

## Biography of Luversa Jones (1845-1911) and Emma Randolph (1865-1934)

Buried in the historic African American Cemetery, Evergreen, in Richmond, Virginia

By Lee Ann Timreck<sup>1</sup>



A simple stone obelisk marks the final resting place of Luversa Jones (1845-1919) and her daughter Emma Randolph (1865-1934).<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the obelisk is a mystery, revealing more questions than answers. The stone was put up many years after the death of Luversa; in fact, there is an original headstone marking her burial place nearby. So, who put this up, and why? Additionally, Emma is only one of Luversa's children; why is only Emma buried with her mother? Perhaps some of this will become clear as we untangle their life stories.

The simplicity of the memorial is reflective of the quiet, yet impactful, lives of Luversa and Emma. These two women are descendants of a free black family that dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and lived in a

<sup>1</sup> Questions, comments, clarifications, and other information about Luversa Jones and Emma Randolph are welcome. The author can be reached at leetimreck@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> No birth record was found for Luversa Jones, and her birth date varies greatly across the historical records; it is most likely between 1845 and 1847. Her memorial stone states her age as 86 upon her death, however, she was only in her mid-70's. Without knowing when or who placed the memorial to Luversa Jones and Emma Randolph, the reason for the discrepancy is unknown.

community of both free and enslaved African Americans. Luversa and Emma both outlived two husbands, survived on their own despite an inability to read or write, and lived through some of the darkest days of racism and discrimination. History has long overlooked the lives of nineteenth century Black women, allowing their stories to vanish over time. However, using the few clues that do exist about Luversa Jones and Emma Randolph, and telling their story in the context of nineteenth-century Virginia history, we can better understand their lives.

### **Luversa Ratcliffe**

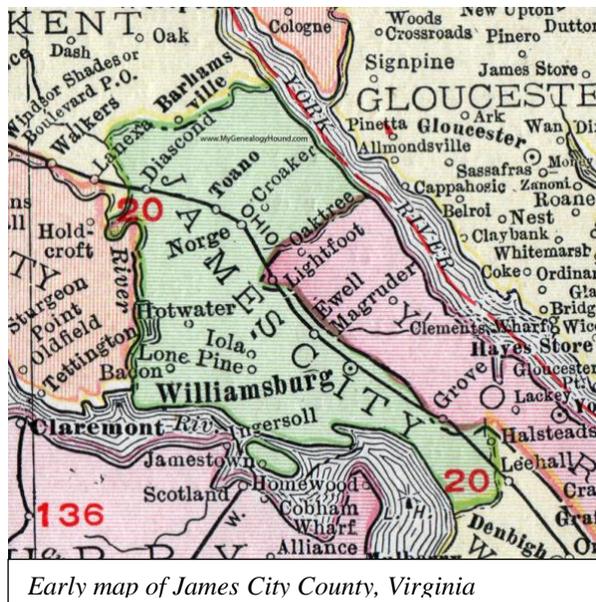
Luversa was born into a free black family, about 1845, in James City County Virginia. Her parents, Nicholas and Eliza Ratcliffe, were members of a free black community of about 250; by 1860 that number would exceed 1000.<sup>3</sup> The exact date and source of their freedom is unknown, but stretches back at least to Luversa's grandparents, Frank and Matilda Ratcliffe, who are documented in the 1820 census as free.<sup>4</sup> The coexistence of free and enslaved blacks in Virginia was not unusual; in fact, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 20,000 Virginia slaves had been set free. Some had been freed by their owners, while others purchased their freedom outright. By the start of the Civil War, Virginia's free black population of 50,000 was one of the largest in the country; of course, this number paled in comparison to the over 500,000 African Americans enslaved throughout the state.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martha McCartney, "An African American Heritage Trails Project: *The Free Black Community at Centerville, James City County, Virginia*", 2000, 15.

