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Complicated Lives: Free Blacks in Virginia, 1619-1865

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Complicated Lives

COMPLICATED LIVES

Free Blacks in Virginia, 1619–1865

SHERRI L. BURR



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Durham, North Carolina

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For the Hills and the Burrs

Rest in Peace, Dear Relatives

Your Stories Continue

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Author's Note

The road to creating this book has been paved with serendipity.¹ Sorting through a bag of letters in 2013, I found one from my great-aunt Callie informing me she was on her way to Wyoming because my great-great-aunt Lillian had taken ill. I remembered meeting Lillian once, at the funeral of my grandmother Juanita when I was six. I recalled Lillian as someone with straight black hair who looked more Native American than black. Two weeks later, another letter from Aunt Callie informed me that Lillian had passed away. From the security of my New Mexico home in 2013, I wondered why an African-American woman had lived in Wyoming in the middle of the last century. Contemplating this question started a journey that led to Virginia and across the Atlantic.

To uncover material for another book, I traveled to North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. On a stop in Worland, Wyoming, I explained to a sales associate that a relative had once lived there, and questioned how I could find her home and grave. She pulled out a map, and circled the county clerk's office and cemetery. Twenty-minutes later with the address to Aunt Lillian's home in my purse, I knocked on the door of her last residence.

Through a screen door, I saw a portly Hispanic woman with a kind face sitting on a chair. I introduced myself as Lillian Fay Todd's niece, and she said, "Come on in."

Mrs. Lucy Vigil explained that she knew Lillian well and had purchased the house and its contents from Callie who had inherited

them. "The antique furniture had been shipped from Chicago," she said proudly.

As we talked, it occurred to me that I had inadvertently stumbled upon a family history museum. I departed Worland with gifts of Aunt Lillian's silver and handcrafted kitchen linens, along with even more questions.

A few months later, as I flew from Albuquerque to Salt Lake City to give a speech at the 2013 National Federation of Press Women Conference, I listened to a seatmate extolling the virtues of the Mormon Family History Library. Planning to check out the library for fifteen minutes, I disembarked from public transportation a stop short of the one nearest the conference hotel. Three hours later as the library was closing and a light drizzle fell upon Salt Lake City, I had missed dinner but had not noticed as I walked to the hotel with copies of digitized census records.

The paperwork contained a 1920 census record linking Aunt Lillian and her husband Andrew Todd to Chicago, and an 1850 census record identifying her father, George W. Hill, as having been born free in Virginia in 1847.² He resided in the household of his grandfather, Gideon Hill. The census record was titled "Free Inhabitants of Virginia." All the blacks and mulattos were designated with a B or M. The whites were not marked. George had an M next to his name, while a B was marked next to Gideon's.

Prior to this discovery, I lacked knowledge that there were blacks born free in the South before the conclusion of the Civil War. Like many Americans, I assumed all Africans were brought to the South as slaves and their descendants remained so until 1865. Unearthing this information led me to question just how many Free Blacks, like my ancestors, resided in Virginia and the rest of the South during the colonial and antebellum periods. What were their lives like? What legal rules governed their activities?

Seeking answers to questions like these led to this book. In researching the lives of my ancestors at the Library of Virginia, I discovered the document releasing Gideon Hill from bondage as a two-year old on January 25, 1787. More research at the Jefferson

Library in Charlottesville and other archives led to un-related individuals who had paid for liberty, earned their freedom through meritorious deeds, or were released from bondage due to the largesse of planters motivated by honor or love.

If freedom is the God-given right of all people, this book contains stories of people of African origin who were never enslaved, born free, or who obtained liberty through court proceedings, sheer will, industriousness and entrepreneurship. They lived in an unpredictable society that sought to systematically deprive them of liberty and other human rights. This history of Free Blacks³ in Virginia reveals the human ability to persevere against adverse odds arising from the color of their skin, or their gender, or both.

