

Biography of Estelle L. Dalton, 1870-1963

Buried in historic African American cemetery, Evergreen, in Richmond, Virginia

by Mary Owens¹



Estelle L. Dalton’s gravestone notes that she was born on July 2, 1870 and died on January 7, 1963. It also includes the term “DAUGHTER-IN-LAW” at the bottom of the stone. While the dates of Estelle’s birth and death can be partly substantiated, the reason for including “DAUGHTER-IN-LAW” on her monument remains a mystery. This is one of several blanks and inconsistencies in Estelle’s life story that remain unresolved – her true birth year, her legal name at various times in her life, her marital status, and even her race. Unfortunately, research only allows glimpses into portions of Estelle’s life and only answers some of the questions a visitor to her grave might have yet it still tells an interesting story.

¹ The author of this biography is a volunteer writer for enrichmond. Questions, comments, clarifications, and other information about Estelle Dalton and her family are welcome. The author can be reached at meo10601@gmail.com. Final edits on the biography were completed by Enrichmond Intern Kathleen Gruber.

Estelle Dalton's Early Life

The first information about Estelle's early life is gleaned from her grandmother's listing in the 1880 United States Federal Census.² Estelle is identified as a mulatto female of eight years old whose parents were both born in Virginia. Her last name is given as Dalton. At the time of the census, she lived with her 43 year-old grandmother, Susan Page, a black widow "in service", and her 23 year-old aunt, Ellen Page, who was classified as a washerwoman. Their address was 8 West Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia. Both Estelle's grandmother and aunt were described in the census as being black. While Estelle's racial description of mulatto might imply that her father was white, there is no conclusive information about her father except his name on her death certificate.

There is a gap of many years before Estelle shows up again in public records. One reason for this gap is the missing 1890 United States Federal Census.³ Most of the 1890 census' population schedules were badly damaged by a fire in the Commerce Department Building in Washington, D.C. in January 1921. Of the schedules that remain, there was no information about Estelle. It is possible that Estelle married and had two children during this gap period.⁴ There are subsequent public records that indicate that Estelle was a widow and that her deceased husband was Claude Liggon.⁵ However, there is insufficient direct information to prove that

² 1880 United States Federal Census (Susan Page), Richmond, Henrico, Virginia; Roll: 1371; Page: 94B; Enumeration District: 081.

³ United State Census Bureau website, "Availability of 1890 Census", <https://www.census.gov>

⁴ 1910 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton), Richmond Lee Ward, Richmond (Independent City), Virginia; Roll: T624_1644; Page: 1A; Enumeration District: 0103; FHL microfilm: 1375657.

⁵ U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995, Richmond, Virginia, City Directory, 1954, pg. 536 (Ligon, Estelle D.).

Estelle and Claude were married. And research to date has not revealed verifiable facts about Claude Liggon.

The Early 1900s

By 1900, Estelle lived at 311 Smith Street, a short narrow street that parallels North Belvidere Street at the western edge of the Jackson Ward neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. The 1900 United States Federal Census identified Estelle as a 28 year old single black woman who could read and write and worked as a laundress. She lived with her son, Joseph Liggon, age 10, and her aunt, Ellen Page, age 38.⁶

The Liggon surname also appears in various documents as both Liggins and Ligon. For example, in the 1910 United States Federal Census, Estelle is listed as Estelle Liggins, age 40.⁷ She still resided at 311 Smith Street, Richmond, Virginia. In this census, she is identified as a mulatto widowed female, working as a chambermaid in a hotel. This census provided a new and interesting piece of information – Estelle reported that she gave birth to two children but only one, her son Joseph, was living. The household at the time of the census included Joseph, age 20, who was employed as a hotel bellman and Estelle's aunt, Ellen Page, age 52, who worked as a washerwoman.

Estelle's son, Joseph, eventually moved to Pennsylvania and, on October 6, 1917, married Lillie Timberlake, who was also originally from Virginia.⁸ Sadly, that marriage only lasted until 1926 when Lillie filed for divorce on the grounds of willful desertion and

⁶ 1900 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton); Richmond, Clay Ward, Richmond City, Virginia; Page: 23; Enumeration District: 0060; FHL microfilm: 1241737.

⁷ 1910 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton).

⁸ Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Marriage Index, 1885-1951, 1917 (Joseph C. Liggon and Lillie Timberlake). Digital GSU Number 4141769.

abandonment.⁹ There is no record of any children from the marriage. Joseph resided in the Philadelphia area from that time onward and does not appear to have returned to Virginia until his body was returned for burial in the 1950s.