<sup>4</sup> 1820 United States Census, James City County, Va., Frank Ratcliffe

<sup>5</sup> "Free African American Population in the U.S: 1790-1860", University of Virginia Library, accessed online September 2020, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/>



James City County straddles the Virginia Peninsula from the James River on the west and the York River to the east, bounded by New Kent, Charles and York counties. During the Civil War, the county served as a throughway for Confederate forces in Richmond and Union forces to the South in Hampton; as each army marched along the spine of the Virginia Peninsula toward each other, they wreaked

havoc on the farms and fields of James County farmers. By the end of the war, the local economy was in ruins, made worse by the flood of newly emancipated African Americans looking for work.

Although Luversa was born free, her life would not be easy. Most James City County free blacks worked as farmers or laborers, and few could afford to purchase their own land. Martha McCarrey writes that “It probably was very difficult for free African American household heads, most of whom were subsistence farmers, to generate enough disposable income to keep their capitation or “head” (poll) tax from falling into arrears.”<sup>6</sup> The Ratcliffe family was indeed poor; the 1860 census data reflects that the family’s total property value was fifty dollars, and they paid \$1.60 in personal property tax.<sup>7</sup>

Luversa would call this rural county in Virginia home for most of her life, and likely never travelled more than forty or fifty miles from her birthplace. She first lived with her parents

<sup>6</sup> McCarrey, 16.

<sup>7</sup> 1860 United States Census, James City County, Va., Nicholas Ratcliffe.

in the Stonehouse district of James City County in the vicinity of Burnt Ordinary, which today is known as Toano. As the oldest daughter with five younger siblings, Luversa grew up working alongside her mother, while her father and brothers worked in the field, planting, plowing, and harvesting. The number of children was not unusual, given the enormous amount of work required on a farm. In fact "... Virginian women often bore five to six living children and led lives proscribed by the traditions and cycles of rural society."<sup>8</sup> Luversa would have helped with the cooking, cleaning, sewing, and tending livestock and vegetable gardens. As was common within rural Virginia families, Luversa's mother may have augmented her household duties with work for pay; this could be craft products, domestic services, or even field labor.

Life was not always hard work and drudgery. Luversa belonged to a large, extended family; in addition to her brothers, she had grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins all living in James City County. As historian Laura Edwards notes, "... the households of the poor of both races included an array of kin who all contributed to the families welfare (Edwards,1997)."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly the Ratcliffe family would have come together to help each other through difficult times, gathered together for worship or family celebrations.

### **Luversa Twine**

Against the backdrop of the Civil War, life changed dramatically for Luversa Ratcliffe. In about 1863 she married Leonard Twine (1830-?) and moved to a new home in James City County. By 1870, she was the twenty-seven year old mother of five children – Elizabeth ( who would go by the name Alice), Emma, Moses, John, and baby Joseph – all under the age of

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<sup>8</sup> "Women in Virginia," *Virginia Museum of History of Culture* web site, accessed 29 September 2020 at <https://www.virginiahistory.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 146.

seven.<sup>10</sup> According to the census, Leonard worked as a laborer and Luversa “kept house,” which likely was a full-time job, given the size of her family. For many poor women at that time, however, “keeping house” often included work outside the home. In his research on the nineteenth century free black communities of Prince Edward County, historian Melvin Patrick observed that:

The revenue commissioner ... misleadingly labeled almost every free black woman there [Prince Edward County] as doing either farming or “housework” ... Most [also] worked as spinners, washers, weavers, cooks, “waiters,” or nurses (Patrick, 2004).<sup>11</sup>

### Luversa Jones

At some point between 1870 and 1880, Leonard Twine passed away, and the next record of Luversa is her marriage to Amos Jones, a widower, on 3 May, 1880.<sup>12</sup> While the 1880 census reflects Amos and Luversa living in the Stone House area of James City County, Virginia, the census reflects only one child, Emma Twine, living with them. Luversa’s oldest daughter Alice had married and moved out, but the whereabouts of Luversa’s other four children is unknown. Making ends meet was a struggle for Amos and Luversa; neither could read or write, and the 1882 tax records reflect the value of their personal property as sixteen dollars.<sup>13</sup> Three of her sons could have been hired out to other farmers as laborers, possibly boarding with them as well; by 1880, two of her sons, Moses and John Twine, would have been about thirteen and her youngest child, Joseph, about ten, all old enough to be hired.

