THE HOUSTON lawyer

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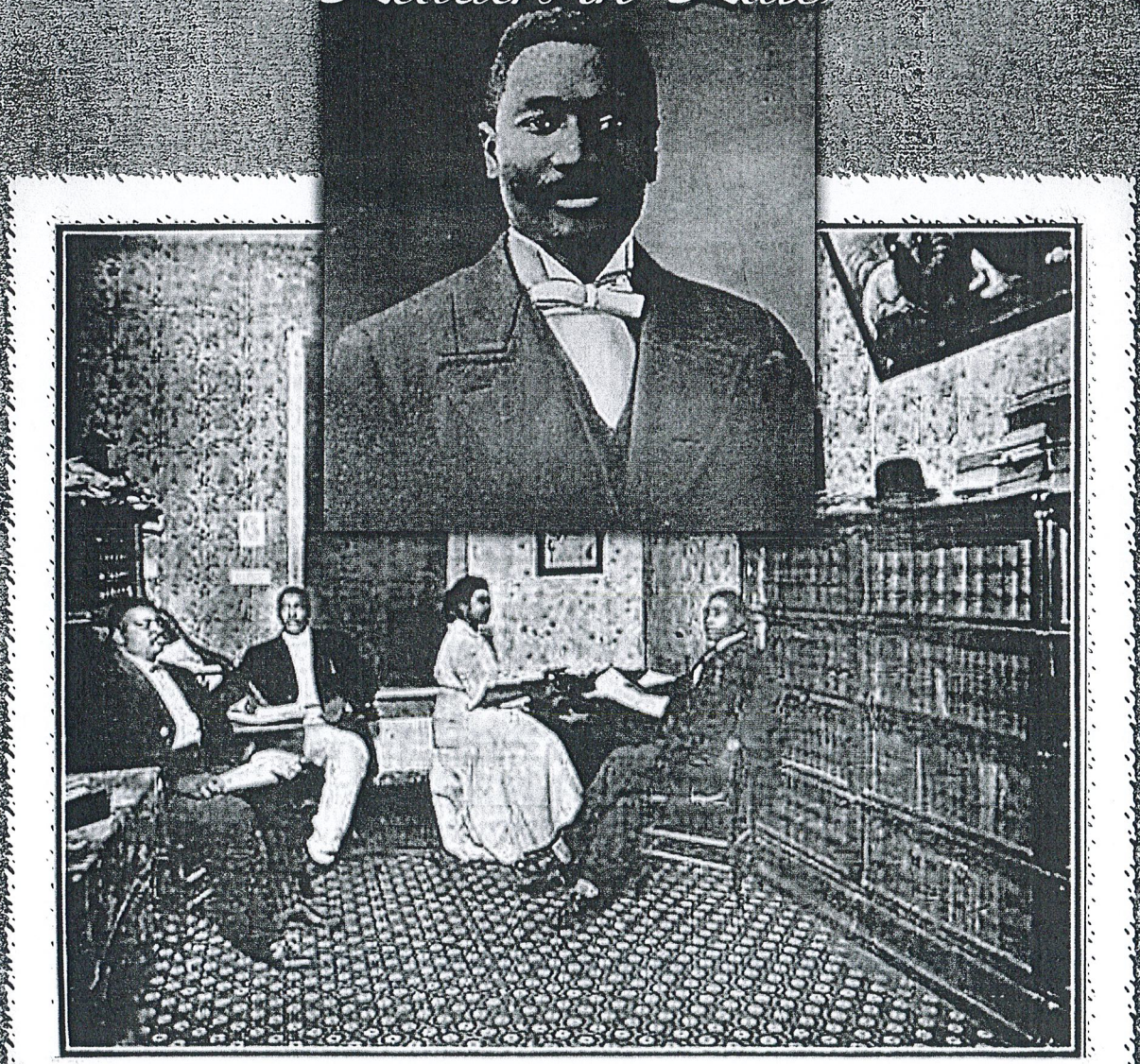
Houston's Pioneering Black Leaders in Law



H. H. Letheridge. J. Vance Lewis. Miss Bernice Griggs. L. Franks.
LAW OFFICE OF J. VANCE LEWIS

By DIANA GOMEZ
Chamberlain Hrdlicka

Honoring J. Vance Lewis and Pioneers in Law

The law—like time—never stands still. Our profession, and those who practice on the bench and the bar, constantly grapple with both precedence–the laws, cases, and people who have come before us—and change—developments that prompt new legal standards. Within Houston's large, diverse legal community, we are eager to champion and celebrate trailblazers—the pioneering individuals in law who pave the way for others seeking to serve. I am grateful to all of those who paved the way for me and supported me to serve as the first Latina president of the Houston Bar Association in the organization's 153-year history.

In this issue, we honor "Houston's First Black Lawyer," J. Vance Lewis, and several of the individuals who were among Houston's first generation of African American attorneys. J. Vance Lewis was an extraordinary individual, leader, and attorney. Born into slavery in the 1860s, Mr. Lewis become the first Black lawyer to secure an acquittal of a Black man accused of murder in Harris County. Mr. Lewis' home, dubbed "Van's Court," served as a hub for Freedmen's Town in Houston's Fourth Ward. I had the pleasure of visiting the home with members of the HBA Historical Committee last summer, where the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum is overseeing renovations to restore the home as a Museum of Legal Professions and Educators with Galleries. It was fascinating to walk through the same rooms where Mr. Lewis and his wife, Mrs. Pauline Gray-Lewis, hosted friends, families, colleagues, and members of the community. You can read more about Mr. Lewis' life, his home, and the lives of Houston's first-generation African American attorneys in this issue, written by members of the HBA Historical Committee. I also encourage you to visit ***hba.org/historical*** to learn more about the renovation efforts underway to preserve Mr. Lewis' home and legacy.

