





# Climbing out of the cradle

*Kay Coles James is rebuilding the home and the legacy of Robert Russa Moton*

**BY LES SILLARS IN GLOUCESTER, VA.**

**T**HOSE WHO REMEMBER HOLLY KNOLL, a home-become-conference-center on the banks of the York River, call it the “cradle of the civil-rights movement.” In mid-century many of the country’s most prominent black activists and intellectuals gathered at the three-story Georgian manor, built in 1935 across the York River from Williamsburg, to strategize and plan.

Activists conceived The United Negro College Fund in the dining room in the early 1940s. Lawyers for Brown of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* met there to discuss legal tactics. The “Greensboro Four” planned their 1960 lunch-counter sit-in on the premises. Martin Luther King Jr., legend has it, wrote part of his 1963 “I have a dream” speech under the huge oak tree out front.

But by the 1980s Holly Knoll had fallen into disrepair and obscurity. Kay Coles James remembers playing with dolls in the stylish bedrooms as a child when her well-to-do aunt brought her along on family trips. In 2006, after a 30-year career in public policy that included posts under Ronald Reagan and both presidents Bush, along with work at the Family Research Council and in the private sector, she returned to Holly Knoll on a whim. As she gazed in dismay at the weed-covered tennis court and dilapidated manor, she had a “*Gone with the Wind* moment”: “I said, ‘As God is my witness, I’m going to figure out how to fix this.’”

So James founded the Richmond-based Gloucester Institute to restore the manor and grounds (both still works in progress), and more importantly, to set up a place where, as she puts it, conservative and Christian “values and principles are welcomed at the table.”

Discussion in the black community is dominated by liberal and Democratic perspectives, James said, and the Institute offers a “level playing field” for ideas, especially for the 25 or so young black college students in its annual year-long Emerging Leaders program. “In my opening statement,” she said, “I tell the students, I don’t care if you’re liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, the one thing we don’t do here is stupid.”

To understand the Gloucester Institute you have to know the man who built Holly Knoll: Robert Russa Moton. Largely forgotten today, Moton was a nationally known black educator and author who would have supported the aims but questioned the approach of the civil-rights activists who frequented his retirement home after his death in 1940.

**RESTORING MOTON'S LEGACY:**

James on the grounds of Holly Knoll.

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Moton was born to an ex-slave couple working on a plantation near Farmville, Va., in 1867, just after the Civil War. His autobiography, *Finding a Way Out*, relates how by firelight his mother taught her children to read in secret until the plantation owner’s wife discovered them—and then had her own daughter give lessons to Moton every afternoon.

Moton graduated from the Hampton Institute, a prominent vocational school for blacks founded by a white man, Samuel C. Armstrong, in 1890. He stayed on to teach and soon rose to “Commandant,” in charge of student discipline. He also befriended another prominent Hampton graduate, Booker T. Washington, who had founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881.

Moton traveled the country with Armstrong, raising funds for Hampton and speaking on “the coloured problem.” Moton and Washington both taught that through education and a determined effort to “better” themselves, blacks could eventually earn equal treatment and prosperity in American society. Blacks and whites could live in cordial segregation, “as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress,” Washington said in his 1895 speech at the Atlanta Exposition, which first brought him national attention.

By 1905 Washington was the undisputed leader of black America, but the game was changing, explains Patrick Henry College history professor Robert Spinney. Right after the Civil War some whites were prepared to accept and even help blacks recover from slavery. But in the 1890s the Populist Movement started to court the black vote, and alarmed white Southerners turned to legal segregation in a backlash.

The black community had two basic responses to Jim Crow laws, Spinney said. At first most held to Washington’s original strategy, to go for economic advancement first and

trust that political rights would follow. Over the next few decades a slowly growing black middle class showed that economic gains were possible, despite pervasive racism.

But many black elites, led by the Harvard-educated W.E.B. Du Bois, would later dub Washington’s speech the “Atlanta Compromise.” Blacks must demand political and social equality in the courts, legislatures, and streets, they argued, and anything less was unacceptable, even cowardly.

In 1915 Washington died and Moton took up his mantle as the second principal of Tuskegee. His impressive list of achievements included work with Sears and Roebuck chairman Julius Rosenwald to set up hundreds of “Rosenwald schools” for black students across the country. By all accounts Moton was a Christian of rare grace and charity, but over time segregation clearly taxed his patience even as the Du Bois strategy gained ground in the black community.