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<sup>10</sup> 1870 United States Census, James City County, Va., Luversa Twine.

<sup>11</sup> Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A SOUTHERN EXPERIMENT in BLACK FREEDOM from the 1790's Through the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) 139.

<sup>12</sup> “Virginia Marriages, 1785-1940”, database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XR38-DPH> : 29 January 2020), Eliza Ratcliff in entry for Amos Jones, 1880.

<sup>13</sup> 1882 James City County Personal Property Tax records, Amos Jones.

After 1880, Luversa disappears from the public record until her death in 1919. Sometime during this period, her husband passes away, possibly leaving her in a precarious financial position. If so, she would have had few options; the only work in rural James City County for an uneducated black woman was as a field laborer, or in some kind of domestic service. Certainly, she could have moved in with family members, a fairly common occurrence within the black community. Historian Edward Ayers noted that by 1890, “Almost a quarter of the black households in one study included blood relations other than children, and about a third of all families lived near other relatives (Ayers, 2007) .”<sup>14</sup> There is a strong possibility that Luversa could have moved in with her oldest daughter, given that Alice lived in James City County, and was with Luversa at the time of her death in 1919.

### **Emma Twine**

Emma Twine, Luversa’s second daughter, was born at the end of the Civil War and grew up during Reconstruction, a period marked by massive social and economic upheaval. Economically, the South was reeling from the widespread destruction of the agricultural industry, the depressed prices for cotton, and the influx of free blacks desperate for work. These conditions drove thousands of newly freed African Americans to the cities in search of work; in Richmond, for example, between the years of 1860 and 1890, the African American population doubled from 38,000 to over 81,000 people.

### **Emma Washington/Emma Randolph**

Sixteen-year-old Emma likely recognized the difficulty of finding work in James City County and made the decision to move to the city. In fact, the 1880 census reflects Emma as

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 152.

married, and working in Harrisonburg, Virginia as a live-in domestic servant for the Hill family.<sup>15</sup> The census also reflects that Emma was married, now Emma Washington, although information on her husband or their actual marriage date was not found. The most likely scenario is that Emma and her husband moved away from James City County in search of work. At some point her husband passed away, and by the mid-1890s Emma had moved to Richmond. In 1895, when Emma was about thirty years old, she marries a thirty-eight-year-old widower named Moses Randolph.<sup>16</sup> At that time, Moses was living in the Shockoe Bottom area of Richmond and working as a driver, likely driving a wagon or cart to transport goods across the city.<sup>17</sup>

Sadly, the marriage was short-lived; Moses would pass away some time around 1899. Now in her mid-thirties, Emma either couldn't, or wouldn't, return to James City County. As a single, black woman with little education, she faced significant employment challenges, at a time that "only certain professions were deemed appropriate for women, such as teaching, nursing, and textile work."<sup>18</sup> Additionally, manufacturing and commercial businesses that did employ women segregated them *by race* – giving black women the harder and more difficult tasks, yet paying them less.

Despite these challenges, Emma managed to work and live on her own in Richmond from 1895 until 1930.<sup>19</sup> After initially working as a laundress and other odd jobs, Emma worked in

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<sup>15</sup> 1880 United States Census, Rockingham County, Va., Emma Washington

<sup>16</sup> 1880 United States Census, Henrico County, Va., Moses Randolph

<sup>17</sup> Occupation data from Richmond City Directories 1895. This census identifies Moses Randolph's first wife, Bettie, and their two daughters. The whereabouts of Moses' two daughters after Bettie's passing and Moses's marriage to Emma is unknown.