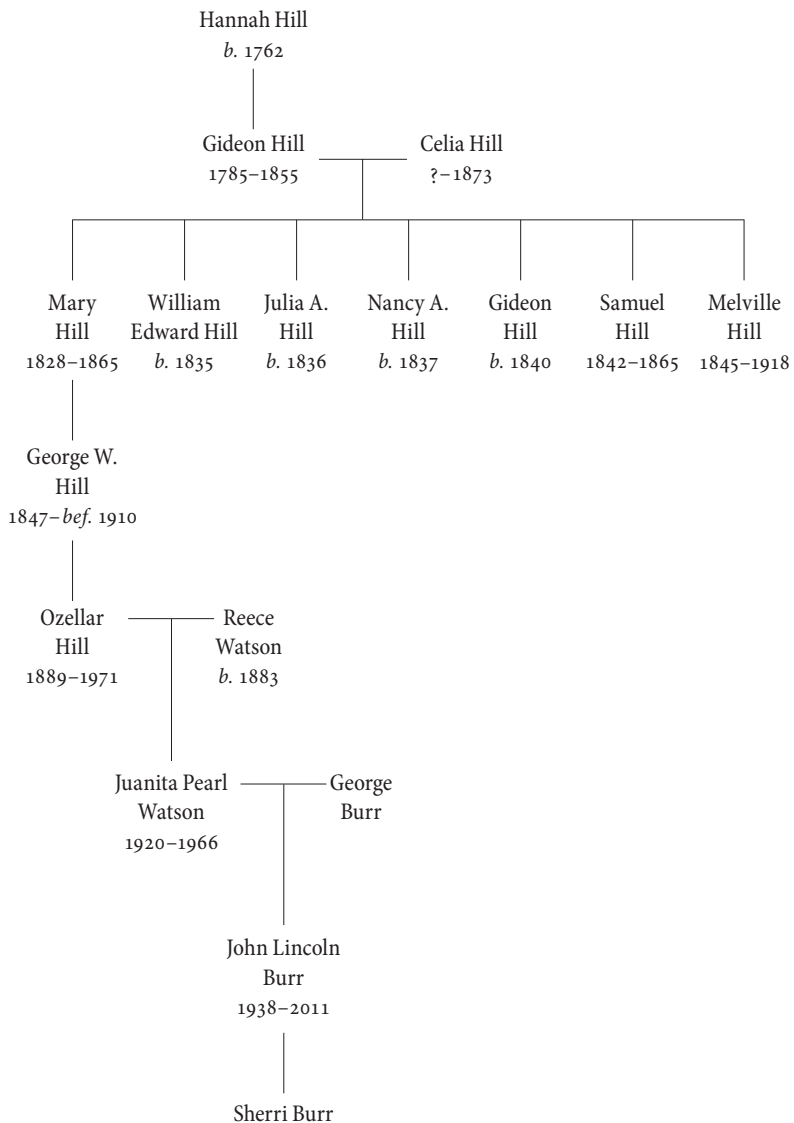
Complicated Lives is written using narrative nonfiction techniques to make sometimes stale history accessible to the general public. For example, with court records and other documents of known events, I modernized ancient dialogue from actual facts to tell the story. So that the reading of this book is not disrupted by footnotes, the source material can be found in the notes at the end of the book.

Revisiting a time when blacks were early citizens and participants in the United States economy proves black lives mattered then, and now. To heal the psychic injuries that continue today, we must unveil the past and address its wounds. This book interweaves legal history with my journey of discovering what happened to those African Americans who were free before the Civil War and lived their lives in the shadows of a complicated world.