HBA President Diana Gomez and the HBA Historical Committee (L to R: Ryan Cunningham, HBA Liaison Maggie Martin, Chair Bill Kroger, R. Michelle Boldon, and Mark Goldberg) joined historic researcher Debra Blacklock-Sloan (left) and a Freedmen's Town descendent (right) for a visit to J. Vance Lewis' home in Freedmen's Town in July 2023.

The law will continue to evolve, but the virtues of law—professionalism, access to justice, and the rule of law—remain the same. And as we begin a new year, I invite you to consider how you can champion your colleagues to ensure the law is inclusive to all.

By LIZ MALPASS
Baker Botts L.L.P.

A True Legacy: The Black Attorneys Who Have Shaped the City of Houston

Less than a mile from the glass and steel skyscrapers that cluster in downtown Houston, the sound of pounding hammers and buzzing saws heralds yet another construction project. This time, it's not the typical high-rise apartment complex or pair of townhouses, but a resurrection of a 1907 house that has, over the years, fallen into ruin. Now, the once-dilapidated home and law office of J. Vance Lewis, Houston's first Black attorney, is being restored. Once the renovation is complete, the house will serve to honor J. Vance Lewis' legacy and to educate Houstonians about his work. Lewis, like the other pioneering Black attorneys featured in this issue—rose above the prejudice of his times to become a tremendously successful lawyer and community leader.

This is one of my favorite issues of *The Houston Lawyer*. In partnership with the HBA Historical Committee, this issue weaves together the past and the present of our city through the rich histories of Black attorneys and judges who have left their mark on the bar.

George "Trey" Gifford III describes the life history, early successes, and profound impacts of J. Vance Lewis on Houston and the legacy he left for those who followed in his footsteps. **Ryan A. Cunningham** and **Charles L. Sharman** write about the J. Vance Lewis home itself—both its centrality to the community during Lewis' life, as well as the efforts to preserve and restore the home for future generations.

R. Michelle Boldon's article about the city's first prominent African American attorneys in Houston and the surrounding area is both inspiring and fascinating. Boldon parsed through primary resources (including scanned images of torn, yellowed newspapers from the late 1800s and early 1900s) to uncover the stories of these African American attorneys from Houston's past.

In addition to paying homage to the past, this issue also shines the spotlight on the Black attorneys and judges doing incredible things today.

Our editorial board member and guest editor for this issue, **Dave Louie**, has beautifully told the story of the many lives of **Tasha Schwickert Moser**—a former Olympic gymnast, attorney, survivors' advocate, mom, and (lucky for our city) new Houstonian. The issue also features an interview with **the Honorable Vanessa D. Gilmore** about her reflections on a lifetime of service and leadership, and her advice to other attorneys. **The Honorable George C. Hanks, Jr.** describes his transcendent experience running a marathon in Africa. **The Honorable Alfred H. Bennett** and his wife, **Tanyel Harrison Bennett**, write about their family life in the "Law in the Family" profile, and **Chanler A. Langham** offers trial advice in this issue's "Profile in Professionalism."

The Houston Lawyer also explores the issues that will be affecting Black attorneys now and into the future. A constitutional law professor provides context to the Supreme Court's affirmative action decision, and each of Houston's three law schools talk about the information and resources they provide for prospective and current students.

Thank you to guest editors **Dave Louie** and **Anietie Akpan** for their work on this inspiring issue of the magazine. Thank you also to **Catherine Roberts** and **Debra Blacklock-Sloan** with the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum for their efforts reviewing the historical details of the articles on J. Vance Lewis and the restoration of his home.

Thank you for reading *The Houston Lawyer*.

By GEORGE "TREY" GIFFORD III

J. VANCE LEWIS:

The Astounding Impact of "Houston's First Black Lawyer"

A young, licensed, J. Vance Lewis Esq.[5]

J. Vance Lewis is often cited as "Houston's First Black Lawyer."[1] As incredible as that sounds, the title serves only as simple shorthand for the list of accomplishments Mr. Lewis achieved throughout his tenured life. J. Vance Lewis was born an enslaved person and, after emancipation, immediately secured multiple degrees at universities in both the post-war American South and North. He was licensed in Michigan and Illinois but chose to return to the South to represent people in need below the Mason-Dixon line. He was admitted to practice in Louisiana and Texas. Not only was he the first Black lawyer to practice in Harris County, but he also first did so while securing a capital acquittal for another Black person. All of which were done in the early portions of his life and career.

While it would be impossible to review every chapter of Mr. Lewis' extraordinary life, this article seeks to introduce readers to this unheralded leader in Houston's legal history. The following extraordinary episodes from Mr. Lewis' time exemplify the courage and resolve displayed by him and others during this formative period of Houston's legal and cultural development.[2]

Historical Background

J. Vance Lewis was born and raised on a plantation in Terrebonne Parish, the southeastern corner of Louisiana. In his autobiography, Mr. Lewis wrote that his first exposure to a legal proceeding was on the sugar plantation of his birth.[3] There, the recently emancipated laborers had to resolve an animal dispute. Mr. Lewis' father, Doc Lewis, was appointed judge in this dispute and successfully resolved the matter through mindful questions and careful thought.

As rudimentary as the proceeding may have been, Mr. Lewis recognized the thoughtfulness his father had put into the matter. Doc Lewis passed away shortly after this episode. After his death, Mr. Lewis desired to uphold the perceptions he held of his father's fairness and pursue a career in law.

To further this dream, J. Vance Lewis attended Leland University in New Orleans. Afterward, he taught in Orange and Lufkin, Texas, where he made enough money to continue his education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. While traveling throughout the Northeast, Lewis was astonished to find Black lawyers successfully litigating before white juries. After finishing his studies in Pennsylvania, Lewis studied law in Ann Arbor, where he graduated in 1894 and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Michigan. He continued his ravenous review of the law and

pursued a subsequent law degree at the Chicago School of Law, where he graduated. Three years later, he was admitted to practice in Illinois.