In 1922, for example, Moton addressed a crowd of 50,000 at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. On behalf of the black community, he concluded, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, we dedicate ourselves and our posterity, with you and yours, to finish the work which he began, to make America an example for all the world of equal justice, equal opportunity for all.” Moton, who would advise five American presidents over his career, then returned to his seat in the roped-off “colored” section.

Moton’s 1919 autobiography emphasized the good will of many whites, but his 1929 book, *What the Negro Thinks*, detailed how it feels to pay first-class fares for third-class railway seats, how much less states spent educating black children than white, how lynching terrorized and outraged

**“LEVEL PLAYING FIELD”:** James next to a portrait of Moton at the Gloucester Institute.

black communities, and how the grinding humiliation of segregation killed ambition.

In his later years Moton abandoned the “Party of Lincoln” and became a Democrat, despite that party’s ties to racism. He wasn’t alone. By about 1930, according to professor Spinney, Du Bois had won; Democrats and the NAACP largely spoke for the black community.

Moton remained at Tuskegee until his retirement in 1935, when he built Holly Knoll and began inviting in prominent black activists for discussions—a tradition that eventually contributed to the courageous and confrontational tactics of civil-rights activists throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Would the black community have been better off today had it stuck with Washington’s vision? Maybe. Conservative black economist Thomas Sowell in his 1981 book, *Ethnic America*, showed how outsider groups that focused first on economic development (Chinese and Jews, for example) assimilated much more quickly into American society, gaining both wealth and standing, than the Irish and black communities, which tended to focus on politics.

The key, Sowell wrote, was “human capital.” In America, groups can rise to affluence and acceptance when their cultures stress the values and behavior that lead to economic success. And “capital” involves not just values or economic skills, but the “whole spectrum of experience, contacts, personal and institutional savvy, confidence, and ease.”

That is the sort of “capital” the Gloucester Institute offers to build into black college students. Carlyn Crawley is a 2011 graduate of the Emerging Leaders program and Hampton University. She now works for the prestigious Washington consulting firm Booz Allen.

The Institute, she said, “was instrumental in helping me transition to a more formal corporate environment.” Monthly sessions cover topics including appearance, etiquette, writing skills, and “personal branding.” Students sharpen critical thinking in debates over issues such as school achievement gaps, and meet with black leaders such as Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige, and Democratic Congressman Bobby Scott.

Crawley used to be “adamant” about Du Bois, she said, but the Institute helped her understand Moton’s legacy: “I have a lot to live up to.” It also helped her see how many of her peers give in to hopelessness or excuses. “Legally, you can make it,” she said. “It’s there for you to take.” But young black adults need support and contact with role models. Learning how to succeed, she said, “is not intuitive for everyone.”

“I really do believe that Moton was right and that the solutions to our problems [in the black community] today lie outside of government,” James said. Many students come in with a strong sense of entitlement fostered by the misguided “compassion” of white society. Now, she said, “I’ve got to get them ready for the real world.”

# Taking a stand

*Quentin Smith and 100 other African-American officers in 1945 refused an unjust order and got the attention of a president*

BY JOEL HANNAHS IN GARY, IND.

**P**ERHAPS THE DEFINING DAY in **Quentin P. Smith’s** life was the day the young Tuskegee airman defied a direct order and helped to integrate the U.S. military. Now 93, he has had a close-up view of U.S. history from desegregation to the Barack Obama presidency.

During World War II, Smith was stationed stateside as a pilot, flying out of Moton Field from the base near Tuskegee, Ala. Then, in early 1945, at a small base in Seymour, Ind., he took a stand against segregation along with other African-American officers. The incident is known by the name of their airstrip, Freeman Field.

Smith—then a first lieutenant—tells his story: The officers were banned after 5 p.m. daily from the officer’s club, which the townspeople also used during the evening hours. The insulting directive kept young, energetic officers away from their primary sources of entertainment: the bar, the pool, and the tennis courts. Rather than accepting it, the officers determined to challenge it, sending different small groups of officers each time to walk up and force the officer in charge to turn them away over and over. This soon brought them into a confrontation with the commanding officer.

Eventually, a superior officer called them in one by one to have them sign a statement that they had read and understood the base’s regulation. When Smith’s turn came, he declined to sign. Told that it could be specified that signing was not agreement, he declined again. Then

