PRE-20TH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS



Photography serves as a vital tool that helps us explore the lives of our ancestors. Offering a glimpse into their lives through preserved mannerisms, hairstyles, and dress, these scenes frozen in time provide a visual record of those who walked the path before us. These images offer tangible evidence of ancestors and relatives we know through oral traditions and genealogical records.

For nineteenth-century African American families, choosing to sit for a portrait was a revolutionary act. Prior to the age of photography, African Americans were often relegated to caricatures and portrayed as objects of ridicule. Many of the earliest photographs of African Americans, including the Zealy daguerreotypes of enslaved people now housed at the International African American Museum (IAAM) in Charleston, South Carolina, represent a dark history. These images were taken against their subjects' will and without their consent, produced through force or coercion that stripped them of the very dignity that self-directed portraiture would later reclaim.

When African Americans could choose whether to be photographed or not, they established the agency to represent themselves with dignity, on their own terms, and to preserve their legacy for future generations.

Safeguarding this legacy today is the Center for Family History at the International African American Museum of Charleston, South Carolina, which offers a publicly accessible digital collection that explores the photography of the African American community. Our archive of pre-twentieth-century photographs, sourced from private donations, depict African American ancestors, home life, Black neighborhoods, and businesses. (View the digital archive at iaamuseum.org/center-for-family-history/digital-archives.)

Each photograph is linked to descriptive metadata that provides the name of the photograph, the names of the individuals pictured, creation date, location, description, image type and format, rightsholder information, and the name of the donor. When we look closely at this data—and the images themselves—powerful themes begin to emerge, perhaps none more striking than the visual documentation of Black professionalism.

Professionalism

A powerful spirit of self-determination emerged among African Americans in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Many shared a mindset focused on becoming economically independent, pursuing higher education and skilled labor, and obtaining social autonomy. Such advancements were instrumental in reshaping the African American professional landscape, facilitating a transition from labor-intensive roles toward professional and skilled roles. This movement also tried to combat the way African Americans were depicted in general American society. Many pre-twentieth-century images of African Americans showed them as enslaved, working in menial positions, or in other stereotypical portrayals denoting servitude, entertainment, scorn, or derision.

IAAM's online archival collection contains photos that were part of the effort to correct and rehabilitate the face of Black America for the general public. An 1890s photo



Darius Brown is the Research Assistant at the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina. His email address is dbrown@iaamuseum.org.

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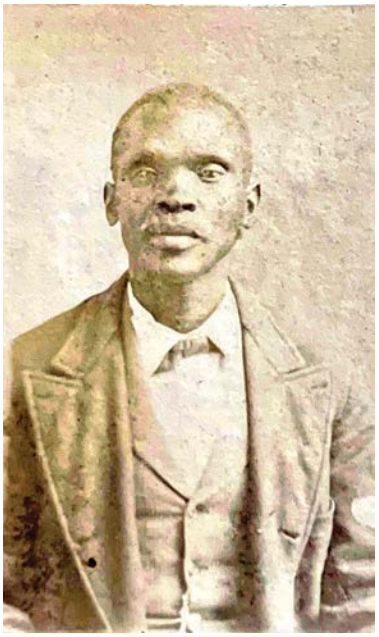

Opposite page: Mary Goins Marsh and her granddaughter, Mary Manitou, Benzie County, Michigan, ca. 1895.

Left: The children of Elizabeth Smalls Bampfield (the grandchildren of Captain Robert Smalls), Beaufort, South Carolina, 1898.

Right: Samson Pringle of Georgetown, South Carolina, ca. 1891–1902.

of Leonard Wilson Roane of Newport News, Virginia, shows a young man who was a shipbuilding engineer in that city. A photo of his brother Bacchus Roane taken about the same time depicts a well-dressed man who served as a special policeman and justice of the peace in Newport News.

Women and family legacies

While the collection shows men highlighted for their white-collar and public service professions, women are honored for their resilience and presence. The images offer a glimpse into the lives of women who shaped their families' trajectories. The portrait of Mary Goins Marsh (1840–1905) and her granddaughter Mary Manitou captures the vital role of women as keepers of generational memory. Two women born in different eras share a space, creating a visual bridge that links the struggles of the past with the promise of the future and proving that the family line remained unbroken.

The 1898 portrait of the grandchildren of Captain Robert Smalls reflects a rich legacy of generational achievement. In 1862, Captain Smalls orchestrated an escape to freedom for his family and fellow crew members on board the *Planter*, achieving fame across the country. Smalls would later serve in Congress. His daughter Elizabeth Smalls Bampfield was only four when she escaped enslavement with her family. As an adult, Elizabeth served as her father's secretary, and she was even appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt as postmaster of Beaufort. This photograph of her children is more than a family portrait; it is a visual testament to a family who quickly moved from the status of property to civil leaders and pillars of the community.

Enslavement to autonomy

Several photos in this collection document individuals who were born enslaved and attained freedom after the Civil War. These portraits portray post–Civil War Black Americans establishing themselves as individuals with honor, dignity, integrity—and a distinctive personal style.

Samson Pringle was one of these individuals. Born around 1843, he was enslaved by William Bull Pringle on the Beneventum Plantation in Georgetown County, South Carolina. He fought for his own freedom as a soldier in the 135th United States Colored Troops (USCT). Remarkably, his portrait was not found in a traditional family album but was preserved within his military pension file at the National Archives in Washington, DC. Taken between his Civil War pension application in 1891 and his death in September 1902, the photograph shows Pringle framed by an elegant, embossed matte. He is dressed in a tailored suit, facing the viewer with his head held high. His appearance stands in stark contrast to his beginnings on the Beneventum Plantation.

Ultimately, the pre-twentieth-century images of African Americans preserved by IAAM and other organizations prove that while a single picture may be worth a thousand words, archival collectives are priceless. Those captured in the frames chose to redefine their individual and collective narratives—and not let their stories or the stories of their people be controlled by others. By stepping in front of the camera lens, these African Americans claimed their place in the American story. By displaying these images, the Center for Family History at the International African American Museum does more than display faces from the past; it restores the names, stories, and context that time and injustice attempted to erase. ◆

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