Early Successes

In Illinois, Mr. Lewis quickly received his first case when a judge who had seen him observe the judge's court recommended him to represent a needy criminal defendant.[4] Mr. Lewis was introduced to John Donavan, a deeply prejudiced man, who refused to cooperate with his newly appointed Black counsel. Despite Lewis' inability to retrieve a witness list or any evidence from his client, Lewis so thoroughly cross-examined the state's witnesses that his spiteful client was found not guilty of murder.

J. Vance Lewis followed this initial win with a string of successes throughout the Northeast. Despite his success, Lewis longed for his home in the South. After a brief stint in his home state of Louisiana, Lewis heard of a dynamic city along the bayou and decided to pursue his career in Houston, hanging his shingle in Houston's lively Fourth Ward.

> In the midst of such a region lies the beautiful city of Houston, Texas, the garden spot of the world, nestled in the meshes of the bayous, whose banks are covered with fragrant mint and decorated with violets and giant magnolias. Nature did its best works here and I felt that I could do mine.[6]

Lewis' Firsts in Houston's Fourth Ward

Upon arriving in Houston, J. Vance Lewis was engaged by two Black men, Max Harris and Jim Riley, who were facing the death penalty regarding a murder in Harris County. The district attorney of Harris County also approached Mr. Lewis, informing him that a Black lawyer had never appeared before the Harris County Bar. The district attorney hoped to intimidate him into taking a plea.[7] After J. Vance Lewis spurned his demands, the district attorney leaned into his prejudice throughout closing arguments.

Reflecting on this first Texas trial, J. Vance Lewis remembered, "If the District Attorney failed to carry out his threats it was certainly no fault of his... I have rarely heard a more stirring address to a jury. Every form of invective was used...He dwelt upon the cruelty and heartlessness of these men until it seemed that torment would be too good a place for them to go."[8] In response, Lewis utilized the same skills he had seen from his father as a boy in Louisiana. Confronting a jury of white faces as a Black man for the first time in Houston's history, Lewis maintained calm, sensibility, and earnestness. He asked the jury only for fair play and begged them to treat the defendants as they would want to be treated.

After thirty-five minutes of deliberation, the jury returned with a verdict of not guilty. Not only was J. Vance Lewis

Houston's First Black Lawyer, but in his first trial in a Harris County court, he also secured a verdict in favor of his Black clients faced with the death penalty.[9] Max Harris and Jim Riley were free men.

Lion of the Hour: Into the Jaws of Death

Following his unprecedented initial success, Mr. Lewis was inundated with work requests from across the country—Black and white. Of particular note is an astounding display of resolve and bravery in Liberty County.

In 1908, Lewis became employed by three Black men indicted in Liberty County. Upon his arrival, Lewis began his argument to the court regarding a motion to quash the indictment. In it, he argued that no Black men were included on the jury commission or the grand jury and, thus, any indictment was faulty. After his argument, an individual beckoned Lewis into the anteroom and threatened him, informing him that men were outside the courtroom ready to shoot him at a moment's notice if he did not leave the city on the next train.

"Following his unprecedented initial success, Mr. Lewis was inundated with work requests from across the country—Black and white."

At this point, J. Vance Lewis was confronted with a choice. He could quietly relent to the demands of his attacker, or he could act. Mr. Lewis decided to alert the court of the "white cappers"[10] who had gathered to attack him. The court promised his protection and the sheriff and his deputies escorted J. Vance Lewis to the train and accompanied him to Houston.

After his departure, Judge Hightower of Liberty County purportedly addressed the would-be mobbers, saying "[y]ou have done Liberty County more harm by refusing Lewis the legal rights the law has guaranteed him before this bar than a flood would do a growing crop in a year of prosperity."[11] Judge Hightower then begged Lewis to return to conclude the trial. In response, Lewis agreed to return to the county that attempted to lynch him. When he did so, he secured a successful verdict for his clients. Regarding his decision to return to Liberty, the Industrial Era paper called him the "lion of the hour" for venturing back "into the jaws of death for a client."[12]

Conclusion

When I was in law school, there was a professor renowned for his theory that the jury system should be discarded. His position was not without basis or reason; he had dedicated his life to studying wrongful convictions, and he diligently came to his conclusions. He understood the massive impact of defective people magnified through an imperfect system. Out of my bright eyes and through a bushy tail, though, I refused to believe such sacrilege. The jury system was as sacred to me as the most basic tenants of our legal system.

Recently, I have reconsidered that professor's position. As our media, our interests, and our circles grow smaller and smaller—infinitely more curated and individualized—I have questioned if there is a common thread strong enough to justify our current jury system. Without a bond of culture, duty, or love, what power binds us enough to keep the jury system (or any communal scheme) working effectively?

While researching J. Vance Lewis, I was struck by people's enduring resolution to do what is right. It is immediately seen by Lewis himself, who, in a letter to his wife before returning into the "jaws of death," wrote:

> I am going to Liberty to defend a poor unfortunate of my race, and I feel it my duty to go and represent him. I am of the opinion that my people need able counselors to defend them at the bar of justice in these United States…I want you to know that it is not ambition that causes me to go into the very jaws of death, but duty and the love of my fellow-man…This invitation may not be a decoy, but if it is I will make the best of it. If while in the courthouse I am unharmed, I will, my love, return to your arms, but should I be killed in doing my duty, I don't want you to weep. I want you to remember that my death may be the salvation of my people in the courts of the South.[13]

Mr. Lewis wrote continuously of the threads of goodness that surrounded his life. While not as immediately courageous as Lewis' own actions, it's important to remember the bravery of the jurors that sided with him during his first cases in Houston. These were men in the heart of the Jim Crow South, immediately after the Civil War, who denied the prejudice around them to further justice for their Black neighbors. A cynic may rightfully claim these jurors were doing the jobs they should have always done. J. Vance Lewis, though, had great faith in a world that had not always been fair. While consoling a Black client indicted with the murder of her white assailant, Mr. Lewis told her to, "[r]emember that you are to be tried by reasonable men, and men that believe virtue, purity, sanctity of home...you can and will go to their hearts and be a free woman."[14] Sure enough, Mrs. Jackson was found not guilty of the murder of her abuser. If J. Vance Lewis can believe in reasonable men, so can I.