Sherri Burr
Albuquerque, New Mexico

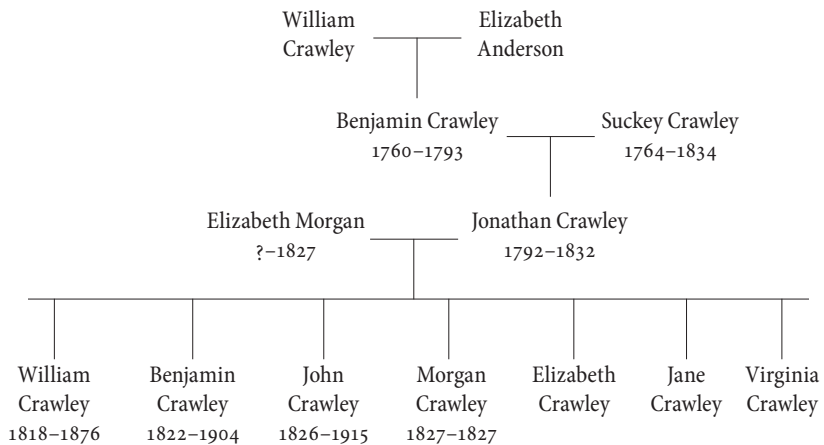
Hill Family Tree

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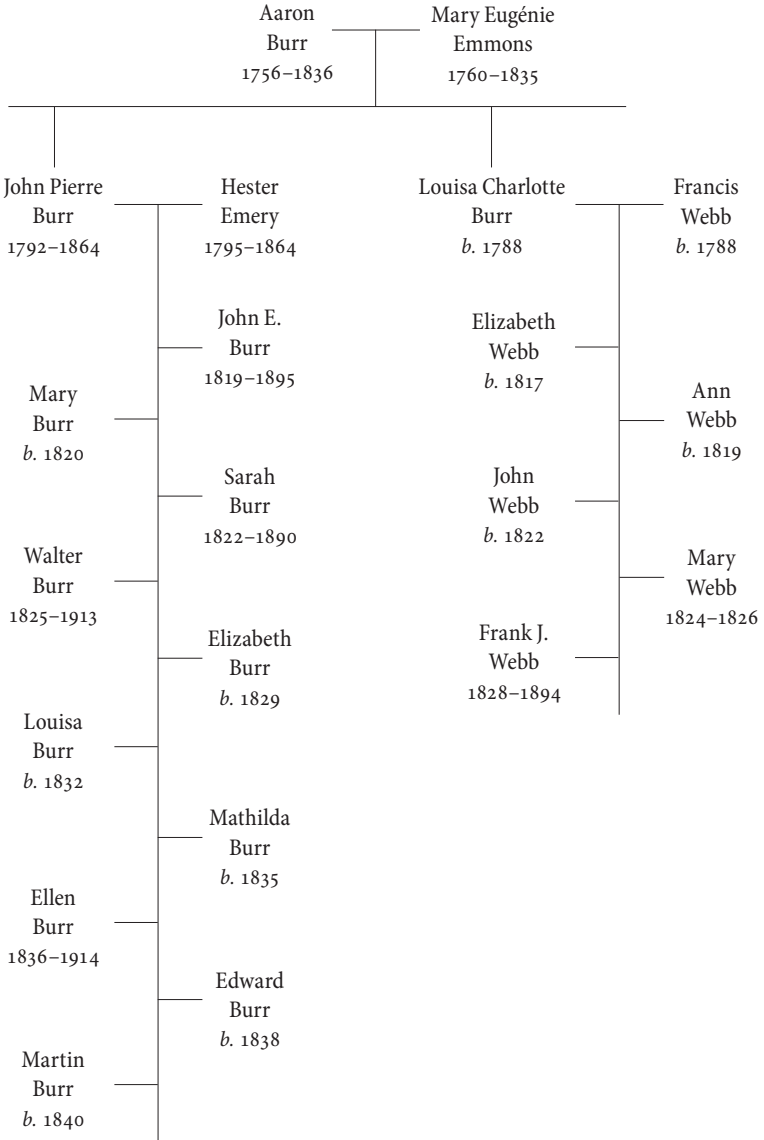
Benjamin & Suckey (Susannah) Crawley Family Tree

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Burr Family Tree

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Thomas Jefferson & Sally Hemings Family Tree

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