest would come home and we could have some good times together. When my friend Ernest came home, he had with him his roommate, who had come to spend the holiday with him. They both wore gray uniforms with bright brass buttons. When Ernest alighted for the carriage, we both rushed up to shake hands. He did not shake hands with us. He did bow very quickly. His manner was as cold and frigid as the north wind we were breathing.

Later, my Father asked if I had seen Ernest. "Yes sir," I said. "What did he say to you?" "Nothing," I replied. "I told you to stay away from there." I made no answer. He said no more. He knew how I felt, for he properly imagined what had happened.

After being snubbed by my boyhood friend, Ernest, I decided that getting an education was the best thing toward which I could bend my efforts in the future. I asked my Father about the school for colored people, which was being projected at Petersburg, now a state Normal school. He told me much about it. It was to open the following Fall. The Honorable John M. Langston, he said, a colored man who was as well educated as any white person that he knew of, was to be its President. He said that I could attend if I wanted, and that he would do what he could to help me.

He also told me much about Hampton Institute, but was not enthusiastic about my going to Hampton. He said Hampton was a work school, and that he could teach me as much about work as Hampton could. Despite that, at age 18, I enrolled at Hampton Institute, graduated in 1890 and became Commandant in charge of military discipline, a position I served in for 25 years.

In 1915, after the death of Dr. Booker T. Washington, Founder and first President of Tuskegee Institute, I was named President of that institution.

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Let me not forget that the first school for colored was opened with a gentleman named John Morrisette, a white man, as teacher. Mr. Morrisette was also an officer in the Southern Army. I introduce to you, Mr. Morrisette.