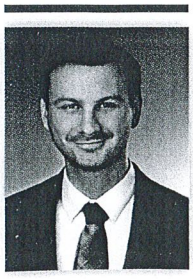
This sense of duty was mirrored in Liberty County, where Lewis escaped with his life from an angry mob. When Mr. Lewis decided to alert the court of the "white cappers" who had gathered to attack him, Sherriff Cherry of Liberty County "immediately summoned his deputies" and "other citizens" to protect Mr. Lewis, saying that he was duty

bound to this office and would "die in his boots in defense of that office."[15] J. Vance Lewis was escorted safely to the train, where concerned citizens and officers rode with him back to Houston.[16]

I am reminded that it takes a great deal of bravery to address our enemies, but also a great deal of courage to stand up to our friends. I am glad there were those strong enough to follow Mr. Lewis' extraordinary example in the furtherance of our country's liberties.

The story of J. Vance Lewis, to me, is a hopeful and inspiring one. This is chiefly because of the resolve and fortitude shown by Mr. Lewis himself. But it's also because of the mirroring commitment to goodness and duty that was reflected back to him by those around him. It refracts a positive light on a contemporary environment that feels so dark and hopeless sometimes.

In 1908, after an arduous 15 years of litigating, J. Vance Lewis secured gubernatorial pardons of two Black men who had been found guilty of murder. On Christmas Day of that year, more than 1,000 people came to see the three men's train steaming into Corsicana. Through his own tears and the joyous shrieks of the men's families, Mr. Lewis handed the boys to their mothers and said, "I am your Santa Claus by law; take your present in God's name."[17] This past holiday season, as I researched and wrote this article, J. Vance Lewis offered me the best present I could have asked for. Learning about Mr. Lewis and others who were dedicated to character, duty, and faith—from a time as caustic as our own—was a wonderful experience.



George "Trey" Gifford III *III is a second-year associate at Crain Caton and James, working in the fiduciary and probate litigation department. He is a member of the HBA Historical Committee.*

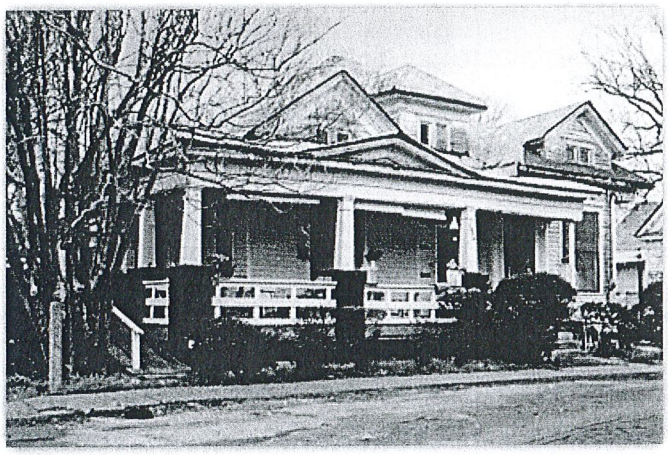
Endnotes

1. For a fuller review of J. Vance Lewis' life, please see his autobiography *Out of the Ditch: A True Story of an Ex-Slave*, which is out of print but is available at the Kindle E-Reader Store and through University of North Carolina's free online resource at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lewisj/lewisj.html.
2. *Id.*
3. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at Ch. 2–3.
4. Regarding this appointment and his early career, Lewis' words continue to ring true more than a hundred years later: "A friend on the bench is invaluable to a young lawyer." LEWIS, *supra* note 2, at 33.
5. Lewis, *supra* note 2, Frontispiece Image.
6. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 73.
7. This District Attorney told Mr. Lewis, "You had better plead guilty... and the jury will give them short terms, but if you don't, I'll see to it that they go to the pen for life." After Mr. Lewis rebuffed his threat, the District Attorney replied "If you clear... I will eat my hat and resign the District Attorneyship and see that you serve the State the balance of my term." LEWIS, *supra* note 2, at 74. It is unclear whether or not Mr. Lewis declined the man's attorneyship or whether the offer was revoked. The status of the man's hat is equally unknown to this author.
8. The District Attorney's racist language is not included here. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 75.
9. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at Ch. 9.
10. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 110.
11. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 113.
12. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 112.
13. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 114.
14. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 78.
15. Lewis, *supra* note 2, page 110.
16. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 110; see also J. Vance Lewis, *Negro Lawyer Gets Scare*, THE LIBERTY VINDICATOR, March. 13, 1908.
17. Lewis, *supra* note 2, at 116

By RYAN A. CUNNINGHAM with assistance from CHARLES L. SHARMAN

"VAN COURT":

J. Vance Lewis House Serves as a Symbol of Progress, Culture, History, and Hope



The home of J. Vance Lewis.[1]

Deep in the heart of Houston's Freedmen's Town, the home of pioneering Black attorney J. Vance Lewis still stands. Lewis was born Christmas Day, 1868,[2] on a sugar plantation in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana.[3] He became educated, taught school, and later earned several degrees. He was eventually renowned as one of Houston's finest Black lawyers and the first to secure an acquittal of a Black man accused of murder in Harris County. Lewis, a member of the Republican Party and known for his oratory prowess, traveled the country encouraging Black people to seek education and practice hard work. His fiery speeches in the U.S. and London also advocated equal rights and opportunities for Blacks, especially the right to vote. His home, as noted in this article, became a shining symbol of his lifetime of achievement.