Estelle's Life in Transition

Evergreen Cemetery records show that Estelle purchased her burial plot in section Y35 of the cemetery for \$25.00 on December 26, 1920.¹⁰ Her aunt, Ellen Page, had passed away on December 23, 1920,¹¹ and was the first family member buried in the newly purchased plot at Evergreen. Ellen's death was surely difficult for Estelle. She had lived with her aunt from a very young age and they were undoubtedly close, being only about twelve years apart in age. As such, it is easy to imagine the difficulties Estelle may have faced with her only son moving to Pennsylvania and her aunt passing away just a few years later. Perhaps the need for less space or lower rent led Estelle to move several times in the years between 1910 and 1920. The Richmond City Directories record her address changes during those years. Between 1911 and 1912, Estelle moved from 311 Smith Street to 510½ North Third Street. By 1919, Estelle moved to 514 ½ B Catherine Street where she lived until her death. (Note: No information was found for Estelle in the 1920 United States Federal Census.)

Life in Jackson Ward

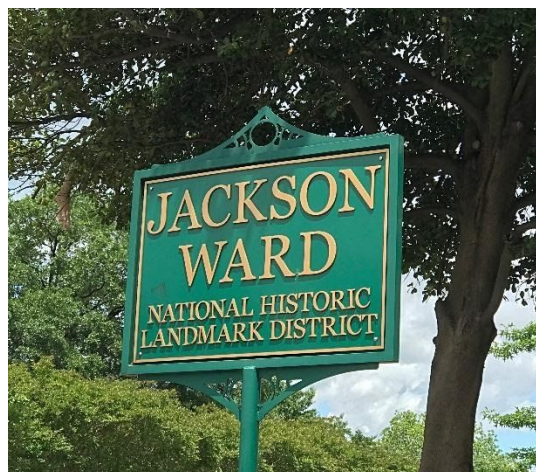
Throughout Estelle's earliest years, her several moves in the 1910s and even her final apartment on Catherine Street, it appears that she always lived in the Jackson Ward

⁹ Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Divorce Records, 1918-2014. (Liggon, 1926). Accessed on Ancestry.com.

¹⁰ Evergreen Cemetery Ledger Book 1, pg. 481, Plot 35, Section Y, December 26, 1920 (E. R. Dalton).

¹¹ Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Deaths, 1912-2014. (Ellen Page, 1920).

neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. From the Civil War until World War II, Jackson Ward was the hub of black professional and entrepreneurial activities in the City of Richmond and even within the State of Virginia.¹² Many prominent fraternal organizations, cooperative banks, insurance companies and other commercial and social



institutions originated in Jackson Ward. The individuals of exceptional vision and talent who developed those organizations – the Maggie Walkers, John Mitchells, W. W. Brownes, and Giles B. Jacksons – lived and worked in Jackson Ward. Although research did not reveal anything about Estelle’s participation in those neighborhood activities, she would have been living among some of the wealthiest and most accomplished black Richmonders during her years in Jackson Ward.

One can glean a bit about Estelle’s living quarters from the book, *The Jackson Ward Historic District*. For example, the building where Estelle lived at 510 ½ North Third Street is described as part of a three-unit Italianate row house built in 1889. The homes had porches and were decorated with cornices. These homes would have been just over 20 years old and still quite impressive when Estelle moved in around 1912.¹³

The house at 514 ½ Catherine Street was demolished before *The Jackson Ward Historic District* was published and, even today, that block continues to be a vacant lot. Though there are

¹² R. Patrick Winthrop, J. Granderson Zehmer, Richmond (Va.). Department of Planning and Community Development. (1978). *The Jackson Ward historic district*. Richmond]: Dept. of Planning and Community Development. 11, 13.

¹³ Winthrop. 192.

no specifics in the book about 514 ½ Catherine, there are other interesting details about that street. In the description of the 400 and 500 blocks of Catherine Street, the author notes that Catherine Street is a small street that was developed in the middle of a large block between Clay and Leigh Streets. It consisted of working people's residences, some dating from before the Civil War. Houses in these two blocks of Catherine Street included well-preserved wooden houses and brick houses. Some were ornamented with porches and railings while others had very plain fronts. Across from Estelle's building, the residence at 515 Catherine Street was described as a two-story home built in 1854 with an unusual two-story porch, exposed brick chimneys, a steep roof and window sash.¹⁴ This is the house Estelle would have seen every time she left her own apartment.

Working as a Hotel Maid

The 1930 United States Federal Census lists Estelle Dalton, age 53, as a renter living alone at 514 ½ B Catherine Street.¹⁵ It describes her as a hotel maid, a widow, a Negro, and one who can read and write but did not attend school.