<sup>18</sup> "Women in Virginia," *Virginia Museum of History of Culture* web site, accessed 29 September 2020 at <https://www.virginiahistory.org>

<sup>19</sup> Emma Randolph lived at a variety of addresses between 1895 and 1930, all within a few blocks of Mechanicsville Turnpike and just outside of the Richmond city line. From around 1895 until 1918, her address is listed in the Richmond Directory as 1837 Jay Street (note – sometimes it was listed as 1835 Jay Street as well). From 1918 until 1925, her address is listed as 1916 Short P Street, and from 1925 until around 1930 is listed as 1921 Short P Street. From 1930 until her death in 1934, Emma was an inmate at the Central State Hospital in Petersburg, Virginia.

Richmond's tobacco factories from 1915 until about 1925. Richmond had become one of the largest American producers of tobacco products, and business was booming. And although new technology enabled increased production, there was also "...increased the demand for blacks as sorters, stemmers, hangers and pickers. These tasks were viewed as an extension of field labor and therefore "Negro work... (Jones, 2000)."<sup>20</sup>

The "cleaner" jobs of inspecting and packaging tobacco went to white women, with black women performing the "Negro" or "dirty" work of sorting and cleaning tobacco. And for this, Emma was paid less than white women. In Durham, North Carolina, for example – a city with comparable manufacturing and discrimination practices – "... white females averaged about 29 cents per hour, while black female hand stemmers earned about 11.9 cents an hour. (Jones, 2000)"<sup>21</sup>



This was hard, hot work; Emma likely stood for ten to twelve hours a day cleaning tobacco leaves, as the hot, stultifying air of tobacco dust made it difficult to breathe. Not only was the general health of black factory workers degraded by the working conditions, many died from

tuberculosis. A black female worker named Blanche Scott in one of North Carolina's tobacco factories described the environment:

<sup>20</sup> Beverly Jones, *Negro History Bulletin*, 2000, "Race, Sex, and Class: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920-1940, and the Development of Feminine Consciousness", page 46.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, page 49.

When I left the factory, it became difficult for me to breathe. The dust and fumes of the burly tobacco made me cough. The burly tobacco from Georgia had chicken feathers and even manure in it. Sometimes I would put an orange in my mouth to keep from throwing up. I know some women who died of TB (Jones, 2000).<sup>22</sup>

Between 1925 and 1929, the entries for Emma Randolph in the Richmond Directory lists no occupation, suggesting perhaps she was ill and unable to work, or limited to working from home. In the 1930 census, however, the sixty-five-year-old Emma Randolph is listed as an inmate at the Central State Hospital in Petersburg, Virginia.



Central State Hospital, founded in 1870 as the Central Lunatic Asylum for the Colored Insane, was created after the Civil War as a psychiatric hospital for African Americans. By 1930, the population of the hospital had grown to about 4000 patients, and Emma would

likely have been housed in the “Eastview Building for Feeble-Minded Females.” There is no documentation as to who committed Emma, or exactly why she was there; she might have been committed because she was infirm, destitute, or suffering from mental illness. Using Central State Hospital as a poorhouse for indigent African Americans was not uncommon. Her health was poor, most likely compromised by her time in the tobacco factories, leaving her with heart disease and rheumatoid arthritis; if she had become destitute and unable to work or care for herself, she might have been committed to the institution by the Richmond courts. Whatever the