Historical Background and Construction

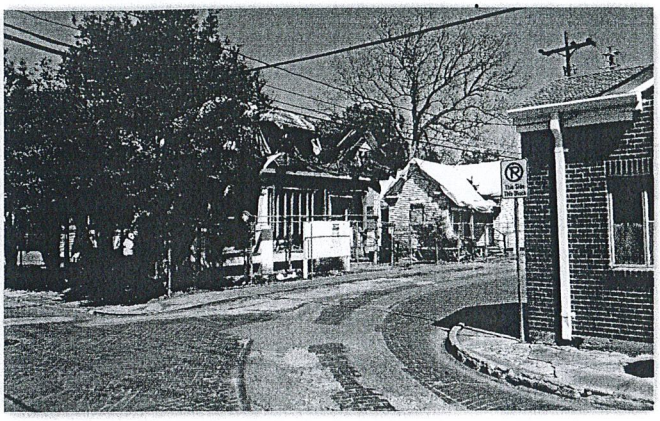
The property on which the home sits was first purchased in 1874 by Louisiana native and widow Isabella ("Bella") Simms, who was formerly enslaved. She gifted a portion of her property to Pauline Gray in 1896.[4] J. Vance Lewis and Pauline married in 1905, and two years later he hired prominent Black contractor Lincoln R. Jones to construct two homes—one for Pauline and himself and the other for Isabella (located at 1218 and 1216 Wilson Street, respectively). Bella Simms' historic home at 1216 Wilson Street, now known as the Simms House, is a one-story wood frame cottage. The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum acquired both houses and is attempting to complete restorations.

For the Lewis home at 1218 Wilson Street, Lincoln R. Jones constructed a one-story wood-framed house built on a high-rise pier and beam foundation. The home is described as "a square-planned, pyramid-roofed late Victorian cottage with hipped- and gable-roofed wings projecting from three of its four corners."[5] The home's eastern and southern sides are wrapped by an L-plan gallery, and the gallery roof is supported by tapered wood columns on brick piers. The home's original windows, still intact, are described as large, one-over-one pane plate glass, and were considered modern at the time of construction. The transoms above doors functioned as windows, allowing air to flow from room to room, providing some relief to the home's inhabitants in Houston's humid climate. I, along with other members of the Houston Bar Association ("HBA") and the HBA's Historical Committee, learned first-hand during a tour in July 2023 that the home lacked heating, ventilation, and air conditioning.

Jones also built a parlor room on the home's corner at the intersection of Wilson and Andrews Streets, the location of which was no coincidence. The San Felipe streetcar ran north on Wilson Street, parallel to the Lewis home. All roads indeed, led to the Lewis home, which quickly became known as "Van Court." This nickname is understandable when one considers the house's high ceilings, bays and gables, grand foyer, hand-painted wallpapers, pine floors, wainscoting, etched glass door windows, elaborate transoms, and moldings that grace its doorways and add to the home's opulence and refinement. Ambitious in its design, "Van Court" in its heyday would have been impressive indeed, rendered even more so by the outsized reputation of its proprietor. And its convenient location for Black businesspeople, religious leaders, other influential members of the community and elsewhere, contributed to its ascension as one of the hubs of Freedmen's Town. In fact, Lewis decided to capitalize on his home's notoriety and convenient location by moving his law office from Houston's downtown Black business center to the parlor of his home in 1920.

Pictured here is the home's "second front door."[7]

The home and parlor played host to Black businessmen, religious leaders, and other influential members of the community. The "second front door" was the entryway to a bedroom for Black travelers who, be-



Above: photograph from the corner of Wilson and Andrews Streets, showing the old San Felipe streetcar tracks leading to "Van Court."[6]

cause of Jim Crow laws, were not allowed to stay in hotels. The elegant main front door welcomed J. Vance Lewis' clients, confidants, and others who either sought Lewis' counsel or merely wanted to make an appearance at "Van Court."

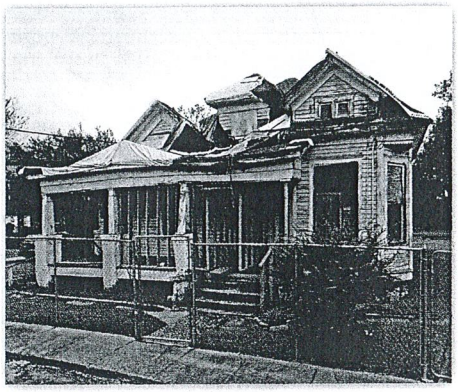
In its time, "Van Court" also stood as a bastion of professional and cultural defiance. The members of "Van Court" blazed the trail for Black-owned businesses, discussing the arts, philanthropy, politics, the law, oppression, and most importantly, the path forward. Lewis continued to practice law at "Van Court," but also supported the community's economic interests. For example, he co-founded the Lone Star State Bar Association and the Twentieth Century State Bank and Trust Company of Houston, joined the Colored Commercial Club, supported Black-owned businesses, and ran for criminal district judge in 1920.

J. Vance Lewis died on April 24, 1925 and was buried in Olivewood Cemetery.[8] His widow, Pauline, continued to live in "Van Court" after his death. She remarried twice—first to a fellow teacher, Leonce Lubin, and then to Samuel B. Byars, a welder. Pauline died the day after Christmas in 1963.