According to the City Directory listings, Estelle worked at several hotels in the Broad Street corridor, including the Hotel John Marshall and William Byrd Hotel.¹⁶ But she spent the most time as a maid at Murphy Hotel, once a leading hotel in downtown Richmond at the corner of 8th and Broad streets.¹⁷ Murphy Hotel was known for its elevated walkway or bridge over 8th street which connected the main part of the hotel to an annex and also served as a lounge or

¹⁴ Winthrop. 133., 135

¹⁵ 1930 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton). Richmond, Richmond (Independent City), Virginia; Page: 14A; Enumeration District: 0017; FHL microfilm: 2342210.

¹⁶ U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995, Richmond, Virginia, City Directory, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1937. (Dalton, Estelle).

¹⁷ Vintage Richmond website, <http://vintagerva.blogspot.com>

sunroom. The bridge was eventually dismantled so that its steel could be used in the war effort during World War II.¹⁸

The Hotel Murphy ran the following classified advertisement in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on June 3, 1947.¹⁹ In describing the desired qualities of a maid candidate, this ad might reveal some of Estelle's own characteristics.

MAIDS – Must be neat and clean, good cleaners, quick and active. Apply Housekeeper, 9 A. M. to 3 P. M. Hotel Murphy.

Estelle's Later Life

The Richmond City Directories from 1935 until the early 1960s list Estelle under several different names - Estelle Dalton, Estelle B. Dalton, Estelle L. Dalton and Estelle D. Ligon - all living at 514 ½ B Catherine Street.²⁰ There is no ready explanation for the use of these variations in Estelle's middle initial and last name. Could they represent directory printing errors or something else?

Estelle's son Joseph died on April 6, 1951 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.²¹ His obituary in the April 12, 1951 Richmond Times-Dispatch mentioned his devoted mother, Mrs. Estelle D. Ligon, of 514 ½ Catherine Street. Joseph's remains were interred at Evergreen Cemetery and he became the second family member in Section Y, plot 35. Joseph was 61 years old at the time of his death.

¹⁸ Library of Virginia, Out of the Box, Notes from the Archives, "Hidden Treasures and Lost History: Murphy's Hotel in Richmond.

¹⁹ Newspapers.com - The Times Dispatch - 3 Jun 1947 - Page 24.

²⁰ U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995, Richmond, Virginia, City Directory, 1935 – 1960 (Dalton, Estelle and/or Ligon, Estelle).

²¹ Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania (State). Death certificates, 1906–1967; Certificate Number Range: 036751-039300. (Joseph C. Ligon, 1951).

Almost until her death, the City Directory listings continued to indicate that Estelle lived at 514 ½ B Catherine Street and was employed as a maid at Murphy Hotel. There was no other information found about Estelle's life in the 12 years between her son's death and her own.

Estelle joined her aunt Ellen and son Joseph in the Evergreen family plot early in 1963. After a short illness, Estelle died on January 7, 1963.²² Her death certificate lists her father as Walter Dalton and her mother as Estelle (no last name). It notes that she was a widow who had worked as a hotel maid. Estelle died of cardiac arrest due to chronic congestive heart failure and arteriosclerotic heart disease. The document also includes other conditions not contributing to her death – diverticulitis and anemia. She had lived a long life, being between 90 and 93 at the time of her death.

The Richmond Times-Dispatch published the following obituary on January 9, 1963²³:

DALTON – Departed this life January 7, 1963, Mrs. Estelle L. Dalton, of 514½ Catherine St. She is survived by a daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lillie P. Pleasants, and many friends. Remains rest at the Chiles Funeral Home, 2100 Fairmount Ave., where visitation will be Wednesday from 8 to 9 P.M. and where funeral rites will be conducted Thursday, January 10, at 2 P.M., with Rev. David Shannon officiating. Interment Evergreen Cemetery. Family and friends will kindly assemble at the funeral home Thursday 1:30 P.M.

²² Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Deaths, 1912-2014. Ancestry.com: Death certificate of Estelle Dalton, 1963.

²³ Estelle Dalton Obituary, RTD 1/8/63 8 Jan 1963, pg. 17. <https://www.newspapers.com>

Postscript: Later in 1963, H. T. Richeson & Co., Realtors (20 North 8th Street) listed rooms available for colored renters at 514 ½ Catherine Street where Estelle had lived for so many years. An apartment consisting of three rooms on the upper east side of the building with an inside toilet was listed for \$30.00 per month.²⁴ There is no way of determining if these three rooms were the portion of the building at 514 ½ Catherine Street that Estelle had previously lived in but it reveals some interesting details - the type of tenant living in the building (colored), the approximate rental rate, and the availability of a bathroom within the apartment.