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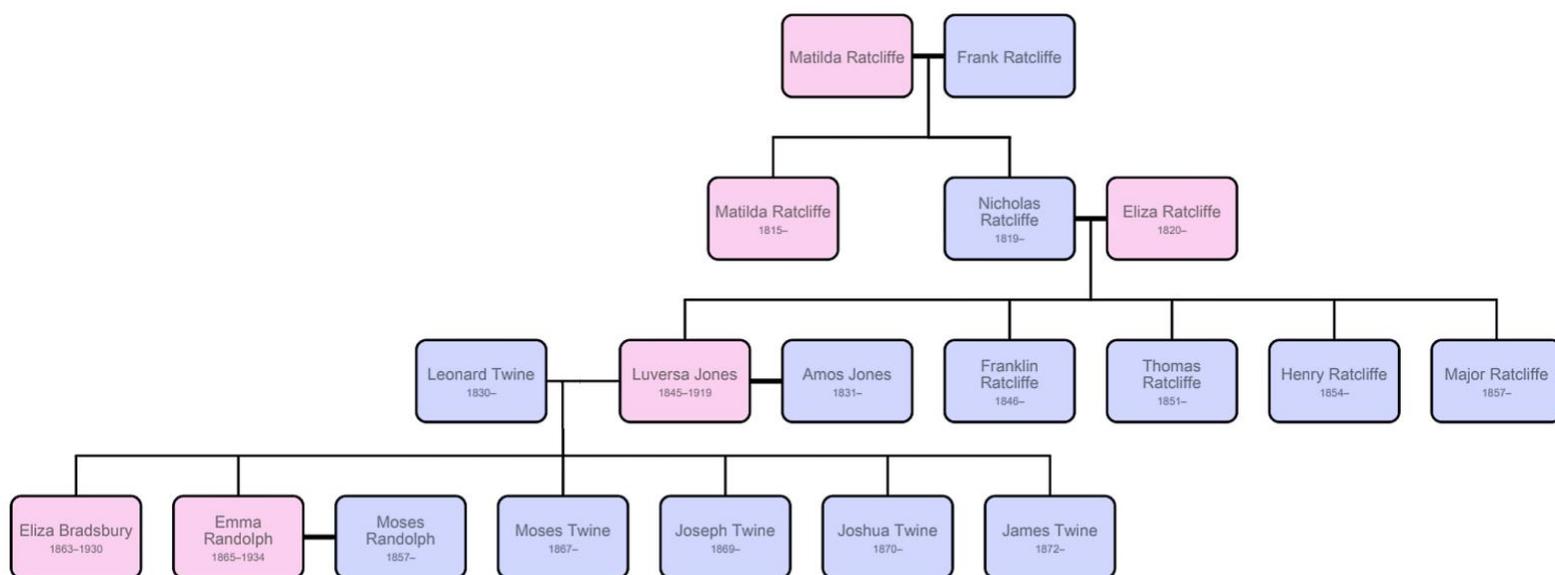
<sup>22</sup> Jones, page 48.

rationale, Emma Randolph spent the last four years of her life at Central State Hospital, dying in 1934 of chronic myocarditis, an inflammation and progressive weakening of the heart.



Two women, two different paths. Luversa remained true to her rural roots, a farmer's daughter and a farmer's wife; Emma escaped to the city, joining the thousands of working poor living in Richmond's fast-growing black communities. But the relationship between mother and daughter, particularly in the years leading up to Luversa's death, remains a question mark. In fact, we have only the outline of Luversa and Emma's life stories, filled with tantalizing clues that they were smart, determined and loving women. I hope that these outlines – filled out with tales of accomplishments, experiences and family – live on through the generations, connecting Luversa and Emma with those that followed them.

## Luversa Jones Family Tree



### **Recommended Further Research**

The question of who erected the grave marker for Luversa and her daughter Emma, and when, remains unanswered; so, does the mystery of why Emma spent the last years of her life at the Central State Hospital. Given the large number of descendants, many still living in James City County, the answer could probably be found. Luversa was one of five children and had at least eight cousins; Luversa herself had five children, and six grandchildren by her oldest daughter, Eliza Alice (Twine) Bradbury. Alice herself never left James City County, and is buried in Shiloh Baptist Church Cemetery in Croaker, Virginia. And although Emma had no children, her brothers all married and had families; and although I did not research in detail the family trees of Luversa's children, she undoubtedly had many more grandchildren. Interestingly there are dozens of family trees on Ancestry.com that are related to either the Ratcliffe, Twine or Randolph family, and the majority trace back to Nicholas and Eliza Ratcliffe. Their story, as free blacks living in Virginia during the height of slavery, may still live on through their descendants.

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