Pauline bequeathed "Van Court" to her close friend, Johnnie Route, who she thought of as a son. Routte then sold the property in 1966 to Joseph M. Fillipone, whose family used the home as a rental property for 41 years.[9] In 1985, the home was designated as a "contributing property of high significance" in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District.[10] The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum purchased the J. Vance Lewis home in 2007.[11] That same year, the home achieved City of Houston Protected Landmark designation status[12] and received a Texas Historical Commission marker.[13]

Efforts to Preserve and Restore "Van Court" to Glory

The years have not been kind to "Van Court" or other structures in Freedmen's Town. Unfortunately, due to natural wear and tear and neglect by previous owners, "Van Court" fell into disrepair. For example, the home's foundation piers have deteriorated significantly over the years, and roof leaks have damaged sections of the interior. "Van Court" is thus in dire need of restoration and preservation. Fortunately, such efforts are well underway, as thanks to the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum's dedicated team, devoted volunteer citizens, local students, and the museum's staff have already commenced a daunting restoration task. Nonetheless, much more help is needed.



Lewis Home renovations[14]

As part of the "Building Racial Bridges Capital Campaign," the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum is spearheading efforts to raise capital to ensure the restoration and preservation of the J. Vance Lewis home, as well as other historical landmarks in Freedmen's Town.[15]

While restoration and preservation efforts are proceeding, the home's historical landmark designations make these efforts more expensive. As a result, the museum needs to continue fundraising to restore this historical home to its place as a shining symbol of hope.

The restoration process involves meticulous research, architectural planning, and skilled craftsmanship. It is a labor of love to ensure that every detail of the original structure is restored and preserved. From the intricate woodwork to the ornate detailing, every effort is being made to bring back the home's original charm and appeal. The museum has also partnered with the Prairie View A&M School of Architecture program and local schools so that students can learn about the history of Freedmen's Town and help in the restoration process. One such group donated their time (and labor) to help restore original wooden beams, work that included countless hours of scrubbing with tools and even toothbrushes so as not to disturb the original wood.

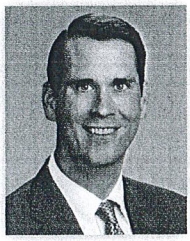
> **While restoration and preservation efforts are proceeding, the home's historical landmark designations make these efforts more expensive. As a result, the museum needs to continue fundraising to restore this historical home to its place as a shining symbol of hope."**

The restoration efforts not only aim to revive the home's physical structure, but also to preserve the stories and memories associated with the home. The home serves as a reminder of Houston's past and the people who shaped its history. By rebuilding and saving "Van Court," dedicated individuals are not only honoring the architectural heritage of Houston, but also creating a space for future generations to learn from and appreciate. The home and the efforts to restore it are testaments to the community's dedication to preserving its history and creating a vibrant future.

While the restored home will pay homage to J. Vance Lewis, the great man who built it, the house will serve primarily as a museum of legal professionals and educators. And the home, once restored, will yet again stand as a beacon of hope for a brighter and more inclusive future.

You can book a tour of the J. Vance Lewis home, as well as the other historic Freedmen's Town homes, at ***https://freedmenstownmuseums.org/tour-our-historic-properties/***. To donate to the J. Vance Lewis home's restoration, please visit ***www.rbhy.org*** or email ***rbhyates@gmail.com***.

Ryan A. Cunningham *focuses his practice at Locke Lord on construction and commercial litigation/arbitration, as well as real estate and contract drafting/negotiation. He moved from New York City to Houston at the age of 11, and is a graduate of Memorial High School, The University of Texas at Austin, and South Texas College of Law Houston. He has been named a Texas Rising Star by Super Lawyers, a top lawyer by* U.S. News & World Report's *Best Lawyers and* Houstonia Magazine. *He is a member of the HBA Historical Committee.*



Charles L. Sharman *practices commercial litigation at Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP in the firm's Houston office. He was born and raised in Houston, received his bachelor's degree in art history, with a minor in English, from Trinity University (San Antonio), and received his law degree magna cum laude from Marquette University Law School. He is a member of the HBA Historical Committee.*

