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The case of Abbie Williams

THREATENED TO KILL THE CORONER
 A young colored woman living on Wolfe street, between Patrick and ...
 ed, yesterday gave birth to an illegitimate child, and was attended by a colored midwife named Abbie Williams. The head of the child was not properly formed, and from this and other causes was said it expired as soon as born. Dr. W. R. Purvis, the coroner, was notified, and in making an examination discovered that the umbilical cord had been so arranged that in time it would have proved fatal to the child, which operation had been properly performed to insure safety to the mother. The doctor having been on his suspicions aroused on several other occasions by the apparent death of colored infants from neglect, concluded that this was a case which demanded investigation, and he interrogated the "granny" closely. The latter undoubtedly understood the *modus operandi* resorted to on such occasions, and being closely pressed by questions from the coroner finally said she couldn't see very well and supposed she had performed her duty satisfactorily. The doctor finally had the woman arrested for criminal neglect. Later Williams, son of the accused, learned the interview between his mother and Dr. Purvis, and becoming exasperated he would knock the coroner in the head with a cobble stone on sight. Coroner Howson later found the bellico individual and carried him to the station house and locked him up. The morning Mayor Strauss held him in the room of \$100 to keep the peace for twelve months. There is every reason to believe that the crime with which the midwife in this case is charged committed with impunity in this city, and that the infants whose worldly career is thus rendered ephemeral are buried at the city's cost, while their provident and depraved parents provide the city night and day leading lives of immorality, laziness and dishonesty. An inquest was held this morning over the remains of the infant referred to above. Dr. W. M. Smith made the autopsy. A verdict was rendered to the following effect: "The jury rendered verdict that the child was born dead and that there was no foul play, except neglect on the part of the midwife, and recommend that all midwives be required to be registered."

PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

A story about Abbie Williams from the Dec. 19, 1893, Alexandria Gazette.

The Dec. 19, 1893, edition of the Alexandria Gazette highlighted the case of Abbie Williams. The case involved a Black woman giving birth to a child who died at birth. The coroner, Dr. Purvis, accused the midwife, Williams, who was also Black, with criminal neglect.

A jury acquitted Williams on charges of foul play, but despite the acquittal, the article insisted she had been negligent in her care of the mother and child. The case of Williams shows the intersection of inequalities in segregated Alexandria, where medical practices and care were viewed through a lens prejudiced against women of color, whether as midwives or as patients giving birth.

The Alexandria Gazette noted Dr. Purvis "had his suspicions aroused on several other occasions by the apparent death of colored infants from neglect." At the same time, the coroner noted that "the operation had been properly enough performed to insure safety to the mother."

The article claimed that Dr. Purvis questioned Ms. Williams, or "granny," closely, and when pressed, Abbie Williams "said she couldn't see very well and supposed she had performed her duty satisfactorily." The interroga-

tion angered Ms. Williams' son, William, to the point that he threatened Dr. Purvis, got arrested and had to post \$100 bail.

The Gazette speculated that medical negligence "is committed with impunity in this city." The newspaper's prime complaint was that stillborn African American children:

"are buried at the city's cost, while their improvident and depraved parents prowl the city night and day leading lives of immorality, laziness and dishonesty."

The author gave no other examples of medical negligence by African American practitioners. Nor did it explain what a more qualified medical professional would have done for the unfortunate child in this case, whose skull never fully formed.

The jury's recommendation that "all midwives be required to be registered at the auditor's office" became a reality almost 20 years later, in 1912. Alexandria created a Board of Health and hired a health officer to inspect businesses accused of being unhealthy or unhygienic.

The new office was meant to protect the public in terms of hygiene, sanitation and preventing mass outbreaks of contagious diseases. The

Board also regulated the practice of midwifery, requiring all births to be registered, all midwives to pass an examination, and to pay one dollar – equal to \$30.67 in 2024 – to the Commissioner of Revenue.

While well-intentioned, the fees and exam requirements disproportionately burdened women with barriers to wealth and whose knowledge was built on experience rather than schooling. Modern-day readers might ask what the medical options for Williams' former patients were if she wasn't able to practice anymore. On Jan. 5, 1914, the Alexandria Gazette printed a list of registered midwives separated by race. Sixteen white women and eight African American women are listed.

Williams' case was rediscovered by Shay Merker and Julia Walsh as they researched a tour on midwifery in Alexandria.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout March. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/WomensHistoryMonth.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.