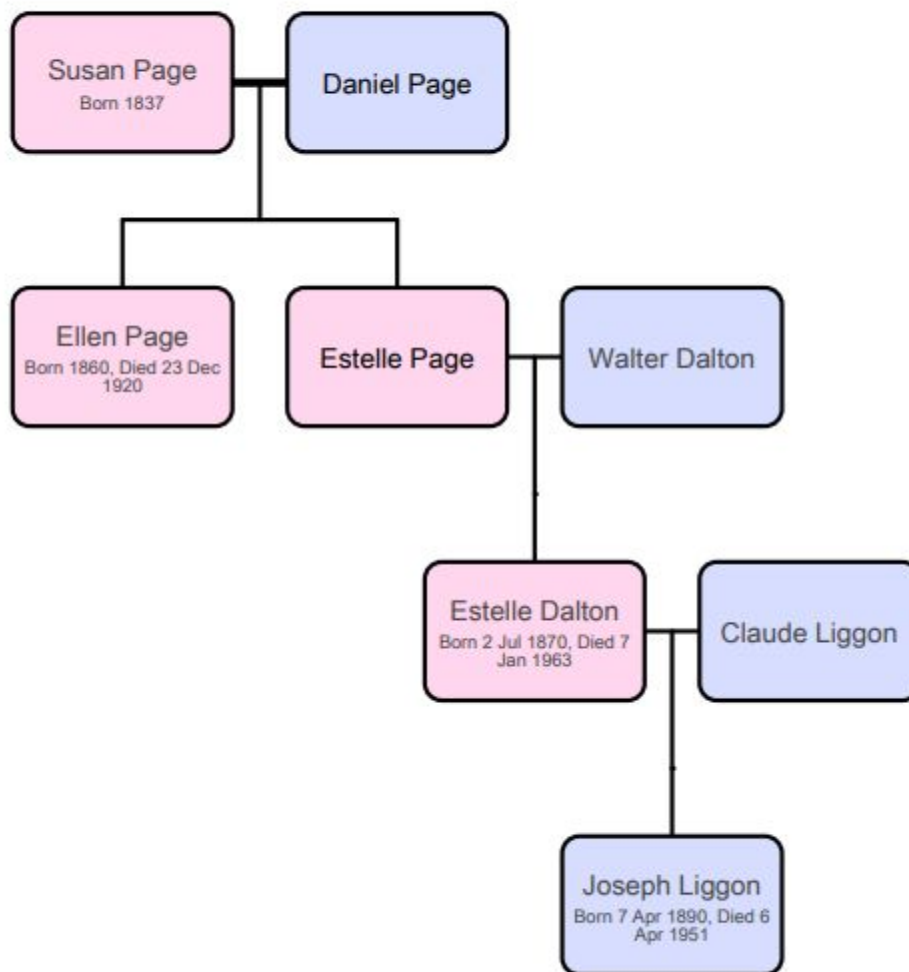
Considerations for Further Research:

1. Very little information was found regarding Estelle Dalton's parents, Walter and Estelle Page Dalton, or the father of her son Joseph, Claude Liggon. Estelle had obtained a social security number and it is possible that some of these missing pieces of information might have been provided to the Social Security Administration. Due to the cost of obtaining copies of the original SSN request form, that information has not been requested at this time.
2. Estelle's aunt, Ellen Page, and grandmother, Susan Kemp Page, were both born in King George, Virginia; however, no additional information was found regarding either person. A more thorough search of information contained in King George county records might reveal more about this line of the family tree.
3. Why does Estelle's gravestone contain the term "DAUGHTER-IN-LAW"? None of the research to date provides any information about Estelle's in-laws or the relationship that

²⁴ Times Dispatch, Richmond, Virginia, October 27, 1963, pg. 73.
<https://www.newspapers.com>

she might have had with them. By the time Estelle died in 1963, she was between 90 and 93. Any in-laws would have predeceased Estelle by many years. Perhaps further research of the Evergreen records or, if available, those of Chiles Funeral Home might provide some answers.

4. How involved was Estelle in the lively cultural scene in Jackson Ward? Did she attend church at Ebenezer Baptist Church, just steps from her apartment on Catherine Street? Was she involved in fraternal or social organizations?

Page - Dalton - Liggon Family Tree

Bibliography

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Page: 94B; Enumeration District: 081.

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