Endnotes

1. *See* FREEDMEN'S TOWN MUSEUMS, HTTPS://FREEDMENSTOWNMUSEUM.SQUARESPACE.COM/LEWISHOUSE (last visited January 2, 2024).
2. DOB 1868 based upon his death certificate, 1869 on his passport, and 1863 in JVL's book. Some slaveholders set birthdates.
3. For more information on J. Vance Lewis, see the article by George "Trey" Gifford III herein.
4. Isabella Simms, already widowed at the time, purchased the properties on Wilson Street in 1874. According to the 2007 Protected Landmark Designation Report, Simms purchased these properties after being encouraged by her pastor, Reverend Jack Yates of the Antioch Baptist Church. Simms worked as a domestic servant to several prominent families. Prior to his death, her husband, Charles Simms, worked as a wood hauler. Simms continued to save money after her husband's death, gave her savings to Reverend Yates, and Reverend Yates conducted the purchase for her. Reverend Yates also paid the taxes on the property until his death in 1897, when the deed was returned to Simms. After Simms' death in 1915, the Lewis family used the home in 1916 as a rental property. See City of Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission, Protected Landmark Designation Report (Jun. 27, 2007), https://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/landmarks/07PL43_J-Vance_Lewis_House_1218_Wilson.pdf.
5. *See* Protected Landmark Designation Report.
6. *See* HISTORICAL MARKER DATABASE, https://www.hmdb.org/PhotoFullSize.asp?PhotoID=579319 (last visited January 1, 2024).
7. The museum has saved three houses that have two front doors. Into the 1960s, Black people traveling to Houston were not allowed to stay in a hotel. Some travelers were directed to Freedmen's Town to look for a house with "two front doors." Homes with two front doors were homes of families who provided lodging in one room of their homes. Traveling lodgers who stayed with Freedmen's Town two-front-door families included visiting ministers, merchants, and entertainers. These historic doors are a major part of the restoration efforts. Each door costs between $1,800 and $5,000 to restore. Each historic window costs between $5,000 and $8,000 to restore. All these doors and windows are painted with lead paint; thus, they need to be sent to a qualified restoration workshop with special equipment to remove the paint and restore the wood to its original varnished finish, before reinstalling into these homes. The J. Vance Lewis home specifically needs to purchase and restore its main front entry door. The second front door is still original but needs restoration.
8. FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VZDN-4F5 : 24 May 2014), J. Vance Lewis, 24 Apr 1925; from "Texas, Death Index, 1903-2000 database."
9. Harris County Deed Records: File Number: C368944/ Film Code Number: 059330938. (September 6, 1966).
10. Texas Historical Commission Historic Resources Library, https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/preserve/ survey/survey/survey%20catalog%202021%2008%2006.pdf.
11. Harris County Deed Records: File Number: 20070068457/ Film Code: RP038910673 (February 2, 2007).
12. Houston Office of Preservation (HOP) https://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/historic_landmarks.html.
13. The Historical Marker Database: https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=170863.
14. *See* FREEDMEN'S TOWN MUSEUMS, HTTPS://FREEDMENSTOWNMUSEUM.SQUARESPACE.COM/LEWISHOUSE (last visited January 2, 2024).
15. The "Building Racial Bridges $7,500,000 Capital Campaign 2021-2025" is a 14-project initiative to create an African Heritage International Research, Education, and Tourism destination for Texas. The museum complex is located in Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District-4th Ward, Houston, Texas. Projects include preservation and restorations of eight museum houses on 13 archaeology sites, as well as an historic plant green house/tea room. Archaeology field methods research investigations have been conducted by Rice University, Houston Community College, the University of Houston, and Lone Star College and have produced thousands of 19th & 20th century artifacts that demonstrate the economic progress, migration patterns, and cultural global connections of this marginalized population that lived during the Jim Crow era. The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum will continue to provide tours, field trips, student internships, and archaeology field courses. The museum will also conduct educational programs in the restored historic houses and churches in partnership with the Alley Theatre, law schools, and universities. Visitors will enjoy the meticulously preserved and restored museums while learning about the historic contributions of formerly enslaved families and their descendants. For more information contact: ***rbhyates@gmail.com*** or visit ***www.rbhy.org***.

By R. MICHELLE BOLDON

A COURAGEOUS PURSUIT:

Houston's First African American Attorneys

"We create our future, by well improving present opportunities however few and small they are," said Lewis Howard Latimer, a late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century inventor. As an engineer, Latimer understood how ingenuity, resolve, and creativity could propel transformation. Nicknamed by historians as the "Renaissance Man," Latimer, a Black man, thrived as an inventor, skilled draftsperson, poet, and pioneer during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War. Latimer's innovation and determination is a great depiction of the resilience and fortitude Houston's first-generation African American attorneys must have possessed. Houston's first-generation Black attorneys were trailblazers in the South during the same time Latimer was carving out his place in history, a turbulent period in America's history when the lives of many African Americans were drastically altered as they sought to bring meaning to their newfound freedom.

Regrettably, much of the history of Houston's first-generation African American attorneys was not recorded, and minimal scholarship has been dedicated to the research and telling of the important stories of these early lawyers. Details such as birthplaces, birth dates, their early years, and the dates of milestones, such as when a lawyer was admitted to practice law, may be lost in the annals of time. The information that has been preserved, however, reveals the important roles these first-generation attorneys played in Houston's history.

Like other cities in the post-Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation era, Houston had to learn to navigate the unchartered territory of a new social, cultural, and political order. After June 19, 1865, two and half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, 250,000 enslaved Black people in Texas were free by executive decree when Union troops landed in Galveston, Texas and announced U.S. Major General Gordon Granger's General Order No. 3, which pronounced that all enslaved people in Texas were now free.[1] After Granger's announcement, some of the newly freed African Americans moved to Houston, which was still segregated at that time. These new residents formed Houston's first African American community, Freedmen's Town, just southwest of downtown along the south bank of Buffalo Bayou, which is part of Houston's Fourth Ward today. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Freedmen's Town became the cultural, economic, and professional center for the African American community. It housed the first Black churches, schools, and political organizations and, by the early twentieth century, most African American physicians and attorneys worked and resided in Freedmen's Town.

J. Vance Lewis migrated to Houston after earning a law degree in Michigan in 1894, graduating from law school in Chicago in 1897, and practicing law in other parts of the country. Lewis was the first African American lawyer to successfully defend an African American client in a murder trial before a Harris County jury (of note, until the 1950s, jurors in Harris County were exclusively white men).[2] In his autobiography,[3] Lewis recounts how the district attorney threatened and addressed Lewis in a derogatory manner, giving readers an idea of the courage it took for an African American to practice law in those times and to stand true to their convictions.[4]

Lewis' contemporaries included L.W. Greenly, George Olympus (G.O.) Burgess,

Winston M.C. Dickson, A.G. Perkins, M.H. Broyles, J.M. Adkins, and L.V. Allen, who were among the attorneys who represented Houston's African American population of approximately 30,000.[5]

In his autobiography, Lewis writes that L.W. Greenly was a "brilliant young man."[6] When Lewis moved to Houston, he began his law practice after forming a partnership with Greenly. Greenly practiced in other jurisdictions, as well. The *Brenham Daily Banner* published in its September 5, 1900 issue that Greenly assisted John C. Cain, the only African American in the Brenham bar, in representing a defendant in the district court, the first instance where an African American attorney appeared before the county's district court.[7] Greenly also practiced in San Antonio, where his court appearances, like those of other attorneys of the time, were often documented in local newspapers. For example, the October 28, 1911 edition of the *San Antonio Express* described Greenly's representation of a client in a criminal matter.[8]

G.O. Burgess (1876–1950) was born on March 15, 1876, in Millican, Brazos County, Texas.[9] Burgess was admitted to the bar after attending Sprague School of Law in Detroit, Michigan. In 1906, Burgess began practicing law in Palestine, Texas, and, in 1913, relocated to Houston, where he continued his law practice in Houston.[10] He resided in, and was elected as the first mayor of, Independence Heights, the first African American municipality established in Harris County.[11]

Winston M.C. Dickson attended Tillotson College in Austin, Texas and then Pomona College in Claremont, California. Dickson was the first African American graduate of any college or university in Southern California.[12] He earned a Bachelor of Jurisprudence in 1905 from Harvard Law School and a Master of Jurisprudence in 1907 from Boston University.[13] Dickson was prominent in the community and was known as one of the most well-respected African American attorneys in Houston during his 50 years of practicing law. Dickson mainly handled divorce and probate cases in his practice. Dickson, along with the founders of the Houston Lawyers Association ("HLA"), challenged the Houston Bar Association ("HBA") when the HBA did not allow Black lawyers to join.[14] The HLA was founded as a result of this prohibition and continues to pursue its mission of ensuring equality and justice and providing a voice for the community through advocacy, mentoring, professionalism, and coalition-building.[15]

A brief biography of A.G. Perkins is included in *The Red Book: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Religious, Education and Industrial Interests of Houston's Colored Population*[16] ("The Red Book"). *The Red Book* was published only once, by Sotex Publishing Company, and is a directory of professionals, educators, schools, businesses, restaurants, clubs, lodges, pastors, and churches in Houston's African American community existing in 1915. As noted in *The Red Book*, Perkins was the valedictorian of his class at Central High in Galveston, Texas, after which he continued his studies at Bishop College in Marshall, Texas before being admitted to practice law in 1900. Along with his law practice, Perkins had a land and loan business, with offices in Houston and Galveston.

M.H. Broyles was born in Anderson County, South Carolina, on November 10, 1863. He graduated with honors from Claflin University, South Carolina Agricultural College and Mechanics' Institute on May 23, 1888. Broyles was admitted to the Texas Bar on August 12, 1905.

There is not much information available about attorneys J.M. Adkins and L.V. Allen. Their law firms are listed in the classified sections of the newspaper publications of their day and, on occasion, the local paper would report on daily life, like their attendance at civic or club meetings. For example, J. M. Adkins was praised for a speech he gave at a corner stone laying ceremony for Houston Academy, an African American school;[17] Allen has an advertisement in the January 19, 1924 edition of *The Houston Informer*;[18] and the October 14, 1910 edition of *The Houston Daily Post* reported that M. H. Broyles was unanimously elected by the African American community who supported the city's deep waterway project.[19] Original files of the cases where Adkins and Allen made appearances in Harris County courts, as well as the original case files of the above-mentioned attorneys, are available for viewing at the Harris County District Clerk's Charles Bacarisse Historical Documents Room.

William A. (W.A.) Price must also be included among the ranks of the above attorneys, although Price practiced outside of Houston in Fort Bend County during Reconstruction—before J. Vance Lewis and many of the other attorneys discussed above began practicing law in Houston. Price is widely considered to be Texas' first African American lawyer.[20] (A case could possibly be made for Allen W. Wilder to hold this distinction, though it would likely be unsuccessful. The 1870 census identified Wilder as a mechanic or engineer, but by the 1880 census, he was identified as a lawyer. However, neither the date on which Wilder became a lawyer, nor the place where he received his legal education, is known. Strong support exists nevertheless, as Wilder was in an election for the office of "presiding justice" in February 1876.)[21]

Like the other African American lawyers during W.A. Price's time, little is known about Price's early years. However, it is known that Price was born a free man in 1848 and was of African American and Native American heritage. He was formally educated at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio before migrating to Texas. Price initially landed in Matagorda County in October 1873, around the time of the collapse of Reconstruction and less than a decade after General Granger's order was announced in Galveston. Price later relocated to Fort Bend County and was elected Fort Bend County Attorney in 1877, becoming the first African American county or district attorney. Price was also Texas' first African American judge. Price later relocated to Kansas and, in 1888, he became the first African American elected to the Kansas State Legislature. While in Kansas, Price handled several civil rights matters in his practice, notably, Price was co-counsel to the plaintiffs in *Knox v. Board of Education of the City of Independence,* where Price argued against school segregation, a prelude to *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954). Price was victorious in *Knox*, a case that was instrumental in the fight for integration and against the disparities caused by school desegregation.

Houston's first-generation African American lawyers, along with Ford Bend County's W.A. Price, created a foundation on which future lawyers could stand. They improved their present opportunities by audaciously pursuing the practice of law despite the challenging environment in which they had

to practice. These attorneys were leaders in their communities and were accomplished in other areas outside of the legal field. Several of these attorneys were educators, entrepreneurs, and activists, and some even held public office. A.G. Perkins was an economist and involved in several civic organizations. Perkins also was United States inspector of customs, connected with the United States Census Department at Galveston in 1900 and the United States Census Department at New York City in 1910, and involved in several civic organizations.[22] J. Vance Lewis practiced medicine, and G.O. Burgess was an elected official.

Despite the scarce information about these early lawyers, their legacies and the important roles they played in Houston's legal community are undeniable. They practiced law during the oppressive Jim Crow era, when discrimination based on race was legal and indignities against African American lawyers abounded, and when the number of potential clients, as well as the type of law they could practice, was limited. Yet, they practiced law with pride and integrity.[23] Their audacity and resilience would inspire future lawyers, like African American barrister Robert W. Hainsworth, who challenged the Harris County Law Library's "one chair" rule, which allowed Black lawyers to use only one particular chair at the library,[24] as well as the rule that all "Black cases" be handled at the end of the court's docket, which often resulted in having their cases heard late at night.[25] The opportunities that were present for those first-generation attorneys were indeed few and limited, but these trailblazers persisted and helped to transform and create a better future for the bar and the Houston community.

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